

# FUTURE AGENDA

Open Foresight

LIFTING OUR SIGHTS:  
THE TRANSITION JOURNEY

**FiMT**  
forces in mind trust



**COMMUNITY  
FUND**







**LIFTING OUR SIGHTS:  
THE TRANSITION JOURNEY**

Qualitative Ethnographic Research conducted as  
part of the Lifting Our Sights programme

**March 2021**

Principal researcher:  
Dr. Robin Pharoah, Future Agenda

## Acknowledgements

The Future Agenda team, and the Forces in Mind Trust would like to thank all of those who gave their time and support to this project, including those who have contributed, and continue to contribute, to this field of research.

In particular we would also like to extend our appreciation to the research participants, all former members of the UK armed forces, who provided thoughtful, frank and honest accounts of their lives during and after military service. All expressed a desire that their input should be used to enhance the experiences and support given to future generations of service and ex-Service personnel. It is our sincere hope that this report does justice to the accounts they shared, and that, through the contribution of their stories to the wider Lifting Our Sights programme (beyond just the creation of this report), they can help to shape a future in which the UK is seen as a leading example of a place in which ex-Service personnel thrive.

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
Key Findings	7
The Transition Journey And The Future	8
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
Methods Overview	12
Data Collection	12
Participants	13
<b>Part 1: Quantified Findings</b>	<b>14</b>
Still Transitioning	15
Preparing For And Facing The Difficulties Of Transition	17
The Role Of Friends And Family	20
Knowledge And Skills	23
Perceptions Of Ex-Service Personnel	24
Looking To The Future	27
<b>Part 2: The Transition Journey</b>	<b>30</b>
Transition journey model	32
Joining	34
Serving	37
Preparing	41
Threshold	45
Confronting	48
Integrating	53
Settling	58
Landing	62
Conclusion: The Transition Journey And The Future	64
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>66</b>
Appendix A: Table Of Respondents	66
Appendix B: Methodological Detail And The Spryng Research Platform	68
Method	68
Data Collection	68
Participants	69
Anonymity And Ethics	70
Note On Reading And Interpreting Findings	71
Spryng	71
Appendix C: Preparedness For Transition	72
<b>References</b>	<b>74</b>



# Executive Summary

This document presents the findings of the ethnographic research component of the wider 'Lifting Our Sights' foresight programme exploring future trends and their impacts on ex-Service personnel going through their transition back into civilian life.

The research involved the collection of detailed narrative accounts from thirty ex-Service personnel, alongside more quantified findings that came from a question set respondents were asked to complete alongside their narratives. The primary output of the research was an archetypal Transition Journey model. However, since the construction of this model involved detailed analysis of the stories provided, other key findings were also identified.

## Key findings

**'Successful' transitions are not necessarily 'easy' transitions:** It is often accepted as a truism that most ex-Service personnel manage their transition to civilian life successfully. However, this should not be extrapolated to mean that ex-Service personnel find transitions 'easy'. The majority in our sample indicated that they found their transition difficult, especially in terms of its emotional impact.

**Closing the chapter on life in service is difficult to achieve:** Transition does not have clearly defined start and end points. The emotional and physical legacies of service can and do live on vividly and viscerally long after leaving service. As such, transition should be seen as a continuous process that begins at the point of joining, and becomes a part of a person's continually evolving identity thereafter.

**Preparation for transition goes beyond resettlement services:** The culture shock experienced by those in transition means that, no matter how well they have been formally prepared by resettlement services and personal planning, transitioners nevertheless feel unprepared for the

various implications of transition back into civilian life. This is true despite the relative predictability of the problems and challenges that transitioners are likely to face.

**Moments of feeling lost or alone persist, even where support is strong:** The sense of 'bereavement' after leaving as all-encompassing a set of institutions as the RAF, Navy and Army, is inevitable. All of our respondents described feeling lost or alone, no matter how fleetingly, and therefore all had moments of vulnerability. This suggests that not engaging with resettlement services, or post-service support networks, should not be optional.

**Friends and family provide pivotal support during the most difficult moments of transition:** During the hardest moments of transition, respondents indicated that the heaviest burden of support was most likely to fall on their family and friends. In this sense, not only are friends and family members likely to have their own experiences with transition, but are also a key safety net in terms of supporting transitioners.

**Public perceptions of the armed forces and of ex-Service personnel affect transition:** Transitioners are acutely aware of public attitudes to both them, and their former colleagues. As public perceptions shift, so transitioners are required to constantly re-evaluate their identity.

**Interoperable skills are not easy to convey:** Transitioners find it difficult to translate their experiences in service into civilian language. This is especially true of the enormous variety of soft and hard skills they acquire. This suggests that engaging with resettlement services, or post-service support networks, should not be optional.

# THE TRANSITION JOURNEY



● In civilian world

● In service

● Crossing over

Lifting Our Sights:

The Transition Journey





What the transition journey, constructed from the personal testimonies of those who have been through the transition from the armed forces to civilian life, tells us, is that transition is not just about meeting a series of practical needs (housing, employment etc.) but is also a journey of identity: a series of emotional transitions in which protagonists must come to terms with, and negotiate their place in, the world around them. Finding secure housing, stabilising familial and social relationships and finding work are all a part of that journey and of course comprise a set of components that are to a greater and lesser extent necessary for integration into the civilian world; but they should not be seen as a tick list which, once completed, constitute success. Success instead is a personal evaluation made by each individual transitioner who will weigh up sets of individual highs and lows against each other and tell us themselves where they stand in relation to their military experiences and their role in civilian life.

Thinking about the future is on the one hand about understanding macro environmental changes in the housing market and the digital and employment landscapes (which the Lifting Our Sights programme addresses elsewhere), and on the other about understanding what a future transition journey might look like at an individual level. Put simply, we can imagine a world in which all practical transition needs are addressed for every serving member of the UK armed forces, but it is hard to imagine that future transition journeys will not continue to be characterised by periods of culture shock and the confrontations implied by movement between different cultural regimes. Similarly, we can imagine a world in which employment options for ex-Service personnel are abundant, but it is difficult to imagine a world in which every transitioner knows which of those abundant choices to accept. Such a question could only be resolved by going through a process of self-evaluation and experimentation such as that outlined in the 'integrating' phase in the current transition journey.

Ethnographic research such as that outlined in this report does not give a prognosis for the future but does provide an understanding of the situation today, from the point of view of transitioners themselves, and therefore a strong indication of the lived experiences on to which societal shifts will play out over the next 10 years. With this in mind, it's important to consider how wider trends are likely to affect that lived experience. How, for example, will the changes in the employment landscape arising from the ongoing digital transformation of society affect the 'Preparing', 'Integrating' and 'Settling' phases of the journey in which searching for employment is key? How will advances in data collection and analysis regarding ex-Service personnels' location and well-being impact the 'Confronting' phase in which today's transitioners often feel alone and misunderstood? How will changing perceptions of the armed forces in public spheres impact on the 'Landing' phase in which transitioners start to resolve their identity as both an ex-Service person and a civilian?

The work presented here, and the transition journey model itself, are therefore embedded in the other Lifting Our Sights programme outputs, where the findings of the foresight work have been mapped on to the different phases of transition, along with their likely impacts, the challenges they will bring, and recommendations for how to prepare for and address them.

It is only with a proper ethnographic understanding of the lived experience of transition today, that we can more fully understand the realities on to which our expectations of the future will play out. It is our sincere hope that the research presented in this report provides the framework for understanding and anticipating the lived experience of the transition journey that all ex-Service personnel must undertake both today and, inevitably, in the future.



# Introduction

This qualitative research report is one component of a wider research programme called “Lifting Our Sights” which was commissioned by the Forces in Mind Trust in early 2020. The programme’s overall aim is to explore future socio-economic and social-political trends and the likely impact of those trends on the Armed Forces Community and ex-Service personnel over the next decade and beyond. It involved a number of different phases of work including: desk research and data gathering, ethnographic research, expert and stakeholder interviews, action research workshops and online seminars to explore recommendations and identify areas of strategic focus for key stakeholders.

The purpose of the qualitative and ethnographic research component, was to establish a baseline understanding of the transition journey ex-Service personnel undertake as they move from military to civilian life, and to ensure that their voices were heard loudly and clearly throughout the more abstracted exploration of future trends. The journey also provides a locus or framework onto which broader, macro changes in society and the armed forces are likely to play out, allowing for more granular actions or strategies to be considered by different stakeholders in the Armed Forces Community.

This document reports the findings of that research, outlines the model of the transition journey and the evidence and rationale behind its construction, and devotes space for ex-Service personnel to describe their transitions in their own words. Beyond this report, the insights gleaned from the ethnographic research were also used to build, critique and refine the wider Lifting Our Sights insights and recommendations.

## Analysis

One of the advantages of conducting ethnographic research of this kind, is that the quantity and detail of the findings collected allow for a great deal of in-depth analysis. The disadvantage is that so much of what is contributed must be left ‘on the cutting room floor’ in order to prioritise those accounts and those stories that serve the primary purposes of the project at hand.

It should be obvious to anyone interested in the transitions of ex-Service personnel in the UK, that other kinds of analysis were possible, and a host of other thematic findings could have been presented. To some extent in fact, this has taken place, and the stories we collected were used to provide a sense-check across all other parts of the Lifting Our Sights analysis. They were also used to construct and give meaning to the strategic recommendations and conclusions that can be found in other Lifting Our Sights documents, the website and other outputs. In creating a transition journey model, however, and by providing the evidence and rationale behind its construction, it is hoped that we have created a re-useable tool for further work that seeks to enhance the services on offer to ex-Service personnel in the UK and ultimately ensure that future generations of transitioners are better understood.

Further detail about the Lifting Our Sights programme including key stakeholders, findings, foresights and recommendations can be found on the Lifting Our Sights website:  
<https://www.liftingoursights.org.uk>

## Methods overview

Although we have referred to this study as being 'ethnographic' it should be noted that the methods used were not 'ethnographic' in the traditional sense, thanks to the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. By necessity, digital tools had to replace traditional face-to-face and in situ participant observation.

An online research platform called Spryng was chosen that allowed research participants to create 'auto-ethnographies'. This involved each participant writing a series of personal, reflective stories and anecdotes around loose prompts, and then answering a series of questions which asked them to consider these stories according to various analytical frames. Since the stories and anecdotes shared by participants were largely unstructured, and were interpreted individually, it was felt that this approach remained closer to the ethnographic ideal than simply prescribing homework from afar in order to meet pre-determined output requirements or pre-determined analysis frames.

**Covid-19:** The research was carried out during the summer of 2020 when much of the UK population was subject to the unique social and workplace restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, though the context was not such that the restrictions had yet become 'normalised'. As can be seen from the structure of both the static questions, the stories told by participants, and the unstructured interview data, Covid-19 received little attention. Transition is, after all, a lengthy process, into which both the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic were still largely unknown. Only in the section in which participants were asked to think about the future did it come up in any detail.

## Data collection

Each participant was asked to complete 5 'tasks', using digital channels, exploring different overarching themes. The tasks involved writing a story about their own transition journey out of the armed forces and into civilian life, and then answering a short series of fixed questions. Family members were also invited to contribute stories if they so wished and, in some cases, tasks were completed once by the participant and then again, separately, by a family member, though these were few in number.

The overarching themes were: Difficult moments, Friends and Family, Knowledge and Skills (including their preparations for transition), Perceptions of the armed forces and Future outlook.

These themes were presented as broadly inclusive. 'Story prompts' invited and encouraged participants to write whatever it was that they felt they needed to say or tell. The structure of some of the fixed questions in the tasks also differed from those that might be found in a traditional survey. Each question was presented as an opportunity to reflect on the narrative account the participants provided, meaning that, unlike traditional surveys, the answers came with context embedded. Furthermore, many involved using tools that require more thinking than simply ticking boxes in a list. Visualisations of the aggregated findings from these tools can be found throughout the report.

Following completion of the tasks, 26 of the participants also took part in one-hour, in-depth and unstructured interviews, in which their task responses were explored in greater detail.



## Participants

In all, 31 research participants completed at least one task and 29 completed all five. 26 respondents took part in an in-depth telephone interview following completion of the tasks.

The recruitment process involved a mixture of methods designed to draw respondents from different sources. These included research panels, open calls on social media, snowballing and targeted recruitment through personal connections at least one remove from recruiters themselves.

The demographic considerations that need to be made when seeking to represent the transitioning armed forces community are enormously varied. It was important therefore, for us to try and include as many views as possible, even given the limitations of sample size and the largely qualitative nature of the research.

A full table of participants can be found in Appendix A.

We chose to refer to those who took part in the research process as both 'participants' and 'respondents'. The difference is purely stylistic, the cohort being referred to is the same in each case. The reason for the use of both terms is due to the different methods of data collection and submission; they were both active participants in terms of submitting, structuring and analysing data, and also more like traditionally passive respondents when it came to completing certain research tasks or questions.

A far more detailed methods statement can be found in Appendix B which includes further information on the exact nature of the sample, our protocols regarding ethics and anonymity, and the Spryng research platform. It also includes an important note for those wishing to refer to or present any of the quantified findings in other contexts. This can be found in the section titled "Note on reading and interpreting findings".





## Part 1: Quantified findings

Although the quantified findings of the research were not at the heart of the exercise, they help to provide important context, and a cross-sectional overview of the researched cohort. They balance against the temptation to place too much weight on any of the individual stories presented in part 2.

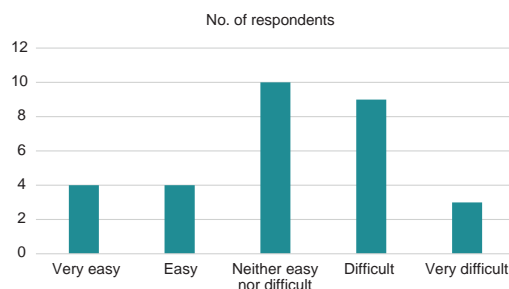
## Still transitioning



At the outset of the research, participants were asked to what extents their transition back into civilian life had been easy or difficult. The chart below shows their responses.

### Chart 1: Easy or Difficult transition

*Overall, would you say your transition out of the Armed forces and into civilian life has been easy or difficult? 1-5 scale, 1 = easy, 5 = difficult*



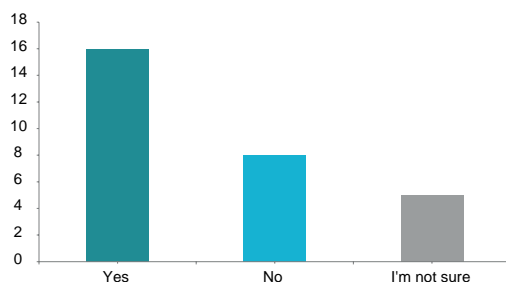
Although responses to this question were initial thoughts, expressed before participants had been invited to share their personal stories, the results reflect the general findings of the research. Whilst it is often accepted as a truism that most ex-Service personnel manage their transition to civilian life successfully<sup>1</sup>, that should not be extrapolated to mean that they find transitions 'easy'. More respondents have indicated that they found their transition difficult than have indicated that they found it easy, and the qualitative research reveals a great deal of ambivalence around how they felt, and about how they 'ought' to feel, about their transition.

Part of this ambivalence perhaps, stems from the fact that many of the participants remembered their time in service fondly. In fact, when asked, at the end of the research period, whether they would serve again if the opportunity arose, most suggested that they would. This fondness led to an oft expressed desire not to speak too ill of the armed forces, despite the difficulties that many had experienced transitioning back into civilian life.

Chart 2 shows the general willingness of participants to serve again if the opportunity arose. Even amongst those who indicated that they wouldn't serve again there are indications that this was often only for very practical reasons: "I am too old to serve now", "I am far too old to serve again" and more personally, "I cannot rejoin because I know this would unsettle my wife. Were it not for my commitment to her I would never have left the British Army.". This is not to say that there weren't any negative views about serving in the armed forces. There were. It simply illustrates the strength of the pull back to the armed forces expressed by the majority of the participants, and the unwillingness, generally, to speak too ill of their service and its effects on their post-service life. Perhaps most tellingly, one of the respondents, who felt that they had had one of the toughest experiences transitioning back to civilian life, nonetheless wrote: "I certainly would rejoin. I feel I have a lot more to offer now." For her, serving was seen not as the root cause of transition difficulties, but more as a way of avoiding them, a potential safe haven in the storm of transition complications.

**Chart 2: Returning to serve**

*If the opportunity arose in the future, would you serve in the armed forces again?*

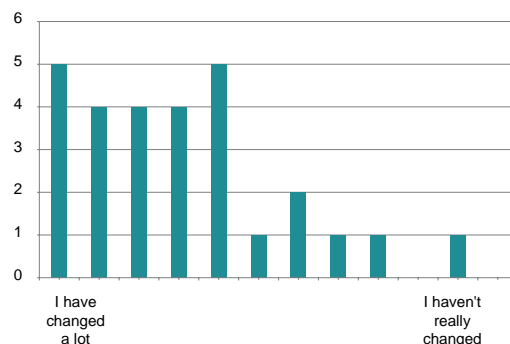


This obvious desire to return to service however, is not an indication that people have been unable or unwilling to move on. Many of our respondents had made successful civilian careers, started families, found suitable housing and were looking forward

to the future. They are living new lives. Stories indicated that some had moved far away from their military experiences, others had stayed closer to institutions that resembled military structures, but most, no matter the length of time they had spent in service, or how recently they had left, said that they had already changed a lot as a person since leaving the armed forces.

**Chart 3: Change since transition** (showing the number of respondents who had chosen different positions on a sliding scale from "I have changed a lot" to "I haven't really changed")

*Do you think you have changed as a person during your transition?*



In both the stories and during interviews, this idea of changing and moving on, was a prevalent topic. Several respondents used the metaphor of chapters of a book. Typical comments describing service as a chapter in their lives that they had finished, included:

*"I feel like that chapter and getting resettled in civvy street - I feel that chapter is closed."*

- Transport worker (36), male, former Lance Corporal in the Army

*"I would categorically say that the military chapter of my life is closed. I did what I did for 22 years. I have no regrets."*

- Charity executive (59), male, former Royal Marine



But the same metaphor was also used to describe the opposite feeling.

*“I’d like to believe that in 5 years - I will be able to say it was just a chapter. But not right now. A lot of it will depend on how you are and how stable you are. My grandfather came back with regrets because he never got to fight - but his entire existence afterwards was coloured by the army - even though it was only 8 years of his life. Does the military do that to you?”*

- Charity worker (35), male, former flying officer

Or as the wife of a former soldier put it... *“For my husband the chapter is finished, but he keeps re-reading it.”*

### Preparing for and facing the difficulties of transition



It is perhaps not surprising that, when asked to describe the more difficult aspects of transition, most of our respondents described early phases: the immediate aftermath of shifting to the civilian side of the wire. Their transition journeys, for the most part, were not smooth progressions, but were instead front-loaded, with a series of challenges landing simultaneously, often soon after leaving the armed forces. In the words of one participant:

*“The most challenging or difficult moment/time that I have experienced since leaving the armed forces was during the first 3 - 6 months when it hit me like a sledgehammer that I was now responsible for providing for myself and my family.”*

Yet despite this commonality of experience, and the well-worn stories of ex-Service personnel finding it difficult to choose which clothes to wear on any given day, or not knowing how to shop for themselves, many felt ill-prepared for the challenges they would face when moving in to civilian life.

Having shared stories about the more challenging aspects of transition, participants were asked to reflect specifically on those challenges and consider how well prepared they were for them. Chart 4 shows their responses. The results show that for almost all, successful transition or not, the most challenging moments nevertheless came as something of a shock. Different respondents had faced different challenges, from the shame of collecting unemployment benefits, to the time it took to understand civilian employers and workplace expectations, or the unwillingness of family members to help with meeting day-to-day needs. But the general sense of it being unexpected, not something that they had been prepared for whilst serving, was shared.

