Forces in Mind Trust – Policy Statement on Relationships

Purpose

1.   This Statement sets out FiMT's policy position on the personal and professional relationships of ex-Service personnel and their families. It provides an overview of the evidence that exists to support it, the issues that inform it, and the changes that are needed.

Background

2.   Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) was established in 2011 by a £35 million endowment from the Big Lottery Fund, now The National Lottery Community Fund. Our vision is for all ex-Service personnel and their families to lead fulfilled civilian lives. Our mission is to enable successful and sustainable transition. We deliver our mission by commissioning and funding evidence generation to influence policy makers and service providers, and by improving the capability of the Armed Forces charities sector.

3.   Having a strong social network is important for a successful transition out of the Armed Forces[1]. It can be a protective factor against adverse outcomes such as poor mental health and alcohol misuse[2], and can increase the likelihood of positive employment outcomes[3]. Building and maintaining relationships is also key to growing one's network. This includes personal relationships with family and friends, professional relationships with colleagues, and interactions with support services.

4.   It is estimated that 53% of Service personnel are married or in a civil partnership and a further 22% are in a long-term relationship[4]. Research has indicated that a higher proportion of serving personnel are married and that they marry at a younger age when compared with the general population. The Armed Forces lifestyle could be seen as incentivising personnel to marry, providing a job which offers financial security and subsidised, stable accommodation for families. However, the military can also be detrimental to married and family life and can place stress on relationships[5]. While there is no evidence to suggest serving personnel are more likely to be separated than the general population, certain demographics in the serving population have been found to be more likely to be divorced, separated, or widowed than others: those who are older, female, commissioned, and those who have experienced two or more childhood adversities. Serving personnel are also almost three times more likely to be separated or divorced under the age of 30 years than the general population but appear less likely to be divorced or separated over the age of 30[6]. While there is currently no data available on the relationship status of ex-Service personnel, the

---

[1] Continue to Work, The Transition Mapping Study 2017, Kantar Futures, 2017
[2] Military Families and Transition, The Centre for Social Justice, 2016
[3] A Better Working Future for Ex-Service Personnel, GoodPeople, 2020
[4] UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results, MOD, 2020
[5] Living in Our Shoes, Ministry of Defence, 2020
[6] *Op cit*, The Centre for Social Justice, 2016

inclusion of an Armed Forces question in the 2021 Census (2022 for Scotland), may provide us with this information for veterans in England, Wales, and Scotland.

5.   In adopting a programmatic approach to our work, based on our theory of change, our Relationships Programme brings together a coherent set of projects with the aim of delivering tangible impact. The Relationships Programme is supported and informed by our policy position on the personal and professional relationships of ex-Service personnel and their families.

Policy issues

6.   The majority of ex-Service personnel make a successful transition into civilian life. The skills acquired and social bonds developed in the military often lead to positive relationships and an improved social and economic position after leaving the Armed Forces[7]. There are a minority however who struggle, and some can experience periods of loneliness or isolation after leaving. There are also certain aspects of Service life that can make it challenging for personnel and their families to build and maintain relationships during and after service.

7.   Poor relationships, or lack of a social network, have negative consequences. Ex-Service personnel who are divorced or separated have been found to be significantly more likely to report mental illness, relationship difficulties, social isolation, and physical health problems than those who are not[8]. Relationship breakdown can also result in practical difficulties and is reported to be the most common cause of homelessness[9]. Poor relationships with, or a lack of trust in, support services and professionals, can also impact levels of help-seeking. Ensuring that ex-Service personnel and their families establish and maintain positive personal and professional relationships is crucial to supporting better outcomes and reducing the financial cost of poor transition for society.

Policy position

8.   We believe that no ex-Service person should be disadvantaged as a result of their service, and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most, such as those who have been injured or bereaved. Our vision is for all ex-Service personnel and their families to enjoy positive inter-personal relationships in family, professional and social environments. Our goal is for all ex-Service personnel and their families to be able to access timely and effective support for their personal and professional relationships when needed.