**Chart 4: Preparedness for the most difficult aspects of transition**

*Did you know before you left the armed forces that this might be something that was challenging or difficult?*

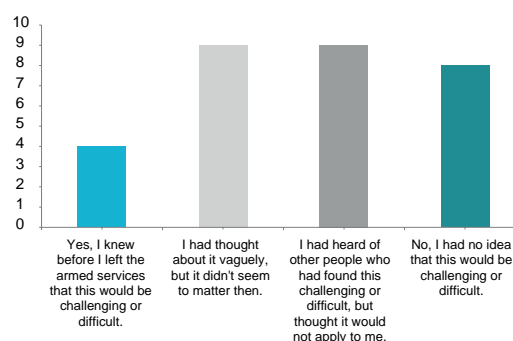
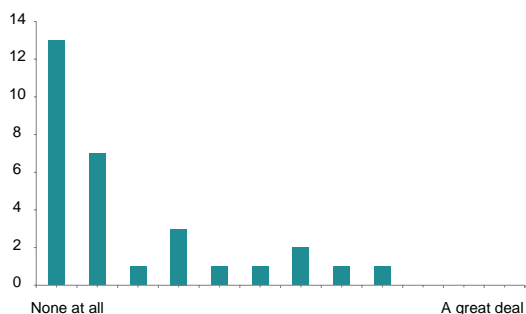


Chart 5 shows responses that were perhaps even more emphatic about this point. Almost half indicated that they had been given no preparation at all for the most challenging aspects of their transition whilst serving. To be clear, the chart is not showing how respondents felt about the level of support, knowledge or skills they were given in relation to transition in general. Their responses reflect only how they felt about how well prepared they were for the most difficult transition challenges that they themselves happened to face, and which they had written about specifically.

#### Chart 5: Preparing for the most difficult aspects of transition during service

*When you were serving in the armed forces, were you given any knowledge or skills to prepare you for this kind of situation?*



It is important to stress that, for the most part, respondents did not apportion any blame for this. In fact, when asked later if there was any more that could have been done for them during their time in the armed forces in preparation for transition, most responses centred on interoperable skills and qualifications, and not specifically on their greatest challenges. It was simply a fact that the most difficult moments of their transition experiences involved things that they were not prepared for. This was true despite the fact that, for the majority, their experiences were often far from unique<sup>2</sup>, and, as Chart 4 illustrates, they had often heard or thought about them happening to other transitioners whilst they were in service.

*"I never regret a day I did but there needs to be more help in the transition phase of leaving not just a 3-day CTW [Career Transition Workshop] course."*

- Locksmith (39), male, former Provost Sergeant in the military police

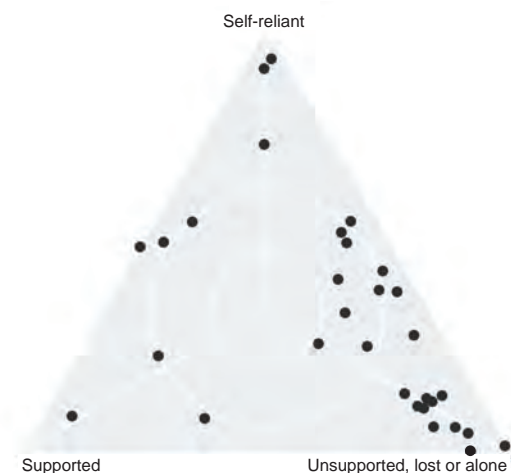
Some examples of the themes that were described in the participants' stories as being the most difficult challenges of transition included:

- Different and/or unfamiliar expectations from civilian employers
- Undiagnosed mental health problems (e.g. stress, anxiety, loneliness, anger and shame)
- Diagnosed mental health problems (e.g. PTSD, OCD, depression etc.)
- Unemployment and under-employment / loss of social status
- Aimlessness or purposelessness
- Struggling with day-to-day necessities (e.g. shopping, dressing, paying bills etc.)
- Boredom and frustration
- Financial difficulties
- Separation from social and support networks
- Fulfilling domestic roles (husband/wife, father/mother, son/daughter etc.)
- Declining physical health
- Finding stable accommodation

A part of being unprepared for these kinds of challenges of course, is that our participants didn't necessarily have the right tools to immediately overcome or address them. This might explain the findings presented in diagram 1 (below). Whilst some felt that they had relied on their own wits, and others had sought or received external help, for most there was a clear indication that they felt adrift in terms of knowing what to do.

## Chart 6: Feelings during difficult times

*Move the indicator to the place that most reflects how you felt during the time your story took place*



*\*Participants were asked to move an indicator to the point in the digital ternary (the triangle) which most closely represented their feelings when dealing with their most difficult moments.*

There is much that could be said about this. The armed forces charities sector in the UK is large, and help does exist for ex-Service personnel facing exactly the kinds of problems our participants describe. The reality is however, that accessing that help was often not straightforward for our respondents. First, several described not having been signposted at all, either because it simply didn't happen or because their military service had ended abruptly for one reason or another, or they describe having been given leaflets at the time of leaving that were subsequently lost, or perceived as being aimed at 'someone else'. Several also talked about being trained in a culture of self-reliance that, at least initially, discouraged them from seeking any outside help. In fact, this attitude seemed to create a kind of self-driven stigma around any kind of help-seeking at all and therefore a barrier to initiating contact with service providers<sup>3</sup>: *"I don't think that would be the easiest conversation. Yesterday I saw a lad I know - and he was posting on Facebook about the things he was doing - but I don't know how to go about that even... It's a bit like the initial contact would be very difficult."*

More than one participant described the needs of other ex-Service personnel as being greater than their own anyway. In other words, they often did not feel that they, personally, 'deserved' help:

*"War heroes was not me... it's the people who were in Afghanistan or Iraq - the word is bandied about too much - it doesn't mean me and I don't think about it."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

*"Everything went pear-shaped over the next 4 or 5 years... Everything didn't work. The idea of getting the help was silly because there was nobody there to help you. Help for Heroes came along and they didn't do a lot. I don't consider myself a hero anyway."*<sup>4</sup>

- Photographer (58), male, former Intelligence Analyst in the RAF

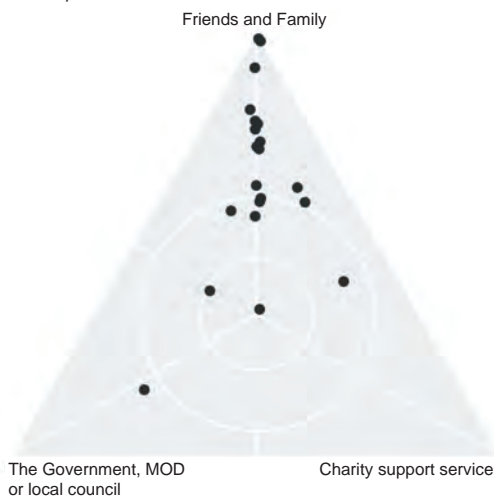
## The role of friends and family



It has been noted elsewhere that the impacts of transition on friends and families of ex-Service personnel are significant<sup>5</sup>. It was no different for those who took part in this study. In the first instance, when asked from where (if anywhere) they had received the most support during the most challenging periods of their transition journeys, the responses were unequivocal: friends and family. In fact, all but one of the responses indicated this fact, whether or not support had also been received from elsewhere. Support from either government, or from armed forces charities was barely indicated at all (see diagram 2). Given the severity of some of the issues being dealt with, friends and family members were clearly on the frontline in terms of ensuring or determining future directions and ultimately, transition outcomes, for our respondents.

## Chart 7: Support during the most difficult moments of transition

If you received any support to help you through the challenging or difficult time you describe in your story, please indicate who you received support from?<sup>†</sup>



*\*NB. Respondents here were indicating where they received support from in relation to their stories about the most difficult moments of their transition journeys thus far. They **WERE NOT** being asked to indicate whether they had received any support from charities or the government in other contexts or at other moments during their transition.*

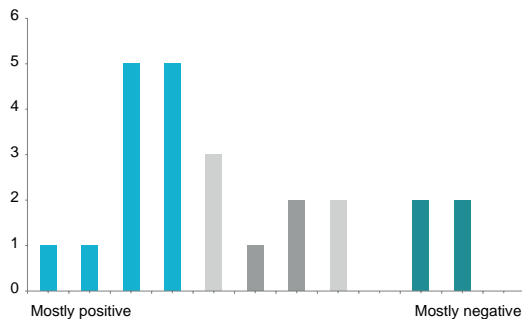
*†Grey dots that appear on, or very close to, the central, vertical axis, are indicating that support was received only from friends and family in relation to their story about their most difficult moments.*

From participants themselves there were mixed feelings around the impacts their transition to civilian life had on their friends and family. Stories reflected the joys of being able to see children, start families and take part in family and friends' social lives, but also recognition that they had often brought problems into households, and had imposed, at times, on the time and space of friends.



**Chart 8: Impact of transition into civilian life on friends and family (showing the number of respondents who had chosen different positions on a sliding scale from “mostly positive” to “mostly negative”)**

*Do you think the impacts of your transition on those around you have been positive or negative?\**



*\*Again respondents here were reflecting on their specific stories of how their return to civilian life impacted on their friends and family*

It is worth remembering here that responses were given from the point of view of the ex-Service personnel themselves, and whilst there was a significant amount of reflection contained within the stories that were written, it should be remembered that there are other sides to these stories. Furthermore, charts and graphs alone do not do justice to the nuance, reflection and context that participants provided elsewhere and which we will explore in greater detail in part 2 of this report. Some examples culled from the longer accounts are provided below:

*“When I returned to civilian life I moved in with my mum. It was strange living under the same roof but comforting too as I didn’t feel I was on my own. She was proud of me and said she liked having me home as she knew I was safe but that I was never quite the same when I came back. She still says that I am missing some of the spark I had before I went away.”*

- Student (39), female, former Combat Med-Tech

*“One of the key reasons that I decided to leave the forces was to actually be able to live in the house that I own with my partner. Although deploying to different countries every year was great for myself, it definitely had an effect on my partner, as she was left in the house by herself for almost half the year every year. When I returned to civilian life it meant that I was able to help around the house, even doing simple things like fixing the tumble drier if it broke or cutting the grass. It also meant that we were able to get a dog, which was something that we had both wanted for a long time...”*

- Firefighter (26), male, former Lance Corporal in the Infantry

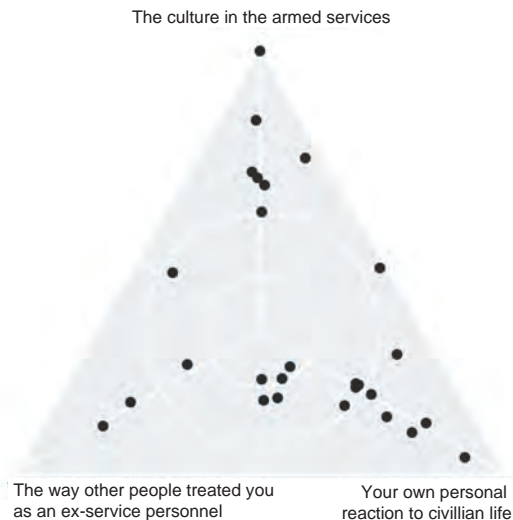
*“Once I left the forces I felt a lot of anger within myself which I ultimately reflected towards my mother, brother, sister & niece and I had no idea why I was doing this as my emotions were all over the place...”*

- Unemployed (41), male, former Lance Corporal in the Royal Engineers

We also asked participants to reflect on which aspect of the armed service to civilian life transition might have had most influence on the impacts on friends and family. Here there was less agreement. Some pointed to the fact that they might have been institutionalised (although many sought to avoid using this term) to the point that social relationships in civilian life were hard to reconstitute. Others suggested it was simply a matter of their own, psychological, reactions to transition, and yet others to the wider societal discourses that shaped someone who had served in the armed forces once they were back in civilian life. These views are summarised in chart 9.

### Chart 9: What shapes the impacts of transition on friends and family

What do you think has had the biggest influence on how your transition has affected those around you?\*



\*Again, it should be remembered that each grey dot represents a specific story told about impact on friends and family, rather than being a generalised commentary.

These issues will be unpacked further in part 2 of this report. However, it is worth noting that participants were given the option of saying 'something else entirely' (i.e. something not related to the armed forces culture, their perception of civilian life or the ways in which ex-Service personnel are treated in society) and none chose to do so. This is an indicator that, at least from the point of view of those we spoke to, there is a unique character to the armed forces transition, and that impacts of armed forces transitions on friends and family, as well as on the transitioner themselves, should not be seen as qualitatively the same as people in the general population who may, on the face of it, be experiencing similar challenges. This is readily apparent in the story excerpts below:

*"I didn't find the transition to civilian life particularly comfortable; working in environments that were less structured, less disciplined, less organised and with people whose general attitude and professionalism I struggled to tolerate. Being at home every night, every weekend, every week, every month, every year descending into mundane routine I found particularly challenging and I had very few or no like-minded people to talk to about it."*

- Property developer (57), male, former Major in the infantry

*"When I first left, Things were great. I got to see my family, particularly my young son and close civilian friends a lot more often, the slight downside was I didn't see my service friends as often and, indeed, I have drifted apart from some of them. This was good for a time, but after a few years, I started to get 'itchy feet' as I was used to and enjoyed (probably selfishly) going away for periods of time. I then took a role in [the Middle East]."*

- Aerospace (48), male, former Chief Petty Officer

*"When I left, my family believed that I had changed, and not in a good way. They claimed that I'd become ignorant and that the army had given me 'ideas above my station', and A\*\*\* told anyone who would listen that I was nothing but a 'stretcher bearer'. The reality was that I now had my own mind and sense of duty with a set of morals they couldn't understand."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-Tech

## Knowledge and skills



Participants were asked to reflect on the knowledge and skills that they gained during their time serving in the armed forces and how they helped (or their absence hindered) their transition and integration into civilian life. This included formally taught or trained skills, specific transition support as well as the embodied knowledge they had gained from being immersed in the cultures behind the wire.

The stories shared were enormously varied. Many focused on the ways in which they were able or unable to translate their military experience into civilian employment. Some focused on the jarring difference between working cultures, particularly around their expectations of civilian colleagues:

*"...on the drill yard we put 100% into everything we were tasked to do, including simple things like running in between tasks and putting some aggression into tasks that would benefit from it. This seemed to be something that a lot of people lacked."*

- Firefighter (26), male, former Lance Corporal in the Infantry

Some reflected on their ability to question authority after the strictly hierarchical regimes of the military:

*"When transitioning into a [civilian] office space, working closely with Senior [management teams], the rigidity of the Army's hierarchy made it incredibly uncomfortable for me to 'speak truth to power' with the level of informality expected of me."*

- Civil Servant (33), male, Captain in the Royal Signals

Many of the strong cultural features of life in the services then, were described as being both a point of pride, and potential strength, whilst simultaneously contributing to a sort of culture shock, or confrontation with, civilian life:

*"There is an edge that I think those who have served pick up. It's in valuing attention to detail, valuing smartness and valuing work ethic. This often sets us apart from civilian counterparts. These skills are important and well regarded in society."*

- Consultant (30), male, former Lieutenant in the Army

*"I would say the best skill taught to me by my time in the army is being 'unflappable' [...] While my work was successful from a company point of view I was given the nickname of 'cold \*\*\*\*\* the Knife.' When I asked why I was cold [they said] that I was the only one who didn't seem phased by the whole episode [at work]. I didn't enjoy a lot of what I had to do but it had to be done and I certainly did not like the nickname, which stuck."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

Another key theme that emerged in many of the stories was the idea of the cross-applicability (or interoperability) of the skills and training attained behind the wire, to life beyond it. The different experiences around how well skills transferred from behind the wire to 'civvy street' varied enormously, making it difficult to pull out a single pattern, but it was an important part of discussion for all. Both ex-officers and ex-non-commissioned service personnel, found themselves challenged to translate their military experience into civilian values, some very successfully, others less so:

*"If I knew what I know now - having left the forces - I would have left and gone back into university and got a degree. Started all over again. It's taken me a decade to get my earnings back to where they were when I left, and that is without allowing for inflation - it's been a v-shaped trajectory - with my income falling to persistently below £10k per year at its worst [...] I was interviewing at Lidl - and at first, they thought I was amazing. But then they realised that I had no retail experience - and that was that - they say to me they don't believe the scale of the projects I worked on in the [RAF]. I still get people saying they don't believe what I have done - but at the same time - they say I have a lack of experience. [...] I have tried removing military from my CV - not sure if that helps or not."*

- Fundraiser (35), female, former Flying Officer

In all, 23 of the 28 respondents who completed all of our tasks indicated that they had undertaken some kind of formal training (or re-training) since leaving the services. This included everything from smaller-scale professional enhancements such as Prince2 project management qualifications, through to full undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, professional certifications and licenses. Some had managed to fund this training with the enhanced learning credits they had earned during their time in service, others had self-funded, at considerable cost. The point to note perhaps, is that so many had undertaken extensive retraining, whether or not they served for a long or short period of time, and whether or not they had served at senior or junior levels. For some this re-training and professional certification process was something they had expected, or had actively chosen to do as part of a planned career change, for others, it was wholly unexpected and came in response to the shock of finding themselves, in their words, 'unemployable', after leaving service.

## Perceptions of ex-Service personnel



How the wider public perceive ex-Service personnel matters. Public discourse and privately held beliefs affect decisions about whether or not to employ ex-Service personnel, how friends and family members react to ex-Service personnel, and how ex-Service personnel understand and make sense of themselves in relation to the society they live in. Public perceptions will also affect the ways and amounts people will give to Armed forces charities, public reactions to government policies that target ex-Service personnel, the ways the public will engage with, or support, ex-Service personnel.

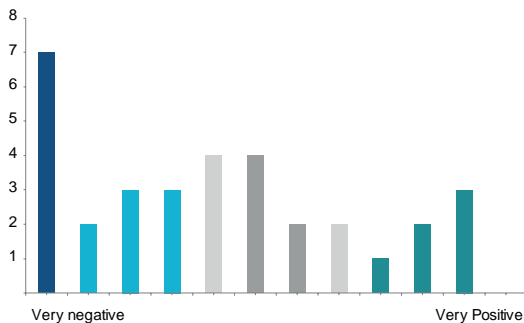
The topic is well studied of course<sup>6</sup>, but there is perhaps a case to be made for more in depth study that goes beyond standardised measurements or simple polling questions. As part of our own research, we have looked at the issue from the point of view of ex-Service personnel themselves with the question: How did our cohort themselves perceive public perceptions of ex-Service personnel? As with the other sections of our research, we asked participants to describe specific experiences rather than providing generalised answers to a simple question, and all of their stories related to specific incidents which they felt reflected their sense of how they were perceived as ex-Service personnel.



Chart 10 shows that a majority of those stories reflected negative public perceptions of ex-Service personnel. In fact, more than twice as many of our respondents said that their stories showed negative views of ex-personnel as opposed to positive. Even more striking is the number who have indicated that their stories illustrate very negative views on the way the public perceives ex-Service personnel.

#### Chart 10: Perceptions of ex-Service personnel in society

*Does your story illustrate a positive or negative view of how people perceive ex-Service personnel?*



The reasons for this varied. Not all of the stories involved particularly extreme accounts of, for example, rude or violent behaviour. Rather they focussed on the ways in which comments or actions added up to making them feel under-appreciated or not wanted. For example:

*"Whilst on a [holiday], a [friend] and I were talking about previous jobs and I mentioned the military, and I must have said something throwaway like 'oh well, that's all behind me now' and they responded 'yeah it's good you're not murdering babies any more'. [...] there's no chance to redress."*

- Fundraiser (35), female, former Flying Officer

Another titled their story *"Hurtful comments leave deep wounds."*

Three separate stories spoke specifically about the media's conflation of veterans with the far right. For example:

*"When the local statues and cenotaphs got defaced, in the protests, veterans stepped in to guard them. That was also giving weight to the thought that they were fascist. This perception started long ago, but one news story sticks out, the [football] fan (who happened to be a veteran) chanting racist quotes at a match. As a veteran and a [football] fan, I was very disappointed. I feel like I have to explain veterans to civilians..."*

- Business Development Manager (38), female, former Military Police

Of course, there were also stories of rather more overt discrimination:

*"When she explained my situation to her manager I was told by her manager that I would need to do the work experience because 'squaddies are usually arrogant and lacking education'. The level of her ignorance offended me quite deeply and I pointed out to her that she doesn't know me and that she should not judge me."*

- Security Officer (27), male, former Gunner

These more negative stories were tempered somewhat by those that were more positive, and experiences were not uniform...

*"I have an Armed forces discount card where you can get money off the meal. I went to Chiquitos with around 8 members of my family. We had 3 courses and quite a few drinks including cocktails. When it came to pay for the meal I gave them my discount card and the manager came to our table. He said that he had the discretion to give away a meal a week to a member of the forces or a veteran so as a thank you for my service, he was giving the whole table our meal (and drinks) for free! It really brought tears to my eyes."*

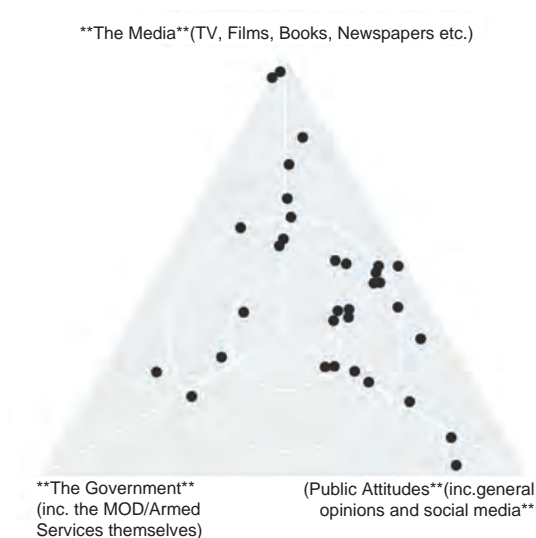
- Student (39), female, former Combat Med-tech

Overall, the sense was that ex-Service personnel are seen as different in some way and that often, though not always, that difference is not well understood, to the detriment of the ex-Service personnel.

Chart 11 shows which of the three key drivers of public attitudes towards ex-Service personnel that our respondents felt were the most influential. Interestingly, they have placed most responsibility on media portrayal of veterans, with social media and public discourse also featuring. The government/ MOD/UK Armed forces themselves were not seen as playing as large of a role. This might suggest that government bodies are not seen as 'to blame' in any sense, but might it also suggest that they could do more to improve public perceptions of ex-Service personnel?

### Chart 11: Key drivers of public perceptions of ex-Service personnel

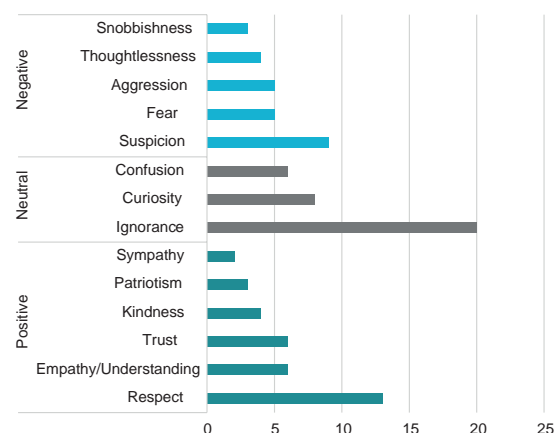
*Who do you think is the most responsible for the perceptions of ex-Service personnel you have written about?*



Building on their stories and these responses, we also presented the participants with a list of words that might be used to describe the attitudes people have towards ex-Service personnel. They fell broadly into positive and negative camps. The results of that exercise are shown in Chart 11.

### Chart 12: Public attitudes towards ex-Service personnel

*What kinds of attitudes do you think were displayed towards ex-Service personnel in your story? (you can choose up to 3 from the listed examples)*



*Words most frequently chosen: Ignorance, Respect, Suspicion and Curiosity.*

Approximately two thirds suggested that public perceptions of ex-Service personnel displayed 'ignorance'. This reflected the general sense of dismay in the stories, at the widespread lack of understanding of the kinds of experiences and the kinds of knowledge and skills, and the kinds of people, that have served in the armed forces in the UK. The results should not be seen, for the most part, as a savage criticism of public perceptions, but rather a weary nod to the disconnect between civilian life and life behind the wire. It is perhaps not a surprise that 'ignorance' might also lead to evaluations of 'suspicion'. The connection is clear.

The corollary of this pair (ignorance and suspicion) might also be seen in the more complementary evaluations of public attitudes as displaying curiosity and respect. Ignorance need not be bad if it leads to curiosity, and curiosity is not bad if it is built on an underlying respect. In those more positive words, perhaps, there is a suggestion for the direction in which public perceptions of ex-Service personnel should be pushed for the better, in the future?

### Looking to the future



The focus of the overall Lifting Our Sights programme, of which this research is one part, is understanding the future for ex-Service personnel. This involves understanding both the world into which future generations of service personnel will transition, as well as understanding the ways that existing ex-Service personnel (their needs, problems, and aspirations) will be affected by a changing world. The key objective of the ethnographic research then, was to establish some meaningful baselines, and to ensure that the more forward-looking work takes account of the current realities of those in transition, from the transitioners' points of view. However, as part of this research, our participants were also asked to think about their own future, and the potential impacts on them (and others like them) of certain macro-trends.

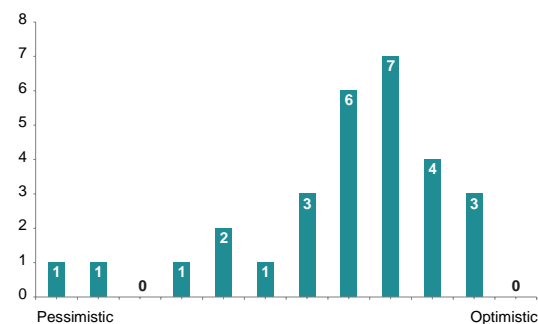
Asking people to project forwards 10 years is hard at the best of times. Many, even experts in their fields, struggle to go beyond hopes and aspirations and identify what is actually 'likely', and equally struggle to imagine a future world without being constrained by ingrained assumptions about what is happening today. This should serve as a caution that what participants have projected forwards about their future should not be seen as a robust prognosis, but rather, a reflection of hopes alongside a best guess about where they might find themselves. It is a reflection of their thinking about the future, in the here and now.

### Thoughts about the future

Despite the sometimes shocking stories of transition shared, the participants were broadly optimistic about their own personal future prospects.

#### Chart 13: Broad views of the future

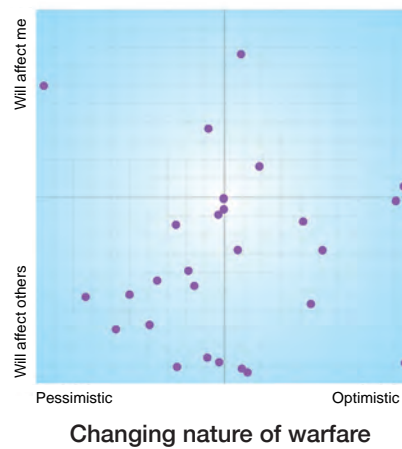
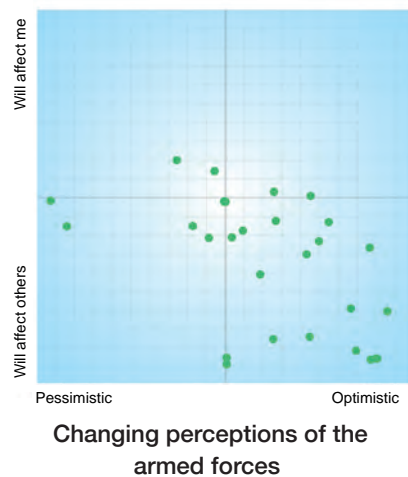
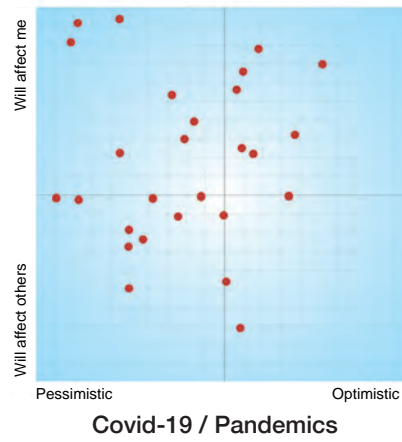
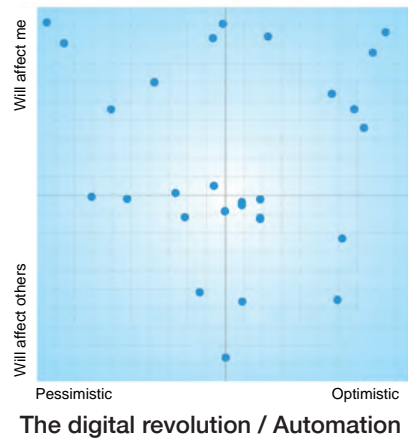
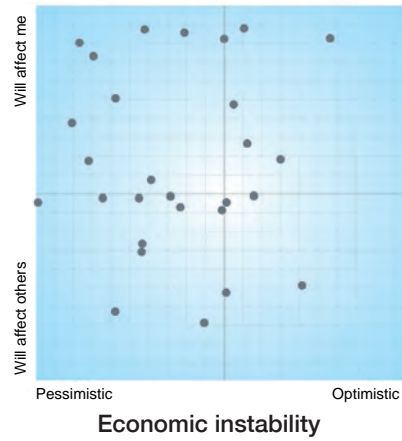
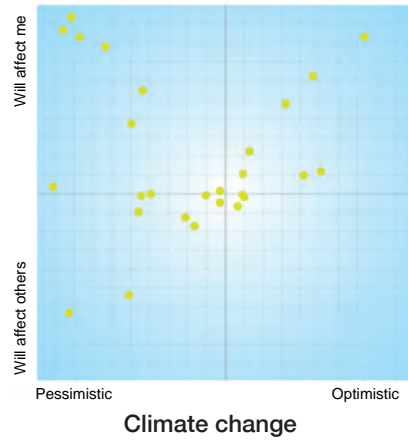
*Think about your story. Is your view of your future broadly optimistic or pessimistic?*



However, when asked to consider certain macro-trends this broadly optimistic view was shown to be standing on some uncertain ground. Chart 14 shows how participants felt about a range of different issues. The higher the coloured marker, the more they felt that they would be personally affected, the further to the left the coloured marker, the more they felt pessimistic about it.

## Chart 14: Views on macro-trends

*How do you feel about the big changes taking place in society?*





There are some patterns here. The first is to note how many of the markers lie near to the central horizontal axis, indicating a lot of uncertainty around whether these issues will affect them or are more likely to affect others, or both. Second, 'economic uncertainty' shows the strongest indication as being both likely to affect them and also to their detriment. This is interesting of course, since many of the other issues are likely to manifest, in real lives, as economic issues.

Opinions on climate change, the digital revolution and pandemics diverged considerably with a range of views represented, but both 'the changing nature of warfare' and 'changing perceptions of the armed forces' were seen as issues that were more likely to affect others (namely future generations of transitioners) rather than them personally. It perhaps reflects the fact that for some, their ex-Service personnel status was something they had begun to rely on less in terms of their own identity, prospects and well-being. That said, many of the more detailed stories and anecdotes shared with us showed that public perceptions of the armed forces did in fact affect them personally: from perceptions in the press that veterans were right wing thugs, or 'mad, bad and sad' to the perceptions of employers that ex-Service personnel were unskilled or unpredictable bullies. In which case, although our respondents themselves might perceive a future in which they are less affected by changing public perceptions, the anecdotes tell a slightly different story.

It is also worth mentioning that at the time of research, the Covid-19 pandemic was at its height in the UK, with all aspects of life having been disrupted, and yet few of the stories focused on the issue. And whilst respondents did indicate that pandemics might well disrupt in the future, their personal stories about future prospects and aspirations tended to focus on matters closer to home. Like all of us perhaps, the impact of grander trends on the minutiae of our individual lives is hard to ascertain.

Nonetheless, the general level of optimism in spite of the seismic shifts taking place around us all, is perhaps summed up best by one of the participants themselves:

*"I am looking forward to the future as I have worked hard to pull myself up from my post-Army slump. I see myself as a qualified [...] therapist working abroad. I see my [child] being happy, doing well at school, and having a good social life with hobbies and nice friends. I hope to have met someone and for things to be going well. I do worry in case everything goes wrong and I end up being back where I was 5 years ago. I worry that issues like Covid will negatively affect life in the future. I feel I have been quite resilient during lockdown but do wonder when or if we will have the same freedoms we had before lockdown. I am realistic enough to know that my mental health issues will never leave me but I think that acknowledging this is helpful to looking to the future. I am aware that I have been very negative about life since leaving the Army, whilst I have had a very rough time, it has made me the person I am today, and some of the skills I developed in the Forces have helped me get here."*

- Student (39), female, former Combat Med-tech



## **Part 2: The transition journey**

### Transition journey model

Transitions are, by definition, journeys from one 'place' (be it psychological, life stage, emotional etc.) to another. Analysis of the stories provided by the research participants has allowed us to create a tentative transition journey archetype. Building a model like this is helpful in two ways. First and foremost, it helps with the wider "Lifting Our Sights" programme by setting a baseline understanding for the world as it is now and therefore the loci of potential future change and future focus for action. Second, it provides some structure to the stories that research participants provided.

The model itself was built directly from the respondents' narratives. The different phases were identified by comparing the different stories and identifying overlapping accounts of specific moments and periods. This is not to say that their accounts specifically described phases such as 'settling down', but rather that across the stories there were overlapping accounts of a period in transition that we might describe as 'settling down'.



**Chart 15: The Transition Journey** (A more detailed graphical overview of each phase is provided in Appendix D)

# THE TRANSITION JOURNEY



In civilian world



In service



Crossing over

Lifting Our Sights:

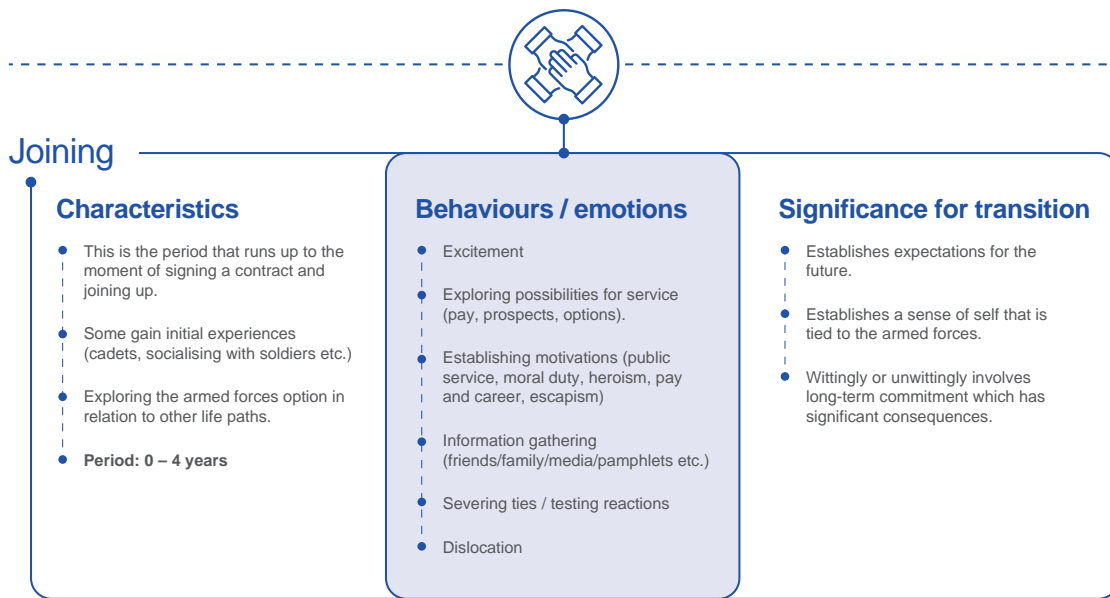
The Transition Journey





To some extent, any life-stage transition journey might follow a similar looking model. What matters are the specific behaviours, emotions and characteristics that we have identified as belonging to each of the different stages. Before describing each stage of the journey in more detail, it is worth outlining some key facets of our model:

- The journey is an overview of the process of transition. There are other journeys and pathways that take place throughout transition that could be mapped out in their own right. For example, there will be specific career journeys and employment pathways. Different family members and military families might also may go through other types of journey in parallel. There will also be individual service journeys and pathways. Service providers may want to consider how the specific journeys they deal with address and map on to ours.
- Although our transition journey is (almost by definition) chronological, and each step is superficially discrete, the different phases do interact. The legacies of certain decisions or experiences in one phase can affect the experience of another. Physical or mental injuries picked up during service phases, for example, will obviously affect later phases, as will decisions made, say, during the fraught period of 'confronting'. Another tangible example of the interaction between phases was suggested by those who had served in Northern Ireland. They spoke of having to carry on various practices associated with keeping themselves and their families safe through to later stages of their transition, preventing them from ever being able to completely leave their service completely behind.
- The different phases are experienced differently by different serving and ex-Service personnel. For some, the 'confronting' phase could be over very quickly, for others it could last a very long time. We are suggesting that the phases are, to a greater or lesser degree, common to all, but not suggesting that they are experienced in the same way.
- Each phase of the journey has been titled with a verb in order to imply the kinds of activities that might be taking place with the sole exception of the phase called 'Threshold'. This is deliberate. The 'Threshold' phase actually describes a 'moment' or 'schism' between two distinct parts of the journey: the pre- and active- service parts of the journey, and the phases more commonly associated with the term 'transition', which begin when a member of the armed forces leaves service. Without going through this moment of course, someone cannot become an 'ex-Service person'.



## Joining



The 'Joining' phase refers to the activities that take place before a person has joined the military as well as the associated emotional drivers that might make someone decide to join the armed forces. This may seem a counter intuitive phase to include in a piece of research (and a journey) focusing on the experiences of those who have left the armed forces. However, the accounts provided by our

participants highlighted the fact that expectations of service life formed before joining could have a bearing on the ways in which they reflected on their time in service, and therefore on the decisions they made once returning to the society in which they had formed those expectations. Furthermore, choices made around social ties or education also determined the opportunities and choices available to them once they had left.

The phase includes all the activities associated with joining the armed forces, including negotiations and discussions with friends and family, the seeking of work or a career, education choices, and the decision-making involved in separating from existing social lives.

*"I never felt part of my family growing up, I never knew my father but did have a step father who made it very clear I was not his son. My mother wasn't much better. The best description of my childhood is what I would describe as child labour. When I physically left to join, no member of my family even bothered to see me off at the rail station."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

*"I joined the RAF young, straight from school at 17 1/2. I didn't know what to do, and there was no careers advice in 1974. I went in as a clerk, which I immediately hated. But there was no way to change it. Anyway, I did 4 years, and did try to remuster to RAF Police, but they weren't having it. I enjoyed the travel and sport, and the feeling of belonging but didn't like the job at all. My only way out was to buy myself out, which I did in late 1978, and joined the civil police."*

- Chauffeur (63), male, former Airman

*"In the late 70s - it was very confusing in NI - I was a civil engineer - so I joined up to a regiment to 'do my bit'. I wanted to be part of creating peace and law and order."*

- Ops Manager (63), male, former Major

*"At this point [post service] I realised that the qualifications I joined with (up to and including A levels) were not going to be much use for the positions I was researching, as the minimum requirement for all was 'degree or equivalent'. I didn't have a degree or received any qualification to the equivalent through service, including Sandhurst, staff college, etc."*

- Developer (57), male, former Major in the Infantry

*"I saw it as a calling - my father didn't do it - but my grandfather did in WW2 - and I found out later that great grandad was in WW1... My grandmother burst out crying when she heard - because I had joined my grandfather's unit."*

- Retired (41), male, former Lance Corporal in the Royal Engineers

Motivations for serving in the armed forces can be enhanced by service itself, and can also be carried through to future career choices with many seeking the same kind of public service role in their post-service lives or looking for the same hierarchical structures and career pathways.

*"I would say that I perceived my time in the military as a way of serving society. I miss that. So in 5 to 10 years time I really hope I am involved with the wider community in some aspect."*

- Sales (33), male, former Captain in the Royal Engineers

It is also worth remembering that at the point of joining the military, certain promises are made (or at least implied) to would-be recruits; in advertising and promotional materials or in glowing representations of military life found in the media, political rhetoric or history books. These promises, whether made explicitly or formed only in the minds of those who choose to join up, can be met or dashed depending on the different experiences of service and post-service life. This, in turn, can play an important part in the experience of transition, as we will explore in later phases.