9.   In 2018 the Ministry of Defence published *The Strategy for Our Veterans* report[10] which set out its key outcomes for veterans. One of these was for "all veterans to be able to build healthy relationships and integrate into their communities" by 2028. We welcome this goal and will continue to work with the Office for Veterans' Affairs and others to achieve it. Reaching this goal will not be easy, however. It will require work to limit any disruption to families caused by the Armed Forces

[7] SToMP: Ex-Armed Service Personnel, Healthy Relationships and Domestic Abuse: A Qualitative Study, Glyndwr University, 2017

[8] *Op cit* Centre for Social Justice, 2016

[9] Positive Futures Getting Transition Right in Scotland, Scottish Veterans Commissioner, 2021

[10] www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-for-our-veterans

lifestyle, it will require more support for the serving and ex-Service community, and it will require better collaboration and integration of the services that support them.

Overview of evidence and issues

10.   Under our Relationships Programme, we have funded and published research to better understand the relationship challenges experienced by ex-Service personnel and their families and we support an ongoing programme of research in this area.

11.   **Relationships in the Armed Forces Community.** Being able to build and maintain positive relationships with others is linked to several factors. Some of these are unique to the Armed Forces while others are experienced by the general population. They include:

- **Pre-service factors.** Research has identified an association between childhood adversity and adult relationship difficulties. Childhood trauma or adversity has been linked to problems with intimacy, trust, sexual relationships as well as increased physical violence, emotional problems and aggression[11]. Experiences of childhood adversity are a common pre-service vulnerability for the UK Armed Forces, particularly in the Army[12], the Service most likely to recruit from areas of lower socioeconomic status.
- **In-service factors.** The Armed Forces lifestyle can place additional pressures on families which can impact relationships. Both the military and the family could be described as 'greedy institutions' with the military placing additional demands on its employees including high levels of commitment, time and energy which can clash with similar family demands[13]. Frequent relocations and long periods of deployment can also place a strain on relationships and can limit employment options for non-serving partners, resulting in financial strain or dependence on the serving partner. The non-serving partner can often be left alone to manage childcare and other domestic duties and serving personnel can miss out on important family events[14]. Combat experience has also been found to exacerbate stress and antisocial behaviour, which can cause problems between partners and have a negative impact on children[15]. By its nature, service life can also be insular, isolating serving personnel and their families from some of the dynamics of civilian life.
- **Service Family Accommodation.** As noted above, living in Service accommodation, and in particular accommodation on military bases, can result in strong networks between military personnel and families but can limit integration with local civilian communities making it harder to integrate on transition. The new Family Accommodation Model[16], which is

---

[11] Relationship Difficulties Among U.K. Military Personnel: Impact of Sociodemographic, Military, and Deployment-Related Factors, Mary Keeling, 2015

[12] *Ibid*

[13] *Op cit* Centre for Social Justice 2016

[14] Families Support to Transition: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, RAND Europe, 2016

[15] *Op cit* Centre for Social Justice 2016

[16] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-accommodation-model-what-you-need-to-know/what-you-need-to-know-about-fam

currently being piloted, will provide more flexible accommodation options for serving families and may aid community integration.

- **Domestic abuse.** Perpetration of domestic violence and abuse is higher in the military than the civilian population[17]. It has been suggested that aspects of the Armed Forces lifestyle and culture such as frequent relocations, separations, combat experience, alcohol consumption, hypermasculinity, hierarchy and patriarchy can create a culture of subordination in the family home and financial reliance on the serving person, increasing the risk of domestic abuse[18]. Victim/survivors of domestic abuse have expressed frustration when reporting incidences of abuse, or are unwilling to report it, to welfare services or others in the military suggesting they will take the side of the serving personnel, their employee, over the non-serving partner[19]. The transition process can also be a trigger for domestic abuse with families coping with a loss of purpose, being in closer proximity and having to negotiate new social situations and relationships[20].