*"My goal when I left the army was to run my own [charity] ... My parents had domestic violence and alcohol and drugs problems. That was one of my motivations to be in the military. When I came up for promotion to be a major - I realised I would be moving away from that kind of frontline care and management of young people - so I took the opportunity to go. At the time I was unsure of the qualifications requirements, so I did some research - and I had to get a level 5 management course - so I basically paid for myself and went to the regulators - and they told me that as long as I had had 5 years of experience [in the sector] - and lo and behold... I knew I would be promoted quickly and then an opportunity came up and now I manage one of the [units]."*

- Youth Justice (35), male, former Captain in the Infantry

*"I applied for a role at X through somebody I met at a party. They promised me the earth when I joined - but it never came."*

- Trainer (48), male, former Chief Petty Officer in the Navy

*"I never went to University and joined the Navy at 18. So, the Navy was all I had. Anyway, when having a meeting with a recruiter one day, he told me not to worry as generally having armed forces experience would be highly desirable in big companies, he seemed to think I'd get a job with no degree and armed forces experience, over a student with a degree and no 'life experience' as he called it."*

- Teacher (34), female, former Able Rate in the Navy

To some extent the process of joining the armed forces is a transition in its own right. It is a journey that involves separation from one life to begin a new one elsewhere. That story of transition however, can only ever be partial. The very act of joining the armed services pre-supposes a later phase of transition back into civilian life. For some, no matter the disruption to social relationships and living standards that must take place when they join, these are often the very same social relationships and standards of living to which they must return after leaving. The problems that existed prior to service may very well end up being the same set of problems that shape their post-service transition experiences. Even returning to the same contexts as pre-service life might not even offer the comfort of familiarity one might presume, since changes that have taken place during their absence, even for those who have left stable and comfortable backgrounds, can cause new confusions and conflicts.

*"I feel most people join the services to get away from something. I have changed, become more resilient, not scared to take a leap. But the culture of the armed forces will always be in my blood."*

- Business Development Manager (38), female, former Military Police

Wittingly or un-wittingly then, 'Joining' forms part of a process in which new recruits make a life-long commitment. Not every new recruit envisions a lifelong military career of course, but their choice will have lifelong repercussions, for good or ill.

*"My dad cried when I told him I was joining the Army. He was worried I would get blown up in Afghanistan."*

- Civil Servant (33), male, former Captain in the Royal Signals

*"I joined at the age of 16, so I was really shaped by the army."*

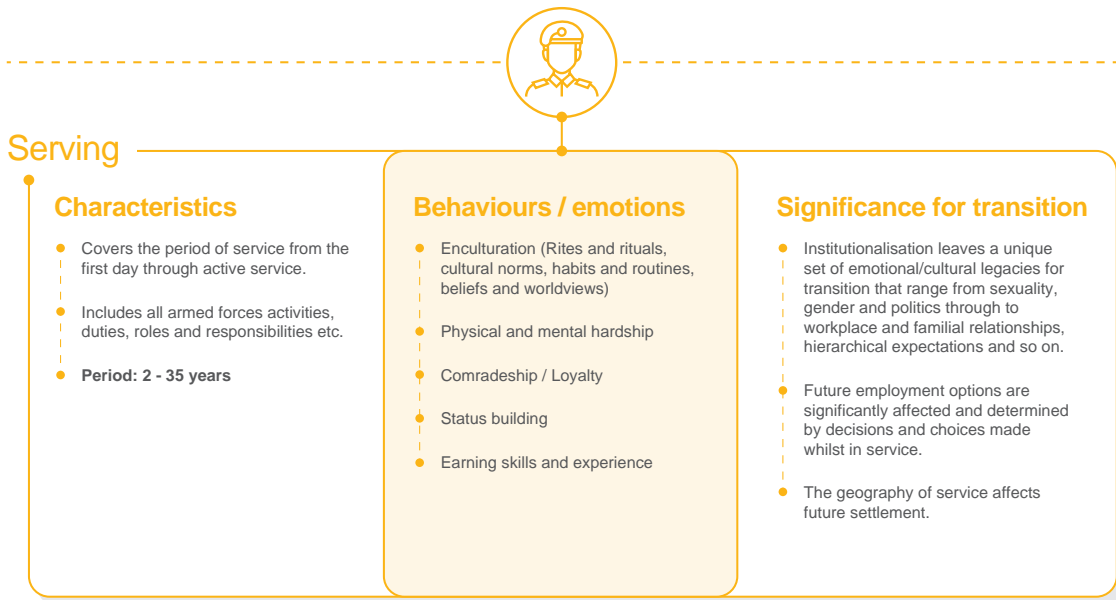
- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

*"From a very young age I had dreamed of joining the army. I knew I didn't want a full career in the army but wanted to spend time as a young man serving before leaving and settling down."*

- Consultant (30), male, former Lieutenant in the Army

*"If I were to give advice to young recruits - I would advise them to think about what they will do when they are in the armed forces - to prepare them for a life after. No one wants someone who can shoot planes out of the sky. I had loads of management experience. I had stripes on my arm. I gave orders and organised people - but with no trade skills it was still very difficult to find work."*

- Retired (68), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army



## Serving



The serving phase of the transition journey is, in many respects, the most important. It is the very significance and all-encompassing nature of serving in the armed forces that give rise to the transition journey itself, and provides it with its uniquely challenging features. More than anything else, it is the individual experience of serving in the armed forces that will define the character of later transition phases. Whilst universal resettlement services can prepare members of the armed forces for

some of the challenges they may face, it is worth remembering that each individual is likely to have been affected in different ways and to different extents by a whole range of factors related to their time serving.

The following list represents those features of service that were highlighted by our research participants as having particular resonance in their own transition journeys. For some, a combination of all of these factors mattered, for others one or two stood out:

- Comradeship, loyalty and kinship with colleagues
- Physical and mental hardship (including combat experiences)
- Development of skills and experience
- Armed forces workplace and social cultures
- Institutionalisation
- Geography of service (where people served), and particularly the geography of postings during the resettlement period
- The wider political contexts of active combat



There is much that could be said, and indeed has been said elsewhere, about all of these aspects of military service and how they drive post-service transitions. For us, the key point is that it is not easy to neatly package up a so called 'resettlement period' as being somehow separate from the rest of the military experience, and then suggest that it is only that period which plays a part in the transition journey. Nor is it a simple task to understand the ways in which different combinations of experiences associated with the above features coalesce in each individual soldier, sailor or airman, creating highly individualised legacies of service.

Serving members of the armed forces gain a huge array of skills, collate mental libraries full of extraordinary experiences, learn to cope with adversity, build exceptionally strong and loyal social networks, have their minds opened to distant cultures, and work as hard as it is possible to work. They also pick up mental and physical injuries, some with life-long implications. They become institutionalised<sup>7</sup>, separated from prior social relationships and wider society, and they develop unique cultures, habits, beliefs and worldviews. Some of these things facilitate the building of a successful life after service, others erect barriers or store up challenges – but it is all happening before anyone reaches any kind of formally recognised resettlement period. The challenge remains, as many of our respondents pointed out, to ensure that strengths are built on and weaknesses addressed. This is true for every member of the armed forces and needs to happen before they leave service; regardless of any reluctance to engage with them at the time.

The accounts provided here give some illustration of the different ways service experiences have lived on into post-service life. Together they point to the need to recognise that transitioning out of the armed forces is not easily reducible to a certain universal set of needs (finding employment, health assessments etc), but rather about understanding the specific service experience histories of each individual member of the armed forces.

Resettlement support then, should perhaps be about identifying the specific strengths service-leavers can leverage and the specific challenges they may face and some of this may only be possible if the whole service period is fully recognised as being part of the transition journey. Processes or systems would need to be in place to recognise and capture the future-implications of service experiences, as-and-when they happen.

## Service experiences in transition

### Trauma and stress...

*I was medically discharged. I struggled with the pressure. I never felt comfortable. My first posting was in Germany. I was away from my support network - and so it's much more intense - and the stress got on top of me. To a large extent these problems were brought on by the army - and I am now much better at understanding what I want... but I was young - 24 - and I had a troop of 35. Some of them were older and more experienced than me. That is very daunting - and of course I am female and quite naturally reserved. There is quite a narrow definition of what leadership is - and I don't think that I was like that. Since then I have heard from one of my troops and he said I was very good, which was nice to hear. I felt like I didn't fit the mould. I think if I had been posted in the UK (I did actually chose to go to Germany) - and if I had got through that troop command post - I could have seen myself as doing well as a staff officer - but I never would have wanted to command a regiment. I wouldn't have been on the track.*

- Project Manager (32), female, former Lieutenant in the Royal Signals

*But I started to have my doubts a few years in - it was a big step up from the TA - going into the regular army. I remember doing training camps in Germany as part of the TA - but in regular service - an horrific event involving bullying happened quite early in my career. I think I was singled out because I had had previous experience. I remember they asked me if I wanted to*

*change my number when I went into the regulars - and I said no. This may have been a mistake. This bullying still affects me to this day - it's only been recently that I have opened up to people. Mainly my mum. For a long time I was hiding from it. I was told to report it - and very quickly all shit broke loose. I was made to feel more like the aggressor - for bringing it up. Never the victim. There were two phrases I remember hearing were 'don't rock the cradle' and 'don't upset the apple cart'. I was blowing open the fact that the instructor's inability to do their duty of care - and my sergeant was worried about his promotion. The impression I got was that he never got that promotion because of what I had revealed. Since then I have always had a real trust problem with everyone I meet.*

- Retired (41), male, former Lance Corporal in the Royal Engineers

*"My experiences whilst on tour in Iraq has left me with some long-standing issues namely PTSD and depression. It was quite a long time after the tour when I wasn't able to hide what was going on inside my head anymore and I had left the military, and it was even longer until I got a diagnosis. I felt very alone as my family and friends didn't understand, the GP didn't seem able to help and all the military doors were closed to me. No-one from the Army checked up on me at any time. This meant that I lost friends, had to lose a lot of time off work as I was on long-term sick. My marriage also broke down and the fact he [her husband] couldn't cope with me when I was ill didn't help.*

- Student (39), female, former Combat Med-tech

### Working cultures...

*When transitioning into a Civil Service Office space, working closely with Senior Civil Service persons, the rigidity of the Army's hierarchy made it incredibly uncomfortable for me to "speak truth to power" with the level of informality expected of me. Furthermore, the career management in the Army - in which so long as you pay attention; stay out of trouble; stay fit, and deliver in work your career progression will*

*be managed through the SJAR/ OJAR appraisal system left me poorly mentally equipped to take control over my own career following my Service.*

*Upon starting in a new role the culture shock was huge. I felt uncomfortable about not extending the courtesy of addressing senior figures as 'Sir' or 'Ma'am' and, having left the Army commanding a squadron, felt under-employed with no line management responsibility and very limited deliverables. I missed the variety of life and busy stop-start routine of in-barracks life... dashing between the Mess; the lines; the sports hall and the parade square. Most of all I missed exercise deployments and the camaraderie I enjoyed with comrades and close friends. I have come to appreciate that nothing to follow will realistically emulate the friendships I made in the Army. I think I spent my first year post-Army silently feeling bereft of the military career I had reluctantly given up and that the work I was doing instead was comparatively meaningless.*

- Civil Servant (33), male, former Captain in the Royal Signals

*"At first I was in signals. My first trade was amalgamating. Then the Royal Signals - and that was a bit of a joke - just being young, work hard, play hard, nothing particularly difficult about it, running around Salisbury plain. The culture in the armed forces is strange (I joined at 16) so it has took me a long time to adapt, I drank a lot more than my civilian counter parts, slept around more, these things are acceptable in the forces. ... Then on to the military police - in Germany - and it was a much more serious job - especially looking after domestics, suicides, traffic accidents. I did a Kosovo tour then - it wasn't too dangerous. ... I decided I had to give my son more security. Also the military police have a bad mortality rate - like the 6 that got killed by those they were training in Iraq. They go out on patrols setting up routes - and doing recces. But first and foremost I was now a mum... so I had to leave. ... I've also suffered domestic violence. Maybe I was desensitised to violence due to my*

*time in the military - and maybe that made me accept things I shouldn't have."*

- Business Development Manager (38), female, former Military Police

### Useful skills and experiences...

*"Luckily for myself the transition to the Fire Service from the armed forces was quite a natural one. This is because a lot of the values and ethos of the Fire Service came from a military background. However even though this is the case, it is not ingrained into you nearly as much in the Fire Service training course as it was during Royal Marines training. This meant that when I started Fire Service training I already had a lot of the mentality that they were looking to instil in us. [...] Examples of this were that when we were drilling on the drill yard we put 100% into everything we were tasked to do, including simple things like running in between tasks and putting some aggression into tasks that would benefit from it. This seemed to be something that a lot of people lacked."*

- Firefighter (26), male, former Lance Corporal in the Infantry

*"I thought bloody hell you can't get more heroic or adventurous than going to another country and saving a young kid in a fire. I didn't want to be a soldier - I thought I was bright and confident enough to lead a platoon in Afghanistan and I wanted to go and save children in Afghanistan but when I got there that wasn't the case. I was involved in an incident where I had to patrol with a police officer and I went into his room and there was an 8-year-old boy - [...] - that sickened me. When I went on patrol - I tried to raise it with my OC - and he shut me down. [...] He was right in a way - he told me that we did not (and should not) go to Afghanistan to change their culture. He said that I could have ended up disrupting relationships - and people could have ended up dying. My own side. From that point on I realised that the military was not the force for good that I thought it was. [...] And then I had the lightbulb moment for my [future career]."*

- Youth Justice (35), male, former Captain in the Infantry

### Joining rituals

Another important aspect of serving that is critical to understanding the transition journey are the multiple rituals that take place and which serve to bolster the sense of belonging that so many of our participants described. The hardships of basic training and drill exercises are the most obvious of these. Ceremonies in which people receive badges or medals are other formal examples, but informal ones also take place. One research participant graphically described having to swim through a fetid body of water before being welcomed into a particular group. Another shared stories about dares having to be performed as part of an elaborate initiation process. They constitute rites of passage that separate new recruits from their old lives and signify their entrance into, or membership of, a new life as a serving member of the armed forces, inculcated with all the values that implies. They are present not only at the point of entering the armed forces, but also crop-up during service as individuals move between different locations or units, again reinforcing the need to bond with new colleagues and learn the new structures in which they find themselves. These rituals (and they are numerous) are extremely powerful, whether formal or informal. They often emphasise aspects of military life (physical fitness, hierarchical order, mental toughness etc.), constantly highlighting and reinforcing the differences between ordinary civilians and 'soldiers'. The ultimate rite of separation of course, is the requirement to fight.

The importance of all of this for our purposes, is that such rituals help to create strong bonds of comradeship and reinforce military structure, but they also serve to create a strong differentiation between the civilian world and the military one. They are a part of the process of institutionalisation. We are not suggesting, by any means, that they be removed or clamped down on. Far from it. The key point for us is this; that whilst there are many such rituals that facilitate service in the armed forces, and which are important in the initial separation from former lives, there are very few equivalent rites that facilitate the transition in the opposite direction, during the transition back to civilian life.



## Preparing

### Characteristics

- This phase covers the activities undertaken during service that are specifically aimed at post-service life:
  - Resettlement programmes
  - Mental planning
  - Negotiation and discussion with AF and friends/family
- NB. This phase varies greatly for different people. For some it is a formal period with formal activities. For others service can end abruptly and unexpectedly, with barely any discernible preparation for post-service life.
- **Period: 10 mins to 6 months**

### Behaviours / emotions

- Formal resettlement programmes and activities
- Communication with friends and family
- Health checks (formally prescribed)
- Service decisions aimed at post-service plan
- Planning and sharing plans
- Financial planning

### Significance for transition

- The degree of planning greatly affects post-service transitions. Different decisions made about the final months of service, for example, can affect the ability of armed forces personnel to, for example, gain new skills, put down financial roots, communicate with family members etc.
- The degree to which armed forces personnel have access to, and take advantage of, resettlement resources varies greatly.

## Preparing



The preparing phase refers to the period before leaving service when serving personnel begin to make preparations for their transition back to civilian life. The formal 'resettlement period' which begins two years prior to the date of leaving service and includes the various systems and packages of support offered and commissioned by the armed services themselves, is a part of this phase. However, as we refer to it, the phase could actually begin whenever a serving member of the armed

forces starts to think about life beyond the military, and/or starts making preparations to do so, such as by telling friends or family members, browsing job or property sites etc. This informal preparation could begin at any time during service, supported or unsupported.

Experiences of this phase of the transition journey varied widely among our participants: from those who began thinking about transition and making plans almost on the day they joined, and who took full advantage of the resettlement support services on offer to them, to those for whom the idea of leaving the armed forces only really took root in the last few days (or hours) of service. Some said that they would have liked to have been able to prepare more, but were unable to do so either because of the nature of their final postings, the short amount of time between when they learned that that would leave and the time of their leaving, or because little help was offered. Some of this may be a mis-representation of what actually happened, reflecting perhaps, a wish that they had made different choices, but either way, it shows that lack of preparation can hit home in later phases.

Associated with this, though not necessarily directly correlated, were the different mental states that our participants reported in relation to preparing to leave. For some, leaving was not something they ever wanted to think about, and the idea of preparing for it was either completely absent or a potential trauma in itself. For some, leaving had been part of the plan from the outset, and planning departure was, in some sense, part of joining the armed forces in the first place. For others, whilst not having a pre-existing grand plan, they nevertheless saw preparing to leave as an opportunity for positive change and entered the period with a spirit of optimism and open-mindedness.

Surprisingly perhaps, good preparation, in the sense of having made good use of resettlement planning offers and of benefits such as enhanced learning credits (ELCs), did not necessarily lead to 'easy' transition stories, even though it almost certainly contributed to 'good' outcomes (in the measurable sense of leading to stable employment and housing). As we shall see, the transition journey is partly about meeting essential needs such as employment and housing, and certainly these are the easiest things to measure, but it is also about a journey of identity and mental wellbeing. It raises the question, for those tasked with thinking about the future of transitions for ex-Service personnel: Should good transitions also be easy transitions? Or, if it is true that most transitions out of the armed services end well (in terms of long-term measurable outcomes), is it ok then that most transitions also seem to be hard?

The reason for posing this question now, rather than in later phases, is that some of the factors that make transitioning out of the armed forces hard, are to do with how well-prepared serving personnel are for the shock of leaving. This is not just about whether they understand how to pay bills and write a CV, but about being mentally prepared for the inevitable discombobulation of returning to life 'beyond the wire'.

Addressing this, of course, would not be easy. As one former major in the army put it to us: *"Those who don't engage properly with the transitions are most at risk. My understanding is that the people in charge of the military unit are supposed to steer people into these services - but in reality they may not have the time nor priority to do this - especially when on operations - so people get handed off to an agency who they are not invested in."*

### Stories of 'Preparing' for transition to civilian life

#### Lack of preparation or inappropriate preparation...

*"I struggled with my transition into civilian street as when I was about to do my resettlement my sign off happened, I found that when you do put that notice to terminate you are treated worse within the army, they won't look after you and act in the same way as when you were serving. I felt that due to me leaving certain ranks would treat you differently as a soldier like you were doing a disservice. The last year in is weird because you're serving but you start to get treated like you're a civilian, which isn't a good thing."*

- Unemployed (34), male, former Signaller

*"The discharge I got was SNLR (services no longer required). They didn't want to give me a full medical discharge - so in effect I was booted out the back door. Before that - I had had a failed suicide attempt (through drink and pills). I remember waking up in a psychiatric hospital. A month after that I left. I was no longer allowed to hold a firearm - or to do the job I enjoyed. As soon as that is flagged up against your name - and although they say they take mental health seriously - its bullshit - and I know plenty others who feel the same way as me. They gave me no resettlement."*

- Retired (41), male, former Lance Corporal in the Royal Engineers



*"There has always been the resettlement period, although to my knowledge I was never offered this as I left as a result of maternity leave."*

- Business Development Manager (38), female, former Military Police

*Personally for me, the navy, for me, wasn't perfect. When I actually left - they did give me a resettlement course. It was HGV driving - and that was helpful for a little while when I first left. It was a week-long course - that allowed me to work after I left. But to be honest, I do feel that I was chucked out a bit and left on my own. I spent a long time on the base waiting to leave. Couldn't I have been training in that time a bit better? I was completely reliant on my wife in the end. Maybe I should have been given a 2-week or 4-week course when I left. The HGV driving was also totally inappropriate - it was a skill to move on with. They gave me choices - but it had nothing to do with what I was doing in the Navy. But rather more generally - they could have prepared me a lot better. Especially to do with general life skills. I took the easy option rather than the best one, perhaps. And HGV driving did give me work straight away. I had a wife and kids, I didn't have the luxury not to work."*

- Electrician (57), male, former Able Seaman in the Navy

### **Good preparation, uneasy transition...**

*"Personally, I had an easy transition out of the Army into civilian life, working with an ex-service mental health charity, but accept that I was perhaps in a more privileged position to steer my own destiny at this time of my choosing. Friends in civilian life were actually amazed by the amount of support I had available to me and were envious of the resettlement package (re-training and help with CV writing etc) on offer.[...] Having served for some 27 years before choosing to retire from the armed forces, I thought that I was well empowered to face civilian life and to make a go of a second career. However, I had not anticipated the vacuum created*

*by stepping out of the military cocoon and soon chose to regain that assurance by re-joining the Territorial Army to 'keep my hand in' as and when I was available."*

- Civil Servant (62), male, former Major in the Army

*"I definitely feel that as a result of my formal training I received in the Army I can project myself well. I pride myself on it. I think good presentational skills are very important. They are valued in both military and civilian work-life. The Army gave very simple presentational rules of thumb. I still follow them to this day and they work. Also, the Army taught me to inject a bit of personality to liven-up boring material. What we considered bread and butter (delivering a PowerPoint well) turns out is quite a valuable skill."*

*I personally feel that the transition was not a difficult one. My wife (who was my girlfriend at the time) totally disagrees. I think there is a distinction to be made. The transition to civilian life from my own POV has two aspects. I found the transition to working life very easy. I left service and walked straight in to a good job. I also had a mortgage so I was secure for a place to live. My income actually increased because I did not have to pay my mess bill and accommodation charge in addition to my mortgage (I chose not to rent my house out). So, when I say my transition was not difficult at all I suppose I mean monetarily I was secure and finding work was easy for me."*

*I think my wife sees it different. She thinks I struggled with the emotional and mental transition from the Army. I admit, I found the loss of status a bit difficult to deal with. I was no longer a captain in the Royal Engineers. However, any loss of status was only a perceived loss of status on my part, in my own head. It wasn't like members of the public treated me different before, when I was a service member, compared to when I was a veteran. I admit I also missed the social side of the Army, I realised that all my mates (close mates) were in the Army too. Once I left I felt there wasn't anything we*

*could talk about. My wife also thinks that I missed being in-charge of people. I would argue that is my nature (I will always gravitate to being in a position of responsibility). To summarise: In one aspect of the transition I had no trouble at all. I was well equipped in a practical sense. On the other hand, emotionally the transition was more difficult."*

- Sales (33), male, former Captain in the Royal Engineers

### **Entrepreneurial preparation...**

*"We were given a date beyond which we couldn't extend our service. 21st March 2012... But we were away - and the time between when I was told I would leave and when I left was not long enough. We had no time to do the normal resettlement procedures. There were a few of us who complained - and kicked a few things off. They thought we were unimportant. We kicked up a fuss... but we did get our courses in the end. I did a locksmith course - and an HGV course through the military - if I ever fall on hard times I can drive a lorry. [...] I still pick locks for fun. [And there is] learning credits - a pot of money I can get for learning up to 10 years after I left. Some of that is left - and I am going to try and use up the lots of £2000 on a masters."*

- Trainer (48), male, former Chief Petty Officer in the Navy

*"I had wanted to go and work in operating theatres. Straight after. But this was not possible - because the Navy wouldn't let me leave before the exact date of 12 years. I had put my notice in 1 year before leaving - but this cannot be flexed. You can't go for job interviews unless you are within 2-3 months of leaving. They had also tried to persuade me to stay - and then gave me a very specific role. So I had 9 months of not being able to do anything for my transition... at least until I had gone into my re-settlement process (cv writing, finance, using*

*re-settlement funds, learning credits etc.). I did do a couple of courses - bicycle mechanics course (but this was for interest - I am a keen cyclist) - I also did a couple of teaching courses - like first aid training. A friend of mine joined the magic circle as part of his resettlement.*

- Nurse (37), male, former Petty Officer in the Navy



## Threshold

### Characteristics

- The exact moment/day of leaving the armed forces. No more, no less. It is literally the moment someone legally stops being a 'soldier' and starts being a 'civilian'.
- As a phase, this accounts for no more than a single 24-hour period.
- **Period: 1 day**

### Behaviours / emotions

- Shock
- Confusion
- Dislocation and relocation
- Removal of highly important and personal status and comradeship symbols i.e. stripping of identity
- Sudden move from familiar geography to unfamiliar territory

### Significance for transition

- The lack of ritual around leaving, in comparison with the abundance of ritual on joining is striking.
- The shock of the day itself can leave a lasting sense of bewilderment, and contributes to an initial and ongoing culture shock.

## Threshold



This phase is not like the other phases we describe. It refers to a specific moment in time: the day that someone stops being a member of the armed forces, hands in their armed forces ID, and steps out into the civilian world. A number of our research participants could remember the moment exactly, and yet the most remarkable quality of these descriptions is how unremarkable they were. In sharp contrast with the elaborate and numerous

'joining rituals' described earlier, most described a decidedly unceremonious exit.

The significance for us, is that the day of leaving, when people are left on the threshold between their life and identity as a member of the armed forces and their new life as a civilian, there is very little to talk about. Anthropologists describe these 'in-between' moments as being 'liminal'<sup>8</sup>, defined by not quite being in either the previous state or the next and characterised by the uncertainty of both a 'dissolving' current identity and yet future possibility. However, those same anthropologists also argue that such liminal periods must come to an end. They must be resolved in some way, since the feelings they induce can be so extreme, chaotic and even potentially dangerous for the individuals going through them. The 'Threshold' phase (or moment) then, is a moment of shock, but it is also, perhaps, incomplete. Ex-service personnel are largely left to find the resolution to their new identity as civilians themselves, albeit with varying degrees of practical preparation for doing so.

To put this in more concrete detail. The Threshold moment is one in which serving personnel are stripped of the symbols of their military life, including any status they may have achieved: their rank, their uniform, their social status etc.. They are also often physically dislocated in terms of where they live, and they are also asked to re-enter a world with which they have become increasingly unfamiliar. There may be friends or families there to welcome them 'home', but these families are being asked to deal with people who are necessarily unsure of exactly who they are.

Of course, for some, the journey through this moment can be swift, and resolutions can be found quickly as the building blocks of civilian life slide into place. This is especially true where sound and solid preparations have been made around things like employment and accommodation in the civilian world, or where pre-existing social networks step in to fulfil the role of reintegrating an ex-Service person into a social life. For others the uncertainty can last much longer.

## The Threshold

### The doorway to civilian life...

*"The day I left - it was exciting and scary - I had met someone and I wanted to be with them - I was more looking forward to what came next. That person was outside of the army. But no, it was literally out of the door with the red book."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

*"It just felt like I was chucked out the door. With hindsight - I put in a whole year of notice to leave and they are very aware of that - I think they ought to at least do a transition workshop or something?"*

- Teacher (34), female, former Able Rate in the Navy

## Unceremony...

*"I can remember the day of leaving very clearly. They moved me from my block to an isolated block - to keep me away from others - even during lunch breaks and rest breaks I was told to keep away from other people. Were they trying to say to me - 'stay away from him he's a retard and its contagious'?... Only one person was nice, the provos in charge of the guardroom - and he said if you need help - you come to see me. He showed me trust. It was like a ray of hope in what was happening at the time. Hope is a great thing. He showed me hope and decency at a time I was most vulnerable. I remember being marched into the commanders' office - and I was given two leaflets - one for the legion and one for Saafa - there were another 3 people leaving on the same day. We were in there for no more than 1.30min - it was like 'take these two leaflets now fuck off.'"*

- Retired (41), male, former Lance Corporal in the Royal Engineers

*"I remember taking a taxi from the guards' room to the train station ... and sat on the train platform feeling numb from head to toe. The first thing I did when I got back home - I remember not sleeping in my mother's house thinking 'what the fuck am I going to do now?' - I was left with nothing. I suppose I was fortunate to have my mother to fall back on - but I couldn't do that for the rest of my life."*

- Student (37), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army

*"I gave my 19 years of service - it was just like 'see ya later'."*

- Locksmith (39), male, former Provost Sergeant in the military police

It is worth noting that for some, the Threshold moment may actually have had some lead up. For all practical intents and purposes a military career might have come to an end prior to the actual date of departure. However, even when this is the

case, the 'petering out' of the military life is usually happening within the institutional framework of the armed forces. In other words, this fact does not detract from the significance of the Threshold moment itself.

*"You remember the beginning and the end don't you... In the last few months before I left - I found it very difficult to get money and expenses and what have you out of the MOD... They made it so hard - with so many hoops to jump through... my final memory is having my ID taken from me and being escorted to the gate. There is no gentle process. It was a really cold feeling. Nobody even waves you goodbye. They do give you a certificate - but it just comes in the post."*

- Trainer (48), male, former Chief Petty Officer in the Navy

*"I had booked to go to resettlement but I was told to go before that. CV writing and interview skills: A full package. But I never got it and then it came to the day and the army left me. When I left I went to my dad's. My cousin's brother came and got me from my posting - in a van - from York. I just left everything there."*

- Unemployed (34), male, former Signaller

*"I landed - gave in my weapon - gave in my armour - picked up the next morning - and that was it. [...] When I got my medal - I just got handed it in a box passed across a desk. No ritual. Regulars and reservists have a ceremony - mine wasn't even mounted. My last day in Iraq - to my parents' house and living at home was 36 hours."*

- Student (39), female, former Combat Med-tech

There will be those who remember their Threshold moment more fondly of course. Some of our respondents described a mild feeling of elation on the day they left. Not from any sense of ill-will towards their time in service, but rather because their time had come to an end and they felt optimistic about their new life. Others had also had leaving parties or drinks that did constitute a

leaving ceremony of sorts, albeit one not formally recognised as being part of the armed forces institutions. These experiences of transition, as it happens, are also entirely compatible with the anthropologists' characterisations of liminality: some people thrive on the possibilities afforded by change and uncertainty. For those who were looking forward to the next step, the day of leaving carried less significance, because it was simply a gateway from one life stage to the next that needed to be walked through. As we have said before, the different phases of transition did not impact on all equally, either negatively or positively.

For those who seek to provide better services to transitioning ex-Service personnel, it may of course be wise to focus on those who may have been impacted more negatively by the curiously uncereemonious Threshold moment. For the others, there may be no reason to dwell on it.





## Confronting

### Characteristics

- The period immediately after leaving the armed forces is characterised by a period of extreme uncertainty around identity and the future.
- The most obvious feature of the phase is that this is essentially an armed forces personnel confronting a civilian world: culture shock.
- The period is longer and shorter depending on preparations made in the previous phase and on different individuals' circumstances.
- **Period: 1 week to 5+ years**

### Behaviours / emotions

- Uncertainty around identity and future prospects
- Economic uncertainty
- Conflict with family and friends
- Poverty
- Soul-searching, anger, bereavement, bewilderment
- New and old mental health issues (e.g. PTSD & loneliness and isolation)

### Significance for transition

- This is a potentially dangerous period in which mistakes can be made.
- It is a phase that clearly impacts mental health and well-being.
- Decision-making in this phase often has long term consequences (for good or ill).
- Help is needed at this point. But is not often sought. Most of the self-described "most difficult moments" of transition occur here.

## Confronting



The Confronting phase of transition comes immediately after leaving the armed forces. The use of the dramatic word here is deliberate. It describes the initial confrontation between the ex-Service person who has just left the armed forces, and the civilian world: the head on collision of two distinct cultures. The word connotes a sense of conflict, but it might also be used to describe a sense of

confusion, awe, curiosity and bewilderment. All of these senses are appropriate.

Again, we would caution that not all experience these different phases of transition equally. For some, the Confronting phase was certainly traumatic and many live with the consequences of it still, and after many years. For others it was less of an issue. There are always those for whom transition was relatively straightforward. However, across the stories provided by our research participants, we struggle to find any in which this particular phase was difficult to identify. The fact of an initial culture shock upon leaving the armed forces was as close as we came to finding a universal experience.

The term 'culture shock' is perhaps a little over-used to describe any situation in which someone finds themselves somewhere that is unfamiliar: a tourist in an exotic location, say, or the start of a new job. We use the term here in its truest sense, to mean not only a genuine disjuncture between how someone makes sense of the world and how other people around them seem to be making sense of it, but

also the struggle to be able to contextualise that conflict due to the uncertainty around which set of cultural rules should be applied.

The Confronting phase of transition is like the Threshold moment writ large. It is characterised by real uncertainties around basic necessities: housing, employment, family and social life. But it is also characterised by uncertainty around identity. An ex-Service person recently out of the armed forces must confront the question of who they are, what roles they now play or are expected to play, what their status is in civilian society etc. They may find that basic, everyday tasks they had taken for granted no longer seem so easy: getting dressed, finding food, relationships with peers and family members, even using the right language in social situations. These things will become familiar again of course, but in this phase of transition they are jarring.

*"I found the sense of belonging really difficult when leaving the armed forces. In the Army you spend your time working and socialising with colleagues + friends, which in hindsight I took for granted a bit. When I left the army, I suppose I naively expected to join the social circle I was part of previously (school friends). However, I realised peoples' circumstances are different and people have now moved on to new groups. Some of my friends were married with children (different priorities), some had moved out of the area and some just didn't seem interested. It was difficult at times adapting from having an active social life to becoming what felt like a social recluse, it would sometimes affect my mood (making me feel down). I struggled in this situation for some time."*

[Wife] *"I observed on his initial return home that he found it difficult to function outside of a routine and that this caused some friction with me, whereby he would become frustrated at plans being changed, and I would struggle with his level of rigidity. I also found that I could not relate to some of his experiences and offer the same level of support that he had likely received from his friends in the army."*

*This would cause me to feel concerned that it may have a longer term impact on our relationship and his functioning more generally."*

- Transport worker (36), male, former Lance Corporal in the Army

More than one of our participants described significant conflict with friends and family, poverty, sharp dips in mental well-being, and self-destructive behaviours or poor decision-making. Some of these problems were of course associated with trauma experienced during time in service (and for example PTSD) but even for those whose transitions were largely untroubled, the immediate repercussions of leaving merited some comment. No one found this moment of their transition to be breezy. When asked to describe the most challenging aspects of transition, almost all of our participants told a story about the weeks and months that immediately followed their discharge. That included those who had left service many years ago, those who lived with debilitating injuries and declining physical health caused directly by their time in the military, and those who had subsequently experienced terrible problems with housing, with domestic violence and with ill-treatment at the hands of the public. When it comes to transitioning, the Confronting phase seemed to be the most difficult.

*"Transitioning was hard on my friends and family. They'd put up with a decade of cadets, university, applying, rejection, getting in, passing out, and now redundancy. I felt like a failure and didn't know what to do next... I do feel I have been left behind compared to my peers in terms of career progression, but now I can catch up. I wanted to retrain as an airline pilot initially ... but owing to a medical investigation that was left unfinished by the military, this left me in limbo for years after leaving. They used to tell me that they usually dealt with people with drug and alcohol problems but my problems weren't so obvious. I don't mind being on a low income - but I had got into debt. And that was the problem. I would be quizzed by charities on how I had got into debt and they seemed to imply*

*that I was doing something wrong - but actually I was spending on essentials only... Is it over now? It is and it isn't. I often wonder why is the forces special? Why do we talk about this so much? Why is transition not straightforward? I used to talk about and feel very sad about it every day - feeling betrayed."*

- Fundraiser (35), female, former Flying Officer

For service providers, the Confronting phase is worthy of perhaps close attention. In general we found that, despite participants describing these times as being the most difficult of their transition, few had sought outside help. Many suggested that they were simply not able to articulate their problems, either to themselves or others, at that time. Some suggested that they had been carrying a strong sense, learned during their time serving, that they were adaptable, self-reliant and strong enough to be able to deal with problems on their own.

More than one of our participants also used the word 'bereaved' to describe the sense of loneliness and isolation they felt during this time, a word which accurately captures the sense in which support has been 'lost' or is missing, rather than being something which was actively being sought.

During other components of the Lifting Our Sights programme of work, we heard service providers express the desire to capture those minority of ex-Service personnel who struggle a great deal with their transition, early, before problems escalate into more serious concerns such as addiction, violence, long-term unemployment and homelessness. It could be argued then, that this Confronting phase is when early help might be most useful, and that part of the task for future models of transition services should be to ensure that ex-service personnel are identified (or identifiable), located and contacted soon after they leave service.

-

It might be tempting to suggest that the culture shock could be avoided entirely with the right kinds of transition services in place even earlier, perhaps during the previous phases we have described. However, we would suggest that some measure of culture shock is inevitable, and, as will become clear, some of the problems ex-Service personnel present with to service providers later on, are in fact picked up or developed during this Confronting phase itself. They may not necessarily be evident, or even present as risk factors, beforehand.

That being said, a great many of our participants never did seek or receive any external help in coping with the culture shocks of transition and nevertheless went on to thrive. Some suggested that perhaps they should be seeking help even today, but others were nonetheless able to navigate through and flourish, regardless of the severity of the initial difficulties they had. As we saw in Part 1 of this report, most suggested that it was family that provided the most significant support through this phase, and for many, that 'worked', though it is also worth remembering, while reading the accounts below, that this means that family members are being asked to cope with a great deal. Conflict and relationship break down were not uncommon.