- **Transition.** The transition process can be a culture shock for Service leavers and can lead to adjustment difficulties for personnel who are moving from a tight knit social environment with a strong sense of purpose and camaraderie to a new civilian home where they may not know anyone. A survey by The Royal British Legion found that half of Service leaver respondents stated that leaving the Armed Forces caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated[21]. Transition can be particularly difficult for those who are unexpectedly discharged and who have little time to prepare, and military relationships may end abruptly. When personnel leave the Armed Forces, they are not just leaving a job, they are leaving behind financial stability, subsidised housing, health care and education. It is also not just the Service person who leaves, the whole family gives up a unique way of life and transition can be stressful for families. Family dynamics can be impacted during transition with changes to family roles and a loss of identity[22].

- **Northern Ireland.** The security concerns faced by veterans in Northern Ireland can result in a lack of trust in others and an unwillingness to disclose their veteran status[23]. For many veterans in Northern Ireland their operational theatre was and remains the communities in which they live. This can result in some living in constant fear and threat.

- **Veterans' mental health.** Social networks can act as a protective factor to mental ill health and reduce the likelihood of suicidal ideation[24]. Conversely, a lack of positive social networks

---

[17] Prevalence of intimate partner violence perpetration among military populations: A systematic review and meta-analysis, Kwan et al, 2020

[18] Intimate partner violence in military couples: A review of the literature, Alysha Jones, 2012

[19] Domestic Violence and Abuse in Military Families: Improving Signposting to Specialist Support, University of Bristol, 2019

[20] *Op cit* Glyndwr University, 2017

[21] *Op cit* The Royal British Legion, 2018

[22] The mental health needs of serving and ex-Service personnel: A systematic review, NatCen, 2020

[23] The Health and Wellbeing of Armed Forces Veterans in Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast, 2021

[24] The Veterans' Advocacy People: Final Evaluation Report and Social Return on Investment Analysis, Serio, 2021

can increase the likelihood of poor mental health outcomes and lead to relationship difficulties. While only a small minority of veterans experience mental health challenges, veterans suffering from mental ill health are at a higher risk of suffering from a range of other problems including social exclusion and personal relationship problems. They can display hostility, domestic violence and physical aggression which can lead to decreased family functioning[25]. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been linked with relationship difficulties where symptoms interfere with sleep and may result in couples sleeping in separate beds and a loss of intimacy. Veterans with PTSD may also believe that their partners are unable to understand their military experiences which can lead to them distancing themselves. Moral injury[26] has also been linked to relationship difficulties and can lead to veterans feeling unworthy of love, difficulty trusting others, and can lead to detachment and isolation. Moral injury can also cause difficulties in professional settings, with some finding it hard to cope with authority figures. Individuals may also find it difficult to trust colleagues or health care professionals when seeking treatment[27].

- **Caring for veterans.** Families play a key role in the prevention, identification, and treatment of veterans' mental health problems[28] but they can also experience significant emotional strain if they take on the role of the carer and prioritise the veteran's needs over their own. There is currently a lack of support for families of veterans with mental health conditions and studies have shown that families are unlikely to seek or be offered help for themselves. Families have reported feeling lonely and isolated and feeling like there is no way out for either them or the veteran[29].

- **Bereavement.** The death of an individual can be emotionally and practically devastating for families and friends. Widowhood has been linked to the loss of relationships, financial hardship and a lack of access to social support[30]. For those who experience widowhood in the Armed Forces, it can also result in the loss of a large military community. Having a strong social network however can help individuals cope with losing a loved one and to access social support[31]. Support for individuals who have been bereaved by suicide is also important. While overall rates for suicide are lower in the Armed Forces than the general population, veterans under the age of 24 have been found to be at an increased risk of suicide[32]. Research from the US[33] has also shown that veterans who have had exposure to

---

[25] Chronic Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Family Functioning of Vietnam Veterans and Their Partners, Evan et al, 2003

[26] Moral injury can be defined as the psychological distress that results from actions, or the lack of them, which violate one's moral or ethical code.