## Stories of Confrontation

### Loss of identity and an unfamiliar world...

*"The other thing was 'lack of status' I found that very difficult to deal with - for more than half of my career I had been sergeant - and now I was just a nobody. I found that very difficult. I possibly should have got some help. ... For fifteen years I held the rank of sergeant or above and I wore my rank on my arm so I knew and everyone else knew exactly what my status was... But I never told anyone about how I was feeling."*

- Retired (68), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army

*"When I left there was a lot of disorganisation, fear, and a complete lack of empathy. The job market was so poor that being told 'you're highly employable' I knew to be a lie. If people leave and are given the right support to find housing, employment, and if necessary retrain then great. I received nothing and did not want to leave, having made every effort to stay. Overnight I lost my home and my livelihood, it was devastating. It took a decade for my income to recover. I don't want anyone to go through that."*

- Fundraiser (35), female, former Flying Officer

*"Something though that has got me into trouble whilst at work as a civilian was my temper and tolerance to other co-workers, coming from the army everything is structured, everything has its process and place and routine, however in civilian street it isn't like that. I would get frustrated from the lack of peoples work ethic mostly and the lack of discipline, I'd often speak my mind when I thought they were slacking or if the process of something could be done a better way. But the lack of discipline and work ethic of others has lost me quite a few jobs over the years. I guess I still require that structured life."*

- Unemployed (34), male, former Signaller

*"After leaving the Army I had to move back in with my parents for 9 months separated from my fiancée whilst waiting for the flat I owned to become vacant. Although I was grateful for my parents' material support in opening their home it still felt like a huge regression back into childhood - and the sharp difference in human interaction levels meant that I still felt incredibly alone across this period. During the time I started re-forming little bad old habits in terms of personal hygiene and cleanliness that military service had previously enabled me to kick. [...] The particular nadir occurred when I had just finished an important accountancy exam and, with my parents being away, realising that there was no one to celebrate with... So I got drunk on my own in my bedroom and fell asleep with spilt pizza and beer all over my bed."*

- Civil Servant (33), male, former Captain in the Royal Signals

## Coping with the everyday...

*"Didn't plan anything and simply went to the local Tesco, grabbed a basket and went inside and started doing what I had normally done in a supermarket whilst serving, i.e. filled my basket with coffee, tea and snacks and went home. When I arrived home I realised that my shopping was ok for someone living in the block. Not so good if meals were to be made. That's when I knew I had no clue about shopping in civvy Street. I had no one to ask and no idea what to buy to make a meal, pot noodles don't count seemingly."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

*"I certainly found transitioning back in to civilian life strange. The routine, self-discipline, the language armed forces personnel use can be very different. I'd often feel 'different'. I'd say words to people like Civvies (civilian clothes), Scran (food) etc. People would look at me like I was odd. We wouldn't wear civvies a lot, and it took a while to adjust. I was trained to look smart and I found it hard adjusting. I was lucky to have a supportive family when I left the service. But some never understood my reasons for leaving. But they also thought and would tell me I had changed as a person. Was a lot more 'switched off', 'distant', 'on edge', 'cold'. This wasn't me. It took me a while to adjust. I was a little bit traumatised by how strict the Navy was to be honest. And I started shouting at people, how I used to be shouted at."*

- Teacher (34), female, former Able Rate in the Navy

*"I have had people take the breaking point for me as aggressive and my military manner as the same. I have had arguments with them because civvies do not understand the way military people are as they do not engage with them that much. In the work place also is very frustrating that people in civilian life - time keeping and personal admin skill - are not the same as us from the military i.e. if I have to be in the kitchen to start work at 1200 I would need to be on site (where I work) for at least 1140 to get dressed and sorted to start at my start time."*

*Civvies seem to think its ok to come in at that there start time and then get ready for work which is very frustrating and their personal appearance does not seem to matter ever, like ironing uniform for work or even down to personal admin like shaving and washing and uniform is very annoying to me. I feel that that people in civilian life can't understand and communicate properly with us and it gets very depressing to have to deal with this and see your self with good standards and to be told that your standards are not what everyone is like and that the way you are, is not the way to be in civilian life."*

- Student (37), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army

### Impacts on family...

*"I felt a lot of anger within myself which I ultimately reflected towards my mother, brother, sister & niece and I had no idea why I was doing this as my emotions were all over the place. Whilst serving you were always told that you cannot question your emotions as this showed weakness & confusion but as I realised this was said merely to subdue you into thinking into a completely different way that goes against how you naturally feel, this is where I find the confusion started... I drank uncontrollably to cope with the feelings of anger and isolation and I was not a pleasant person to be around, my niece who was 3 at the time ended up crying as she thought I was ill and asked why her uncle was upset. [I was] thinking I would use this to mend my ways. I instead drank more heavily to cope, it was a snowball effect that got worse and worse as time went on."*

- Retired (41), male, former Lance Corporal in the Royal Engineers

*"I did not like my new life. It was boring - and most people around me didn't care about my service ... and I loved my wife - but I found my life was boring. To try and relate to their lack of care and to blend in, that was difficult. Maybe I didn't ever transition completely. I still sit around to this day with people who have been through the same. Only the guys who I met up with would have known that I found it hard... and my wife.*

*Nobody else knew. They wouldn't understand and they didn't really care. But there was no counselling or anything like that. Maybe I should have counselling. If I could have spoken to someone who did know what was going on - and did understand - but the option just wasn't there. I never thought to ask for it. I never thought I needed it."*

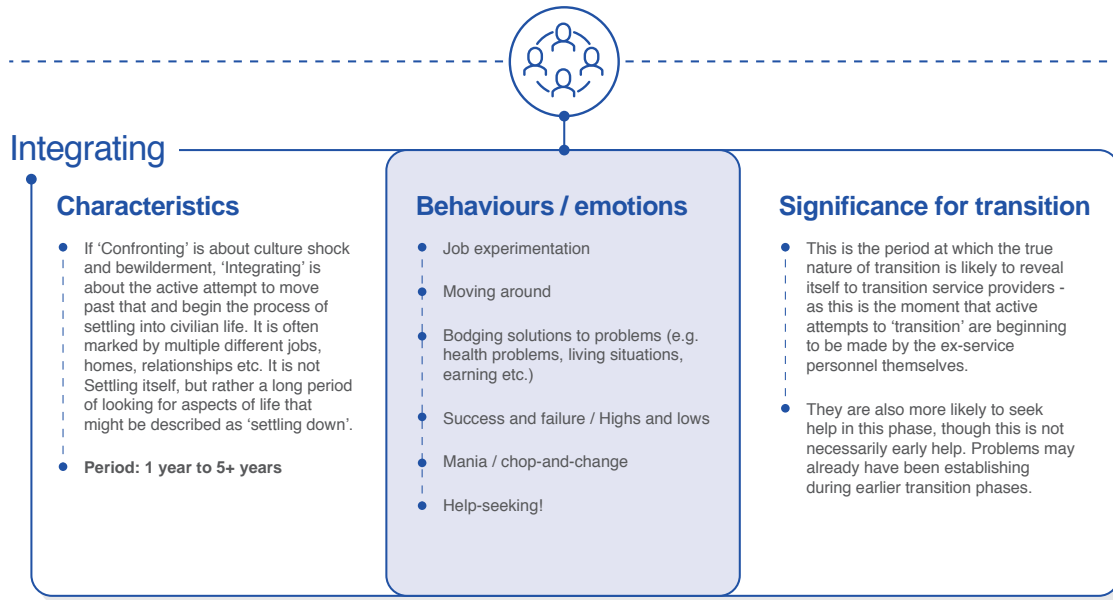
- Developer (57), male, former Major in the Infantry

### Everything hitting at once...

*"I felt like the world needed to just swallow me. [...] I still find it hard to integrate with civilians. [...] Unless it changes, people will find it hard to adjust to the way of life outside the wire. Not knowing what help was available when you're out of the forces with regards to housing, benefits, mental health, help signing up at doctors or dentist, all the bill paying etc.. It was all challenging both mentally and physically feeling you're not worth anything out of the forces. [...] It was a horrible place coming home afterwards - I felt like my 19 years had just been thrown away - I was staying in bed not doing anything. I gave my 19 years of service - it was just like 'see ya later'... They gave me nothing. I was medically discharged for post-traumatic stress - it was months between the diagnosis and leaving - maybe 4 months. I was offered 3-day workshop - but I didn't feel ready to do it. I didn't feel comfortable - and I was feeling let down - and I was rebelling. I was angry that the system had not prepared me for what was to come. I spent months in bed. It was hard to adjust. [...] don't drink now - but even the pub - we are quite loud when we drink in the pub and we swear at each other - like if I called my mate a knobhead then I am accused of being a loud mouth. It's a clash of cultures. That's why I stopped drinking - I would attract attention to myself - and then fights would start - so I have learned my limits. I don't want to get in trouble again. [...] Now, I do get bad days when I feel like I am not as good as I should be - but I am in a place where I can manage it."*

- Locksmith (39), male, former Provost Sergeant in the military police





## Integrating



There is significant overlap between the Confronting phase and the Integrating phase. What marks out Integrating, is the sense of forward momentum. During this phase the ex-Service personnel described job hunting, moving house, and both abortive and successful attempts at forming new social lives. It is, if you like, the attempt to move beyond the stasis, shock and bewilderment of the Confronting phase, and integrate into civilian

life with all the trappings that entails: new families, homes, jobs, activities etc. Of course, some of these attempts at settling and reintegrating fail, and therefore many of the problems that are encountered or developed during the Confronting phase can live on.

Integrating has a chaotic quality, veering between highs and lows, bouncing around between different jobs and geographical locations and experimenting with different social groups. Some described a certain mania and a life of constant change: *"Something I noticed while I was writing - I've lived in 10 different houses in the past 4 years - My life is quite hectic and ever changing. I always want some respite but I can never settle and keep still."* For some, this kind of constant change is a direct result of having spent time in the armed forces where change, variety and activity is a feature of everyday life. In that sense it is perhaps no surprise that so many describe chopping-and-changing without any particular sense that this is a problem. In fact, it is just part of a process of finding the best way to move on using the methods and skills that they are used to, and have been trained in.

As with other phases, for some, this phase can be quite short. Landing in appropriate employment quickly, finding a house, starting a new family can all bring it to an abrupt end. But for others it can last years, even decades, as they find the ultimate goal of settling increasingly difficult to attain. For a few, the problems and challenges encountered during service and during the Confronting phase never get resolved and can prevent 'successful' integration entirely. On the other hand, some described activities that look like Integrating beginning very quickly after leaving service, either by necessity or as a way of coping with the problems associated with initial culture shock.

Often, the quickest solution to the challenges of culture shock and with the idea of reintegrating into civilian life is to find a speedy pathway back to the armed forces lifestyle, by, for example, joining the reserves or becoming involved in military charities or social groups, or finding career paths that bear some similarities with the institutional contexts of military life such as the police or the fire service. These provide an institutional continuity between military service and civilian employment.

*"I suppose leaving the military can be a scary time for a lot of servicemen, it certainly was for more me even though I had a supportive wife. Personally, I really didn't have any transferable technical skills and it was an uncertain period in my life however I quickly found the 'softer' skills developed in the forces were invaluable in working and social environments. Team player, leadership, self-discipline, timekeeping, ability to learn quickly, smartness of appearance, I could go on, certainly gave you an advantage over "civvies". After a year of bouncing around jobs but coping well I ended up in a position as a prison officer, it was possibly inevitable that I would end up in uniformed and disciplined service as I always revelled in that when serving. Luckily a lot of ex-servicemen were also enlisting, and whilst I enjoyed working with non-ex-servicemen I did gravitate towards veterans socially and vocationally which I suppose is natural*

*a common bond etc. As I imagine a lot of veterans are into sports I was and this allowed me to kind of break away from my service past and socialise with 'normal' people. I was surprised how interested they were in my time at sea and the job I did and once again it did make one proud to have served."*

- Electrician (57), male, former Able Seaman in the Navy

A marked feature of the Integration phase is that it is during this period that our respondents described themselves as being more likely to reach out and seek help from external sources (i.e. outside of the family). Either they had come to the realisation that the difficulties of the Confronting phase were not going to simply fade away, or they had been increasingly made aware that there is help out there. It is during this phase that many of our participants describe making contact with military charities, local authorities and, of course, forming bonds with newfound groups of former service personnel.

*"The advent of Facebook has meant that I now have renewed old acquaintances. And I have got into sports again it's one of the best ways of getting back to that camaraderie."*

- Retired (68), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army

In more practical terms, this is also the moment at which participants described the different ways in which their skills and experiences could be made to work (or not work in some cases) in the civilian world. CVs were written and re-written, and the advantages of military culture and disciplines revealed themselves alongside the disadvantages of ingrained habits and incomprehensible exploits behind the wire.

### Integrating: In their own words

#### Exploring...

*"When I left the army after twenty-five years of*

service I found it very difficult to find a decent job as employers didn't understand what management skills and experience that I could bring to their company. I found that they wanted people with skills in their own particular field or that they could relate to. I eventually lowered my expectations and started applying for security jobs and driving jobs. One such post was as a civilian security guard on an American military base near my home, I was interviewed by a civilian HR manager who was responsible for all of the civilians working on the base. I was asked what experience I had and when I told him about being guard commander on army camps with what that entailed, six tours of Northern Ireland, which is all about security, guard duty on nuclear weapons sites in Germany. At the end of the interview it was obvious that the person conducting the interview had no military experience himself and thought that what I had told him of my experience was lies or a flight of fantasy. It was all true. I eventually gave up looking for employment with a company and started my own chauffeur/ private hire company. I stopped talking about my experiences in the army as most didn't understand what I was on about, most seemed to think that it was all a big game."

- Retired (68), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army

"I don't know where I see myself in 5 to 10 years' time. And that's part of the problem. I am still so undecided as to what to do with the rest of my life that I feel rather stuck and my lack of progression towards a goal terrifies me. I have had some difficult days where I feel as if I will never find a sense of purpose again and something that I can work towards. My biggest fear is to still be drifting between jobs in 5 years' time and having not made any progress in another career. I am considering retraining into something such as financial advising or cyber security. I just don't know where to begin and I'm afraid to commit to a new path in case it turns out to be the wrong one. That indecision is leading to and has led to inaction. I feel more useless now than ever, and the more time that elapses from when I left the armed forces, the greater that feeling becomes and

also the harder I think I will find it to forge a new career in something worthwhile."

- Consultant (30), male, former Lieutenant in the Army

### Chop and change...

"During transition and the job application process I found that I needed to work harder than expected to overcome assumptions about the type of work I had done in the Army. [...] My first job after leaving the Army was as a project manager, implementing software services for global clients. [...] Starting my new job ... was actually helpful as it provided structure, leaving me little time or energy to be too worried about being on my own. I had been considering working part-time to start with, but in the end I took on a full-time role. After 10 years of a fairly nomadic existence I bought a house with my husband 2 years ago; I am currently enjoying being more settled and stable, and we plan to stay where we are for at least 5 years. Moves beyond this point will depend on whether we decide to have a family, or whether our circumstances change in other ways."

- Project Manager (32), female, former Lieutenant in the Royal Signals

"I had a few niggles - but I think I was quite well prepared for leaving - and I always knew that the reserves were crying out for aircraft engineers - and nuclear engineers, so I joined them. It wasn't a good job at first - but I knew there was always something to fall back on. Then I went for a train driving job. I passed the aptitude training - but I never took it up as a career. The money was good - but I thought I might find it a bit dull. [...] Then I was offered a job that was out of my area - most people get settled somewhere but I got offered a job in Bournemouth - and others didn't want to do it - and so I took up this teaching role there - and I knew that this would set me up for teaching engineering again later - gaining the lecturing experience. It feathered my nest."

- Trainer (48), male, former Chief Petty Officer in the Navy

*"When I left the armed forces, there were so few jobs available, the UK being in the grip of a major recession. So, I left the country. It was very sad - I tried to be excited - but what I really wanted was life to be back as it was, which was near impossible with large numbers of service personnel being made redundant. I didn't know what else to do, and the one route I was keen to explore seemed too uncertain. I moved to Japan to teach English... [...] [At first I had] moved back in with my family which was hard, as they passed me job ideas but I wasn't getting anywhere. I was working in a call centre, and still applying for better jobs. [...] I don't know how long transition is considered to be but my search for my next job has never ended."*

- Fundraiser (35), female, former Flying Officer

*"When I left the Army I was looking for jobs which I had qualifications for, I found a job that was teaching PE in primary schools. The minimum expectation on qualifications was an Army PTI one which I had attained during my time serving. [...] I believe that since then, my time in the armed forces has helped into other roles indirectly. For example, I now work as Train Driver, when applying for the role I made a point of all the transferrable skills that were similar. For example, being resilient, similar drugs + Alcohol Policy, the ability to operate in a stressful situation and communication skills."*

- Transport worker (36), male, former Lance Corporal in the Army

### Easier pathways...

*"I sort of stumbled into HR - and decided I liked it and studied at the Institute of Personnel Management. I liked it because of the people - I didn't want to be stuck in an office - I wanted to be out with people. The reputation [for being blunt] stayed with me though. I have a no-nonsense approach to HR - if you want to work you should work and you should do what is required of you - I was blunt with people who ... you know. This absolutely came from the military. I would say the*

*best skill taught to me by my time in the army is being unflappable."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

*"[After serving] I felt I could do anything I put my mind to and I really feel that helped me be a better person. Certainly a much stronger one. Mentally and physically. Going in the 'real world' really was a challenge and I think these skills really helped. Professionally, I earned an NVQ Level 3 in 16 weeks and that in itself, got me in good stead with recruitment agencies and managers. I felt more confident and felt the forces brought me out of my shell. It helped to build relationships and teamwork like no other job could. Massive skills to use when transitioning. At first, when I left I had got myself on benefits, but then I started to get temp work and that was the quickest way to get work - a few weeks of that - and then managed to get a permanent job with DHL - and they were really impressed with the Navy when I was at interview."*

- Teacher (34), female, former Able Rate in the Navy

### Social Integrating and reaching out...

*"I was unsure what I wanted to do to be honest - and I had looked into getting courses and what have you from the transition charities - but never took it up. I did go with the Not Forgotten Association though. They run courses throughout the year for people who are injured. I went kayaking in the French alps for a week. I felt good about how good they were to me - and there were a lot of people with PTSD - and missing limbs and that. I had been injured by having a broken leg. Nothing bad but it just meant I was eligible."*

- Firefighter (26), male, former Lance Corporal in the Infantry

*"I needed a clean break. I moved to Dumfries - and got a job as a night porter in a hotel in ... But I haven't been in employment since 2008. My mental health has not been the greatest. It is improving -*

*but it hasn't been good. I want to work again. I want to feel useful once more. I now engage with a lot of military charities and now I am opening up more - and it's helping me to make peace and move on. [...] The Royal British Legion Scotland and Ssafa in Scotland and Poppy Scotland have all been great with me. Ssafa have been really good because when I moved house and I broke up my relationship I was living in a shell with nothing. Ssafa helped me get furnished again. Especially when the council took their sweet time doing necessary refurb. British Legion were actually the ones who got this all moving."*

- Retired (41), male, former Lance Corporal in the Royal Engineers

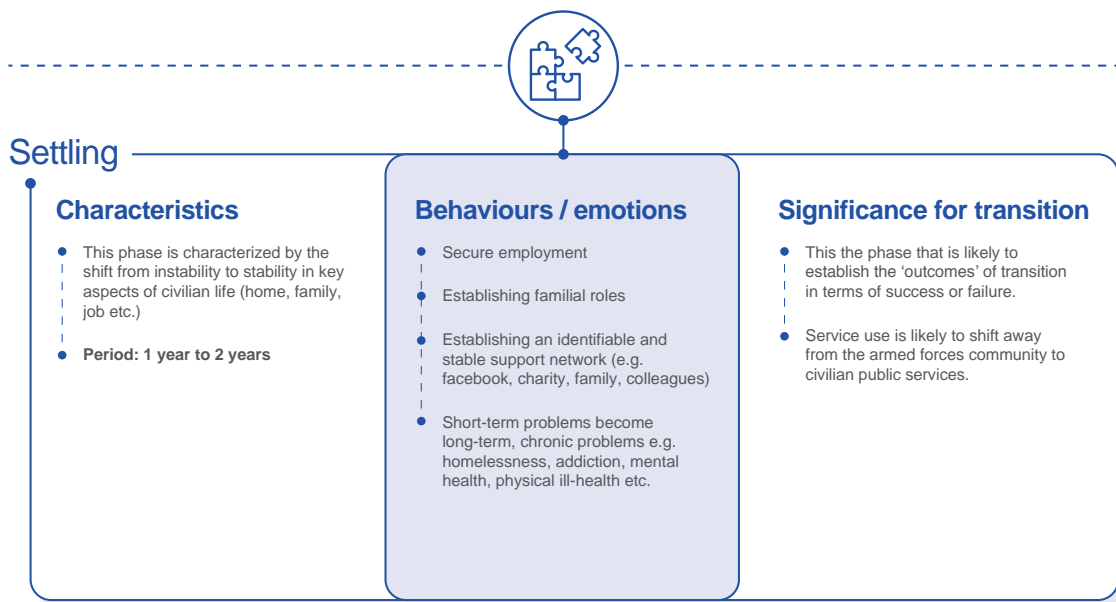
*"I have now started running a fitness group called Frontline Fitness for veterans and NHS and blue light services, for free, so like-minded people that are struggling mentally and physically can get together to also help integrate military and civilians together."*

- Locksmith (39), male, former Provost Sergeant in the military police

*"When you leave the army - you feel like a social recluse - because your friends are all over the country... mates from school had families and had moved on - and I didn't have the social network.... I think I am a quieter person than I was - but I have built up a social network again - mainly through Rugby League and Union. Actually, it took ages - I was looking at rugby teams on twitter - eventually I found one that was specifically appealing to ex-army... even then I was anxious even just emailing... and since then have played with other teams."*

- Transport worker (36), male, former Lance Corporal in the Army





## Settling



The Settling phase of the transition journey is not quite the resolution, but it does describe the phase in which an ex-Service person might start to be considered a civilian again, both by those around them and to great extent, by themselves.

The phase is characterised by a number of different facets of civilian life becoming settled: a chosen career or secure employment, stable accommodation, more clearly defined family or social roles etc. It is only at this point that one could start to talk about 'outcomes' of transition, since previous phases are, almost by definition, still subject to so much change and instability. It should also be apparent by now, having presented some of the accounts provided by our research participants, that a fair proportion of those we spoke to have not yet reached the Settling phase of their journey. To some extent this is due to the difference in the amount of time that has passed since they left the armed forces, but not in every case. The different phases last different lengths of time for different people in different circumstances.

*"If I am brutally honest, I feel like a bit of a failed transitioner... maybe I should have done another couple of years in the army. I haven't found that next thing. I thought I knew what I wanted to do... but that didn't work out. Maybe I should have taken advantage of more of the things offered... and maybe I have been a bit slow to open the little black book and gone off and worked in finance in London. Haha."*

- Consultant (30), male, former Lieutenant in the Army

The word Settling then implies a mostly positive sense in which transitioners are finding a more comfortable situation for themselves. In most cases, this is certainly the case. It is a time in which ex-Service personnel can envisage a future as a civilian and reflect on their military careers as playing a part in that, but not necessarily being the single most important or defining feature of their current identity.

*"I hope to find ways to start embedding within and giving back to the local community – possibly by gaining coaching and/or officiating qualifications within athletics. Taking up the sport again played a crucial role during my resettlement, as it gave me focus and routine at a time of significant disruption. Though still competing at a high standard I am aware that I only have a couple of 'peak' seasons left, and I am looking forward to helping the next generation achieve their goals in the sport. I would also like to live more sustainably, by following a greener diet (I would not be surprised if I become vegetarian within the next 10 years), purchasing an electric car and reducing unnecessary travel. I think that these lifestyle changes will only become more critical as time goes on."*

- Project Manager (32), female, former Lieutenant in the Royal Signals

*"My health is currently good and my personal circumstances and finances are currently good. My primary focus in life, and I suppose concern in life is to be able to provide as stable a lifestyle and upbringing for my daughter. I would like to be fit and healthy enough to be able to work to retirement age (65) providing the best education opportunities for my daughter up to and including university, if that's the path she chooses. I would like to be fit and healthy, and indeed live long enough to see her settled with a good person; equally, to walk her down the aisle and make a very proud speech afterwards."*

- Developer (57), male, former Major in the Infantry

Of course, there is a flip-side to this sense of solidification in the civilian world. Problems that have not been dealt with during previous phases, or the legacies of serving, can also become embedded, taking on a more chronic, or long-term, set of characteristics.

The most obvious example of this is physical or mental injury of course, which can become a long-term burden.

*"As I have turned 60 I guess my health problems put me in 'sniper's alley' which makes me worry."*

- Civil Servant (62), male, former Major in the Army

*"I have recently left my previous job of thirty years unwillingly. The position was a job I loved and revelled in, I like to talk !! I had to leave due to a long-standing injury, arthritis, which had increasingly developed over the years. The initial cause of the arthritis in my shoulder was caused by a rugby injury playing for my ship at the age of 17 [in the Navy]"*

- Electrician (57), male, former Able Seaman in the Navy

*"Being ill didn't really show until towards the end of my transition into civilian life. When I first came home it was like coasting on a wave of positive emotions from loved ones who were happy to see you back safe. Then the symptoms began but I was able to put a brave face on, so everyone around me thought I was doing OK and adapting well. The celebrations ended, I had to get a new job and the symptoms became worse. This had a direct effect on me. I stopped socialising, didn't return calls and felt too tired all the time. In time many friends drifted away and I felt so alone. I am sure that if I didn't have this problem my transition would have been a lot easier both on myself and those around me. However, who I am now is the result and I like the direction I am going in and have made some new friends so everything happens for a reason."*

- Student (39), female, former Combat Med-tech

Other legacies of service and of having been in military institutions can be subtler and more ambiguous in terms of 'outcome'. More than one participant, for example, described a decline in ambition since leaving the armed forces:

*"I have become more comfortable in my own skin, and have accepted that certain aspects of my character are fundamental to who I am and may not change. I have also gained some confidence, but would say I am less sociable and outgoing than I was when serving. Though still motivated and conscientious in my professional life, I am also less ambitious than I was."*

- Project Manager (32), female, former Lieutenant in the Royal Signals

*"I am less ambitious. However, I am also less purposeful and more cynical of others motivations. I am less self-assured. I am less interested in my appearance and being smart. I am more open-minded to others' difference of opinion and accepting of weakness in others. I am kinder and more giving of my time. I am wiser and more mature*

*and frequently sought out by friends for advice, but I am less fun on a night out! I now occasionally suffer short melancholic periods which I never suffered from whilst I was in the Army."*

- Civil Servant (33), male, former Captain in the Royal Signals

*"This lack of ambition and easy-going attitude really started in the Navy and is something I do regret on occasions. I think when I left I was just happy to provide and grateful to be able to. Whether in my senior years I can fulfil my potential does remain to be seen"*

- Electrician (57), male, former Able Seaman in the Navy

This was by no means universal, but it does perhaps speak to the anti-climactic nature, for some, of the return to civilian life. The boredom that some spoke of, and the lack of variety, as compared with life in the armed forces, might give some a tendency towards malaise. For these people, settling down might just be a little bit... boring?

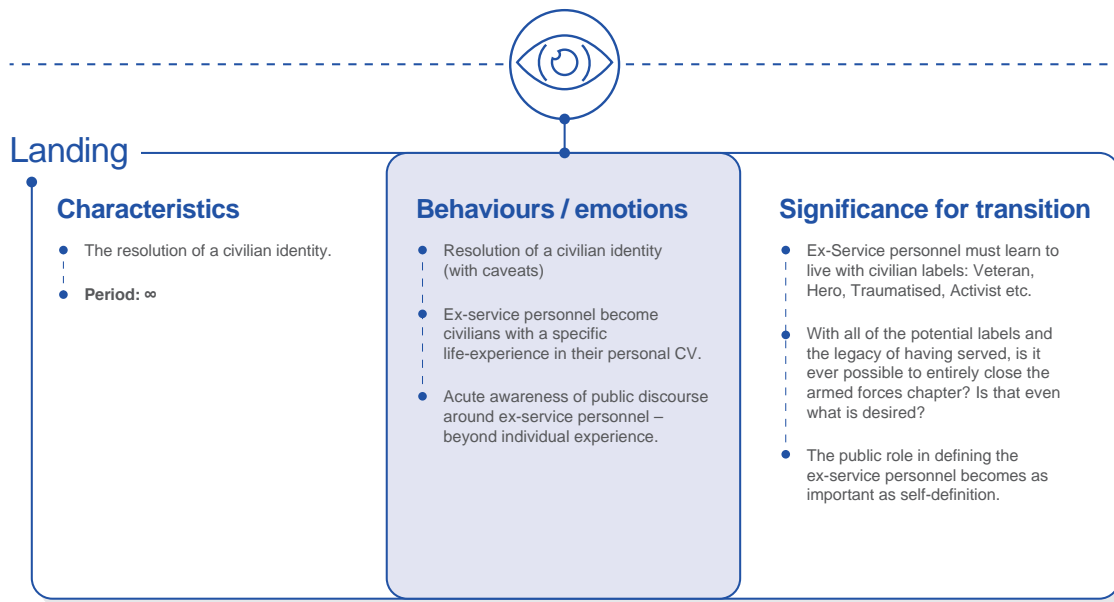
Settling then, should not necessarily be read as meaning that all problems and challenges have gone away. In fact, Settling might simply involve becoming embroiled in a whole new set of distinctly civilian problems.

*"I am just about to start a full-time degree course to become a teacher. This will take 4 years. I am doing this because my trade which I gained in the military - the industry in civilian life pays a lot less and has more demands on you than in my military job. I am doing this for the future of my family so I can get better pay and a life which was more like what we use to have in the army. My choice to do this is with more people not eating out and watching what they spend so going out to eat is a luxury in a restaurant so there is more work being put on me as they make cuts at lower levels. This is more to do*

*with covid-19 and the industry is a very uncertain business to be in. we will struggle with money while on my degree but the benefits which will come will far outweigh this. Me and my wife both agree with this. we have a new baby on the way and a 5-year old in the house so a better work and family life balance for me will be so much better on my health, family life and my mental health. As a head chef I am [currently] working a 46 hour week minimum and other time is not paid until I am on minimum wage as I am salaried so most weeks I am working up to 52 hours a week which is 10am - 10pm 5 days a week."*

- Student (37), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army

The key feature of the Settling phase is that it is the time when an ex-Serving personnel becomes more or less indistinguishable from any other civilian, albeit with a specific history. It involves the wrapping up of the various processes of settlement that ensure someone can live successfully or functionally in society, such as finding stable employment and housing. It can involve receiving support from both family and outside organisations from within and without the Armed Forces Community, but is less likely to be about crisis management and more about resolving uncertainties.



## Landing



beyond the introspection and self-evaluation that characterises earlier phases, and involves more of an engagement with the roles of the military in society, and of those are serving or have served in them.

It is worth remembering that, no matter the relative successes of the Settling phase, it will never be entirely up to any ex-Service person to define themselves. Public discourses that surround the military and the politics of military spending and military action mean that ex-Service personnel will always, to some extent, have their identity blown around in the prevailing winds of public debate, requiring them to revisit who they are on an ongoing basis. In this context, it is sensible to ask whether transition ever truly ends?

If stability and the resolving of certain processes is the key feature of the Settling phase, then Landing is much more about identity. This final phase of the transition journey is about reflecting on and coming to terms with a civilian identity given a life-history that involves serving in the armed forces. This goes

To be clear, we are not suggesting that this is necessarily a bad thing. To some extent everyone must constantly revisit their past in order to understand themselves in the present. The difference in this case is simply that ex-Service



personnel have a particular kind of past that plays a particularly salient, and often controversial, role in society.

Labels that become attached to ex-Service personnel provide one example. Is it useful to have the term 'hero' for example? That label is surely a civilian word for those who have served in the armed forces, that serves a socio-political purpose for wider society that may not chime with the experiences of ex-Service personnel themselves. How that 'lands' on a particular individual and a particular ex-Service person is often invisible. For some, it is clearly a label that is impossible to live up to in reality:

*"War heroes was not me. It's the people who were in Afghanistan or Iraq. The word is bandied about too much - it doesn't mean me and I don't think about it. I think there should be respect and maybe as role models - but not heroes."*

- Unemployed (55), male, former Combat Med-tech

*"I think there are different perceptions and misconceptions in society. Plenty of my friends in the army are not heroic - they are right wing to the point of being racist. I can't understand how they have formed these views - despite being noble people. [...] Leadership and heroism are not the same thing. Victoria Crosses are awarded to juniors. My thinking on it has changed since leaving the army. I used to think heroism went with rank and leadership - 'if he's a brigadier or colonel he must have earned his stripes.' - But nowadays I have met plenty of junior ranking people who were spiritually and morally unimpeachable... Since leaving - I think I have come across more people in civilian life - who are unheralded - but nonetheless change the world. But what is heroism? I met people with medals - they were always impressive - often flawed."*

- Civil Servant (33), male, former Captain in the Royal Signals

Reading this last comment, it is hard not to think that the simple and well-intentioned public labelling of ex-Service personnel as 'heroes' was never intended to cause such angst amongst those it is aiming to praise.

For others, it unhelpfully contributes to a continuous demarcation between themselves and their peers, colleagues and friends – in many ways competing with the very idea of 'transition back into civilian life'.

*"My friends, family and most of the public seem to think that veterans are special and they are grateful for our service. An example of this is that my oldest friend always puts messages on Facebook every Remembrance Day and Armed Forces Day saying that she thinks I'm a hero. I know she means well and I like [that] she is proud of me, but I don't feel like I am anything special, I did a job and got paid for it."*

- Student (39), female, former Combat Med-tech

The same kinds of problems arise with the term 'veteran'. The term seems to bring with it connotations of age and of having served in a world war, and having certain kinds of stories to tell, but seemed divorced from the kinds of experiences of those who had served more recently in the middle east, say, and for whom less welcome labels such as 'mad, bad and sad' seemed to land more easily. The effects of this are felt in different ways. One participant, for example, described his company as having won an award for its willingness to employ and look after 'veterans' and being invited to the awards ceremony despite his relatively junior role in the company: "I suppose I was being used as part of the company's overall strategy. However, I got on with the other people at the dinner and so looking back on the event it was mixing business with pleasure. A good experience and an eye opener for me." This more positive story contrasted with another who described still having to persuade his employer and his colleagues that his having served in the armed services does not make him 'prone to violent outbursts of aggression'.

As we saw in Part 1, widespread protests involving military statues also gave rise to conflicts and reflections, both private, and on internet forums and within families, around the politics of military history and the nature of ex-Service personnel in society. But these protests, and the societal issues that gave rise to them, were not brought about by the ex-Service personnel themselves. Rather they were being drawn into them as the media and wider public debate picked up on the overt meanings of military symbols. In other words, the discussions around identity and politics, or the politics of identity, that some ex-Service personnel felt required to take part in, were not about their own personal journeys, but rather an addendum that had been tacked on from outside.

Similar kinds of consideration also apply to the legacies of having served in particular contexts. No matter how long ago someone served in, for example, Northern Ireland, the very fact of service in the UK armed forces there, meant that transition to civilian life, no matter how successful, was never likely to end the need to confront the question of one's identity in society.

Landing then, is not just about the end of a transition journey involving housing and employment, but about coming to terms with an identity that is a civilian, with caveats.

*"I will always be ex-military - I am proud of being ex-forces. People ask your opinion on things and I can fill in the gaps that civilians don't know. It's also a good conversation piece - and if even if they're not - they become interested when they hear how different it was. I am proud to be a veteran."*

- Trainer (48), male, former Chief Petty Officer in the Navy

*"I am always an ex-soldier. If anybody asks me what I did before I retired - that is the first thing that I tell them: I am an ex-squaddie - and only afterwards might I tell them about the private-hire business."*

- Retired (68), male, former Staff Sergeant in the Army

### Conclusion: The transition journey and the future



What the transition journey, constructed from the personal testimonies of those who have been through the transition from the armed forces to civilian life, tells us, is that transition is not just about meeting a series of practical needs (housing, employment etc.) but is also a journey of identity: a series of emotional transitions in which protagonists must come to terms with, and negotiate their place in, the world around them. Finding secure housing, stabilising familial and social relationships and finding work are all a part of that journey and of course comprise a set of components that are to a greater and lesser extent necessary for integration into the civilian world; but they should not be seen as a tick list which, once completed, constitute success. Success instead is a personal evaluation made by each individual transitioner who will weigh

up sets of individual highs and lows against each other and tell us themselves where they stand in relation to their military experiences and their role in civilian life.

Thinking about the future then, is on the one hand about understanding macro environmental changes in the housing market and the digital and employment landscapes (which the Lifting Our Sights programme addresses elsewhere), and on the other about understanding what a future transition journey might look like at an individual level. Put simply, we can imagine a world in which all practical transition needs are addressed for every serving member of the UK armed forces, but it is hard to imagine that future journeys will not continue to be characterised by periods of culture shock and the confrontations implied by movement between different cultural regimes. Similarly, we can imagine a world in which employment options for ex-Service personnel are abundant, but it is difficult to imagine a world in which every transitioner knows which of those abundant choices to accept. Such a question could only be resolved by going through a process of self-evaluation and experimentation such as that outlined in the 'integrating' phase in the current transition journey.

Ethnographic research such as that outlined in this report does not give a prognosis for the future but does provide an understanding of the situation today from the point of view of transitioners themselves, and therefore a strong indication of the lived experiences on to which societal shifts will play out over the next 10 years. With this in mind, it's important to consider how wider trends are likely to affect that lived experience. How, for example, will the changes in the employment landscape arising from the ongoing digital transformation of society affect the 'Preparing', 'Integrating' and 'Settling' phases of the journey in which searching for employment is key? How will advances in data collection and analysis regarding ex-Service personnell's location and well-being impact the 'Confronting' phase in which today's transitioners often feel alone and misunderstood? How will

changing perceptions of the armed forces in public spheres impact on the 'Landing' phase in which transitioners start to resolve their identity as both an ex-Service person and a civilian?

It is the job of the wider Lifting Our Sights programme to identify exactly those wider trends that are likely to impact on the future transition journey over the next decade, and to develop a set of strategic recommendations for stakeholders in the Armed Forces Community to address the likely challenges. The findings in the work presented here then, and the transition journey model itself, are embedded in the other Lifting Our Sights programme outputs where the findings of the foresight work have been mapped on to the different phases of transition, along with their likely impacts, the challenges they will bring, and recommendations for how to prepare for and address them.

It is only with a proper ethnographic understanding of the lived experience of transition today, that we can more fully understand the realities on to which our expectations of the future will play out. It is our sincere hope that the research presented in this report provides the framework for understanding and anticipating the lived experience of the transition journey that all ex-Service personnel must undertake both today and, inevitably, in the future.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Table of respondents

NB. Some respondents did not complete all tasks but all those listed below contributed at least one story and/or took part in interviews.

Gender	Age	Marital Status	Ethnicity	Children	Employment Status	Industry	Which of the following best describes your current living situation?
Male	26	Co-habiting	White British	No	Employed	Public Sector	Homeowner
Female	38	Divorced	White British	Yes	Employed	Charity	Renting
Male	27	Single	White British	No	Employed	Public Sector	Renting
Male	34	Single	White British	Yes	Unemployed	N/A	Social Housing
Male	48	Divorced / Co-habiting	White British	Yes	Employed	Aerospace	Homeowner
Male	37	Married	White British	Yes	Employed	Healthcare	Homeowner
Male	63	Divorced	White British	No	Semi-retired	Automotive	Homeowner
Male	39	Co-habiting	White British	Yes	Employed	Other	Homeowner
Male	41	Single	White British	Yes	Retired	N/A	Social Housing
Female	32	Married	White British	No	Employed	Transport	Homeowner
Female	39	Separated	White British	Yes	Student	N/A	Social Housing
Female	35	Single	White British	No	Employed	Charity	Renting
Male	57	Married	White British	Yes	Employed	Property	Homeowner
Male	63	Divorced	African-Caucasian	No	Employed	Defence	Homeowner
Male	37	Married	White British	Yes	Employed / Student	Catering	Social Housing
Male	68	Married	White British	Yes	Retired	N/A	Homeowner
Male	55	Single	White British	No	Unemployed	N/A	Social Housing
Female	34	Co-habiting	White British	Yes	Employed	Education	Renting
Male	33	Married	Mixed Ethnicity	No	Employed	Engineering / Construction	Homeowner
Male	35	Co-habiting	White British	Yes	Employed	Public Sector	Homeowner
Male	58	Co-habiting	White British	Yes	Self-Employed	Various	Social Housing
Male	57	Married	White British	Yes	Employed	Construction	Homeowner
Male	30	Married	White British	No	Unemployed	Consultancy	Homeowner
Male	44	Married	White British	Yes	Employed	Information Technology	Renting
Male	62	Married	White British	Yes	Employed	Public Sector	Homeowner
Male	57	Married	White British	Yes	Retired	Public Sector	Homeowner
Male	33	Married	White British	No	Employed	Public Sector	Homeowner
Male	32	Married	White British	No	Employed - Temp	Various	Renting
Male	36	Divorced	White British	No	Employed	Transport	Renting
Male	59	Single	White British	Yes	Employed	Charity	Renting
Male	40	Divorced / Co-habiting	White British	Yes	Employed	Telecoms	Renting

What was your role in the Armed Forces?	Which region do you currently live in?	How long did you serve?	Did you earn combat experience?	Which part of the Armed forces were you based in?	How long ago was it that you left the Armed forces?	Have you ever engaged with the services of armed forces charities?	Before you left, what role and rank were you?
Owner	England	6 years	Yes	Royal Marines	Less than 2 years	In the past	Infantry
	England	10 years	Yes	Army	6-14 years	In the past	Corporal
	England	<4 years	No	Army	2 - 5 years	Never used	Gunner
Householder	England	7 years	No	Army	6-14 years	Never used	Signaller
Owner	England	23 years	Yes	Navy	6-14 years	Never used	Chief Petty Officer
Owner	England	12 years	No	Navy	2 - 5 years	Never used	Petty Officer
Owner	England	5 years	No	RAF	More than 15 years	Never used	Basic Airman
Owner	England	19 years	Yes	Army	2 - 5 years	In the past	Provost Sergeant
Householder	Scotland	7 years	No	Army	More than 15 years	Currently engaged	Lance Corporal
Owner	England	4 years	No	Army	2 - 5 years	In the past	Lieutenant
Householder	England	6 years	Yes	Army / Reserves	6-14 years	In the past	Combat Medical Technician
	England	3.5 years	No	RAF	6-14 years	In the past	Flying Officer
Owner	Northern Ireland	25 years	Yes	Army	More than 15 years	In the past	Major
Owner	Northern Ireland	>20 years	Yes	Army	6-14 years	In the past	Major
Householder	Scotland	13 years	No	Army	6-14 years	In the past	Staff Sergeant
Owner	Scotland	25 years	Yes	Army	More than 15 years	Never used	Staff Sergeant
Householder	Scotland	11 years	Yes	Army	More than 15 years	Never used	Corporal
	England	<4 years	No	Navy	6-14 years	Never used	Able Rate
Owner	Wales	6 years	No	Army	2 - 5 years	In the past	Captain
Owner	Wales	5 years	Yes	Army	6 - 14 years	Never used	Captain
Householder	England	5 years	No	RAF	More than 15 years	Never used	Intelligence Analyst
Owner	Wales	9 years	No	Navy	More than 15 years	Never used	Able Seaman
Owner	England	<4 years	No	Army	2 - 5 years	In the past	Lieutenant
	England	>20 years	Yes	Army	2 - 5 years	Never used	Troop Staff Sargent.
Owner	Northern Ireland	42 yrs	Yes	Navy / Army	2 - 5 years	Never used	Major
Owner	Wales	5.5 years	Yes	Navy	More than 15 years	Never used	Able Rate
Owner	England	6 years	No	Army	2 - 5 years	Never used	Captain
	England	6 years	Yes	Army	2 - 5 years	Currently engaged	Lance Corporal
	England	7.5 years	Yes	Army	6-14 years	Never used	Lance Corporal.
	England	23 years	Yes	Royal Marines	More than 15 years	Never used	Sargent Major
	Scotland	7 years	Yes	Army	More than 15 years	In the past	Corporal



## Appendix B: Methodological detail and the Spryng research platform

### Method

Although we have referred to this study as being ‘ethnographic’ it should be noted that the methods used were not ‘ethnographic’ in the traditional sense, thanks to the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. By necessity, digital tools had to replace traditional face-to-face and in situ participant observation.