[27] Experiences of moral injury in UK military veterans, King's College London, 2020

[28] Call to Mind Wales, Community Innovations Enterprise, 2016

[29] Fighting Their Own Battle: Families of Veterans with Substance Use Problems, University of York, 2020

[30] Managing widowhood in later life: the challenges encountered, Collins, 2014

[31] Conducting longitudinal research with older widows: exploring personal communities through multiple methods, Collins, 2016

[32] The mental health of the Armed Forces, King's Centre for Military Health Research, 2021

[33] An Examination of Suicide Exposure and Fearlessness about Death on Suicide Risk among Active Duty Service Members, Veterans, and Civilians, Soberay et al, 2021

suicide were more likely to attempt suicide than those who had not, a finding also made in UK research on the general population[34].

- **Workplace culture.** Military and civilian workplace cultures can differ, and it can take time for Service leavers to adjust to a new way of working. Learning new approaches, how to speak to colleagues, and how to deal with difficult team members can be challenging. Some Service leavers have described feeling frustrated by attitudes of others in the civilian workplace, particularly if the organisation appears to be less efficient than the military[35].

Impact of relationships. While strong social networks and positive relationships can lead to better outcomes for the Armed Forces Community, poor social relationships, or a lack of a social network, can impact future opportunities and outcomes:

- **Housing.** The breakdown of a relationship can be challenging for everyone. However, when couples separate during service, it can have significant repercussions for the family. If a family is living in Service Family Accommodation at the time of the separation, the serving partner will need to move to Single Living Accommodation and the non-serving partner and any children will be required to leave Service accommodation altogether and usually within 90 days. This can result in significant changes for both parents and children, having to move home, integrate into a new civilian community and potentially find a new school all at once and in a relatively short time frame. Moving from Service Family Accommodation can also result in the loss of a large support network for partners and children, triggering feelings of loneliness and social isolation[36].
- **Employment.** The majority of Service personnel will continue to work after leaving the Armed Forces and for them, finding work will be integral to a successful transition and to maintaining healthy relationships[37]. Having a strong social network can be beneficial when looking for work. Ex-Service personnel with well-developed social networks have been found to be significantly more likely to be in work sooner and in a job that meets their aspirations than those without. Social networks are also crucial in helping Service leavers understand the labour market[38]. Some personnel, such as those who have been in the military for a long time, may have fewer networks to draw on in the civilian world compared to other cohorts[39]. Officers on the other hand, who also tend to be in the military for shorter periods, are more willing to draw on their wider networks than other ranks[40].
- **Accessing support.** The military culture tends to encourage self-help rather than help-seeking. This can result in some veterans finding it difficult to approach health and welfare

---

[34] Bereavement by suicide as a risk factor for suicide attempt: a cross-sectional national UK-wide study of 3432 young bereaved adults, Pitman et al, 2016

[35] *Op cit* Kantar Futures, 2017

[36] Lifting the Lid, Families Federations, 2018

[37] *Op cit* Glyndwr University, 2017

[38] *Op cit* GoodPeople 2020

[39] Understanding Service Leavers Aged 50+, Centre for Research into the Older Workforce, 2020

[40] Self-employment and the Armed Forces Community, Warwick Institute for Employment Research, 2018

providers and only seek help once they are in crisis[41]. Veterans with mental health conditions may also fail to identify their problem as being a mental health issue and do not seek treatment. For those who do seek help, positive beliefs about the efficacy of that treatment can have a substantial impact on the veteran's maintenance of that support and they can be put off seeking mental health support if they have had a negative initial experience with care[42].

Addressing the issues – where are we now?

12.   The Armed Forces Community can access a range of statutory and charitable support to help maintain relationships and support is available in the event of a relationship breakdown. Policies have also been put in place which try to limit the impact of Service life on family relationships.