Many existing digital tools associated with ‘digital ethnography’ however, fall far short of the principles required of good ethnographic research and simply turn into run-of-the-mill data collection exercises with participants responding to prompts around pre-determined questions by uploading digital materials (pictures, videos etc.) and providing light commentary. This looks more like a dispersed focus group than anything truly ethnographic. What scope there is for more exploration and investigation, using these tools, is limited to some real time follow-up questions and prompts from afar, rather than the wholesale explorative, environmental and participant-driven shifts in direction that face-to-face ethnographers would be allowed to engage in whilst in the field.

Instead then, an online platform was chosen that allowed research participants to create ‘auto-ethnographies’. This involved each participant writing a series of personal, reflective stories and anecdotes around loose prompts, and then answering a series of questions which asked them to consider these stories according to various analytical frames. Since the stories and anecdotes shared by participants were largely unstructured, and were interpreted individually, it was felt that this approach remained closer to the ethnographic ideal than simply prescribing homework from afar in order to meet pre-determined output requirements or pre-determined analysis frames.

The research was carried out during the summer of 2020 when much of the UK population was subject to the unique social and workplace restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, though the context was not, at the time of research, such that the restrictions had become ‘normalised’. As can be seen from the structure of both the static questions, the stories told by participants, and the unstructured interview data, Covid-19 received little attention. Transition is, after all, a lengthy process, into which both the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic were still largely unknown. Only in the section in which participants were asked to think about the future did it come up in any detail.

### Data collection

Each participant was asked to complete 5 ‘tasks’, using digital channels, exploring different overarching themes. The tasks involved writing a story about their own transition journey out of the armed forces and into civilian life, and then answering a short series of fixed questions. Family members were also invited to contribute stories if they so wished and, in some cases, tasks were completed once by the participant and then again, separately, by a family member, though these were few in number.

The overarching themes were:

- Difficult moments
- Friends and Family
- Knowledge and Skills (including their preparations for transition)
- Perceptions of the armed forces
- Future outlook

These themes were presented as broadly inclusive. ‘Story prompts’ invited and encouraged participants to write whatever it was that they felt they needed to say or tell. The structure of some of the fixed questions in the tasks also differed from those that might be found in a traditional survey. First,

responses to non-discursive questions required participants to reflect on the stories they had already written, meaning that each answer they provided came with context embedded. This is more than just lip-service. The analytical tools provided in the digital platform literally embed the long-form personal narratives within the various graphs that the more static questions give rise to. Unfortunately, this powerful analytical tool is difficult to visually represent or replicate in a static document such as this report, but for the purposes of analysis it has meant that we were able to add greater context to the findings. Second, the questions make use of tools (such as 'ternaries') derived from the field of 'sensemaking' and complexity studies<sup>9</sup>. These require a deeper engagement from the participant than would standard survey questions. They cannot simply be 'ticked', in a rush. Responses are therefore far less likely to simply be artefacts of the research process itself. They also yield more subtle results since they allow participants to nuance their answers rather than forcing them to respond with an answer that puts them into a 'box'.

Following completion of the tasks, 26 of the participants also took part in one-hour, in-depth and unstructured interviews, in which their task responses were explored in greater detail.

More details about the digital platform used in this research can be found in Appendix B.

## Participants

In all, 31 research participants completed at least one task and 29 completed all five. 26 respondents took part in an in-depth telephone interview following completion of the tasks.

The recruitment process involved a mixture of methods designed to draw respondents from different sources. These included research panels, open calls on social media, snowballing and targeted recruitment through personal connections at least one remove from recruiters themselves.

The sample was designed strategically to ensure, as far as was possible given the limitations on the ability to conduct any face-to-face recruitment, that there was representation across the demographic categories outlined below.

The demographic considerations that need to be made when seeking to represent the transitioning armed forces community are enormously varied. It was important therefore, for us to try and include as many views as possible, even given the limitations of sample size and the largely qualitative nature of the research. Criteria we considered for representation included:

- Rank at the time of leaving service
- Service of the armed forces being transitioned from
- Time spent in service
- Time since leaving service spent in civilian life
- Region currently being lived in
- Combat experience
- Marital / Employment / Housing and household status/demographics
- Industries being worked in
- Engagement with armed forces charities services
- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity

A full table of eventual participants can be found in Appendix A.

Whilst we are confident that our table does provide at least some representation from across the different categories implied by these demographic considerations, our recruitment efforts were hampered by both time and Covid-19. In particular, one group is obviously under-represented, namely those ex-Service personnel from minority ethnic backgrounds. This can partly be explained by the fact that today there are, in relative terms, fewer ex-Service personnel in the general population

from minority ethnic backgrounds. We were simply less able, within the constraints of the project, to find and recruit these participants using the more generic recruitment techniques imposed by remote recruitment methods. We therefore make no claims to having made adequate representation of this cohort and the potentially unique or different experiences they may have. In fact, given the fact that in the future the proportion of ex-Service personnel from ethnic minority backgrounds is likely to increase, we would recommend that future studies explore these demographics and their experiences, and that such studies should be prepared to recruit specifically for that purpose.

The other way in which our sample differs from the general population of ex-Service personnel is in terms of the age demographics. This was by design. The focus of the larger study within which this piece of research sits, is on the future. We therefore wanted to place greater emphasis on those still going through transition processes and that included more recent searches for housing and employment, starting families etc. That is to say, we wanted to ensure adequate representation of those whose circumstances were still undergoing (to a greater or lesser extent) significant change, and who could shed light on the emerging patterns that would affect future generations of transitioners. Whilst the older demographics do also experience change of course, it was felt that their pathways were less likely to yield fresh insight across a whole range of specifically transition issues, and were also more likely to follow predictable routes, such as declining physical health due to ageing.

In this report we also choose to refer to those who took part in the research process as both 'participants' and 'respondents'. The difference is purely stylistic, the cohort being referred to is the same in each case. The reason for the use of both terms is that due to the different methods of data collection and submission, they were both active participants in terms of submitting, structuring and analysing data, and also more like traditionally passive respondents when it came to completing

certain research tasks or questions.

## Anonymity and Ethics

All participants were given a detailed outline of the ways in which the stories and answers they provided would be used, including the fact that findings would be placed in the public domain and that their words would be reproduced verbatim. Nonetheless, pseudonyms have been used and certain key, potentially identifying, pieces of information have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of each participant, and where such changes did not materially affect the point or argument being made. Some of their written accounts have also been lightly edited to aid readability.

Some of the participants were more obviously vulnerable than others. For some, this was about their ongoing mental and physical health, for one or two more it was more about where and how they had served and the associated ongoing risks to their safety, and for others it was to do with socio-economic disadvantage. Appropriate signposting and caution around anonymity was exercised in each case.

All participants were also provided with signposting to support services, both general and specific, verbally (during recruitment and during interviews) and digitally every time they completed a task. In the event, one participant decided to end their involvement in the research due to the fact that writing their personal story brought up bad memories. This person was given immediate directions to support.

All expressed hope that by telling their stories in such a personal way they could make a positive difference for future service leavers, and all wished to be informed when the report was made public. The camaraderie felt for those who would follow was heartfelt and genuine.

## Note on reading and interpreting findings

In light of all of the above, the 'Quantified Findings' section of this report should not be read in the same way as the findings of a traditional quantitative study.

First, the sample size does not permit full statistical analysis and therefore graphs and tables should be seen as indicative of the responses given simply by this cohort. That said, they are more than just numerical indicators, rather they should be seen as fully considered responses given in the context of detailed personal stories. They are not simply a 'small data set based on a limited sample' but rather a powerful visual tool providing analytical insight into a more complex qualitative data set that sits behind them. For example, therefore, the responses given by participants to static quantifiable questions have also been used to inform the qualitative analysis to a great extent.

Second, since each response, even to a simple binary choice question, is given in the context of a specific personal story, they should not be seen as generic responses to survey questions. For example, where respondents have been asked a question like: "From where (if at all) did you receive support during your transition out of the armed forces and back into civilian life?" their answer comes alongside a long-form, personal account of their own transition, and can be matched directly to it. It is not an indication of a general level of support they feel they might have received – but rather a specific response in relation to the story they have told about needing (or not needing) support. In other words, each response comes with context. One consequence of this is that tables and graphs should not be reproduced elsewhere, without reference to the wider context from which they came.

We have tried, as far as is possible, to indicate the ways in which this greater nuance and context affects the way the quantified findings should be read and understood, in the body of the report.

## Spryng



Spryng is a relatively new digital research platform and global network of practitioners (at the time of writing). It was developed by team of academics, consultants and researchers working in a field known as 'active sensemaking'. Sensemaking merges thinking and practise from a number of related disciplines and research methodologies including: systems thinking, complexity, and ethnography.

The strength of the tool for ethnographers, lies in its focus on story-telling. Each research participant must provide a thoughtful and reflective narrative each time they respond. The analytical tools then provide a way of making sense of those stories in ways that aid the specific goals of any given programme of work. As the creators put it:

*Because people naturally use stories, images, memes and narrative as containers for what they find meaningful and noteworthy, these represent essential inputs to Spryng's sensemaking engine. Leaders and planners, whose challenge is to identify, shape and guide meaningful actions that will allow our human systems to make progress toward desirable ends, can leverage insights facilitated by the platform to guide their next wise choices.*

Whilst the platform does allow researchers to ask straightforward, survey-style questions of research participants alongside stories, its more interesting capabilities lie in the various sensemaking tools that demand more engagement from participants and in return allow for more nuanced responses.

*"Active sensemaking is, in effect, more like an ethnographic inquiry, rather than a statistical survey. The questions are designed to be ambiguous and open-ended. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers and thus no way to "game" the instrument. Respondents are encouraged to provide more than one experience or story, assigning meaning to (or "signifying") each experience through a small set of interpretive questions. The resultant data is therefore both qualitative (the respondents' experiences) and quantitative (the respondents' responses to the interpretive questions). In the dataset and the subsequent analysis, the stories remain linked to the interpretations. Thus, it is always possible to move back and forth between patterns of interpretation and the experiences underlying those patterns."* (Horne and Nielson, 2020)

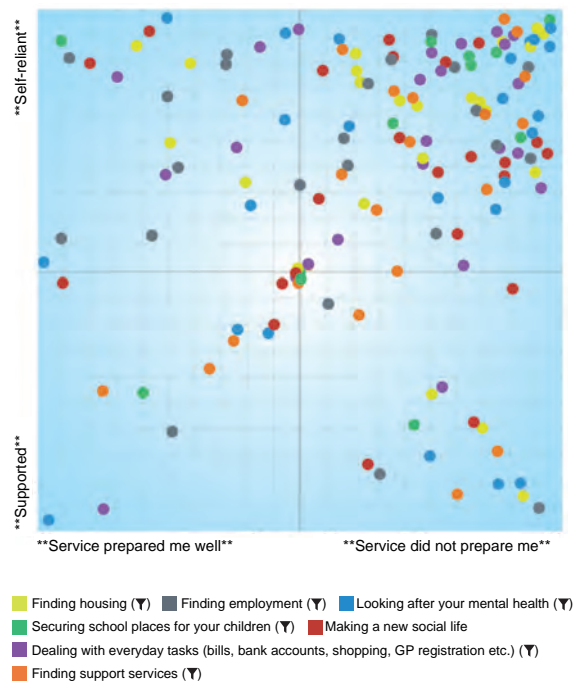
- Active Sensemaking Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA) Vol. 20, No. 1 <https://emflipbooks.com/flipbooks/QRCA/VIEWS/Fall2020/>

For more information on the Spryng platform <https://spryng.io>

### Appendix C: Preparedness for transition

Participants were asked to place different coloured markers (representing different aspects and challenges associated with transition) on a two-by-two grid showing the extent to which they were self-reliant or supported, prepared or ill-prepared, in terms of meeting them. They were asked to ignore those coloured markers that did not apply to them. The full results of that exercise are provided in the diagram below.

Chart C: Meeting the challenges of transition



At first glance, the results of this exercise seem to point to a clear trend. For most, no matter the transition difficulty under consideration, the top right quadrant seemed to be the most appropriate area to place the marker. In fact – there are twice as many markers in this quadrant as in all the others put together – with many placed toward the upper right corner where the indication is most emphatic. In other words, for most of our participants, most of the different types of challenge faced during transition were faced alone (without support), and were things that their time in service did not prepare them well for. This trend looks broadly the same when broken out into the different sub-categories (housing, employment, schools, everyday tasks etc.).



However, there is reason to treat these results with some caution. First, in this instance, the tool is a fairly blunt instrument which hides much of the nuance provided in other tasks. For example, one of the stories told by a respondent who placed their 'employment' marker in the upper right quadrant (indicating that service did not prepare them well, and they were unsupported) actually expressed a more complex situation than the tool is able to present:

*"There are not many skills that you cannot transfer from military to civilian life, however, in terms of preparation I was very unprepared. ... This is due to no one telling leavers the difficulties of leaving. The most challenging is the lack of structure, and dealing with civilians who have no connection to military service through family or friends. Another problem is dealing with people in the same way (i.e. as an NCO you have to deal with people differently in civilian life)."*

- Unemployed (32), male, former Lance Corporal in the Infantry

This narrative seems to be suggesting that whilst there are some specific challenges in terms of shifting between one culture and another, the ability to transfer skills (arguably the most important aspect of finding employment) was not in question; a more nuanced answer perhaps than looking solely at the placement of the marker.

A further reason for maintaining some scepticism around a cold reading of the chart above, is that the answers were given in the context of talking about difficulties respondents had faced during their own transition, and therefore there may have been a predisposition towards feeling unsupported and to having not been prepared for transition challenges during their time in the armed forces.

All of that said, the findings should not be ignored either. The results do give some indication of a state of mind and set of feelings around transition, which coalesce around the themes of having to 'go it alone' when facing the hardships of transition, and the notion that transitioners felt that they left the armed forces ill-prepared for the challenges they would face:

*"I found that some of my skills I obtained in telecommunications were transferable to the industry in civilian street, however its very basic and most of the courses you need in civilian street isn't something you have on paper from the army. It's enough to get you into something base level. I wasn't able to any sort of resettlement out unfortunately due to certain circumstances. I would have benefitted from that service i.e. cv writing and interviewing techniques etc."*

- Unemployed (34), male, former Signaller

This is not necessary a reflection of how well transitioners are treated in relation to other groups in society facing these same kinds of challenges, or an indicator of the kinds of service that exist to help transitioners. Rather, it reflects the way this group of transitioners feel about the challenges they have had to face during their transition.

# References

- <sup>1</sup> See for example: Career Transition Partnership Annual Statistics: UK Regular Service Personnel Employment (MoD) - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/career-transition-partnership-ex-service-personnel-employment-outcomes-financial-year-201819>
- <sup>2</sup> See for example *A Better Working Future for Ex-Service Personnel* (Good People and FiMT, 2020) and numerous other research reports at <https://www.vfrhub.com/>
- <sup>3</sup> See also *The mental health and treatment needs of UK ex-military personnel* (Rhead et al, 2020)
- <sup>4</sup> There is a great deal more in the data collected that yields more insight into the question of how well prepared our participants were for the challenges of transition out of the armed forces. The messages they give here however, are subtle and require a larger space to unpack. A summary can be found in Appendix C.
- <sup>5</sup> See *Lifting The Lid On Transition: The families' experience and the support they need* (Heaver, L., McCullough, K. and Briggs, L., 2018)
- <sup>6</sup> See for example the British Social Attitudes Survey 29th edition (2012), conducted by the National Centre for Social Research <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk> and research conducted by the Forces in Mind Trust and YouGov *Public perceptions of veterans and the armed forces* (FiTM and YouGov, 2018) - <https://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/public-perceptions-of-veterans-armed-forces.pdf> <sup>7</sup> <https://www.futureagenda.org/foresights/autonomous-vehicles/>
- <sup>7</sup> Some of our research participants suggested not using the term 'institutionalised' in order to avoid the connotation that they are people who cannot do things for themselves. Others, of course, recognised that this was precisely how they felt about themselves. In this instance we use the term in the sense that Erving Goffman suggested in his paper "Characteristics of Total Institutions" (1957) Goffman provides 'army barracks' as a specific example: "*Often entrance will mean for the recruit that he has taken on what might be called a proactive status. Not only is his relative social position within the walls radically different from what it was on the outside, but, as he comes to learn, if and when he gets out, his social position on the outside will never again be quite what it was prior to entrance...*"
- <sup>8</sup> Most notably by Arnold Van Gennep in *Rites du Passage* (1909) and by Victor Turner in his essay *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (1963).
- <sup>9</sup> See for example *The new dynamics of strategy: Sense-making in a complex and complicated world* (Snowden and Kurtz, 2003) - IBM SYSTEMS JOURNAL, VOL 42, NO 3





## About Future Agenda

Future Agenda is an open source think tank and advisory firm. We help organisations, large and small, to explore emerging opportunities, identify new growth platforms and develop game-changing innovations. Founded in 2010, Future Agenda has pioneered an open foresight approach that brings together senior leaders across business, academia, NFP and government. The aim is to connect the informed and influential, to challenge assumptions and build a more comprehensive view about the future that will help deliver positive, lasting impact.

For more information and to have access to all our insights please visit  
**[www.futureagenda.org](http://www.futureagenda.org)**

Contact:

**Dr. Robin Pharoah:**

[robin.pharoah@futureagenda.org](mailto:robin.pharoah@futureagenda.org)

**Dr. Tim Jones:**

[tim.jones@futureagenda.org](mailto:tim.jones@futureagenda.org)