- **The Armed Forces Covenant.** The Armed Forces Covenant is a commitment by the UK Government to ensuring that the Armed Forces Community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases for those who have given the most such as the injured or bereaved[43]. The Covenant explicitly states that the nation has a moral obligation to members of the Armed Forces and their families.
- **The Family Test.** In 2014, the Government introduced a Family Test which provides guidance to officials, asking them to consider how policy making will impact upon family stability. In the last few years, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) have taken a more proactive approach in applying the Family Test and have created a bespoke programme to ensure that Armed Forces families are considered throughout the policy making process[44].
- **UK Armed Forces Families Strategy.** In 2016 the MOD published its first Families' Strategy which sets out its approach to Service families and provides guidance for MOD policy officials. The Strategy recognises the importance of families in supporting serving personnel and the additional burdens placed on families as a result of being part of the military community. The vision of the Strategy is for "resilient, empowered, thriving Service families, who are treated fairly, have increased choice, and who are valued by the Nation[45]." The MOD is currently in the process of refreshing the Families Strategy for 2021. The MOD has also implemented new initiatives to try to make the Armed Forces more inclusive as well as recognising modern family structures. This has included the introduction of flexible working and piloting a wraparound childcare scheme to help families during deployment.
- **Employment support.** There are several providers which help Service leavers to increase their professional networks. The MOD's Careers Transition Partnership[46] provides guidance to Service leavers on who they can approach to widen their network and the type of

---

[41] Current and Future Needs of Veterans in Northern Ireland, Ulster University, 2017
[42] Stigma and barriers to care in service leavers with mental health problems, King's College London, 2017
[43] www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk
[44] A Review of the Family Test, The Centre for Social Justice
[45] 20160108-UK_Armed_Forces_Families_Strategy_2016.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)
[46] https://www.ctp.org.uk/

questions they should ask. There are also pre-existing networks available which have been set up by the business community and charitable sector. Some larger employers have internal military networks and provide ex-Service personnel with a buddy or mentor to help them integrate into the civilian workplace.

- **Military networks.** Clubs and membership organisations have been set up to support veterans to retain contact with the Armed Forces Community. These include social membership clubs as well as more informal networks such as breakfast clubs for veterans and social media groups.

- **Charitable support.** Both the military and civilian charity sectors offer support to the Armed Forces Community. The support ranges from information and advice on relationship breakdown to bereavement support and advocacy services. The Armed Forces Community can use the Veterans Gateway[47] to navigate the support available to them.

Addressing the issues – What needs to happen?

13. While progress has been made to acknowledge the contribution and sacrifices of Armed Forces families, more needs to be done to ensure that that Armed Forces lifestyle does not disadvantage families and, if it does, that effective and timely support is available.

This requires:

- **Integrated family support.** It is important that health and social services cater for the practical, social and emotional needs of families. While support is available via the NHS, MOD and charities for veterans with mental health conditions, families have been left behind and opportunities are being missed to support them. Where appropriate, professionals working with veterans should encourage families to engage in the veteran's mental health treatment. Services supporting veterans should also signpost families to appropriate support. This will require more training for staff on how Armed Forces families can be affected by a veteran's mental illness and on which services might be appropriate for them. Given the current lack of support available for Armed Forces families, it will also require the commissioning of new services and health commissioners should look to previous studies in this area when developing new services. Forces in Mind Trust recently funded a pilot study using restorative approaches to build and maintain relationships in Armed Forces families when a veteran is seeking mental health treatment. The evaluation showed promising results and it is recommended that the programme is rolled out and similar programmes trialed across veteran health services.

- **Increased involvement of the family in transition.** While the MOD's Defence Holistic Transition Policy and the Families Strategy acknowledge the importance of involving families in the transition process, action is needed to ensure direct involvement of families rather than communicating information via the serving personnel. To improve family engagement with transition, the MOD should ultilise behavioural insights to ensure guidance and support

---

[47] https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk/community-family-advice-for-veterans/

is easy, attractive, social and timely[48] and that it is provided to families directly. An interactive transition 'app' for families should be considered for this purpose and would allow families to break transition topics down into actionable steps and identify priority issues.

- **Interventions that encourage Service leavers and families to build and exploit networks.** As previously mentioned, networks are important in helping Service leavers to secure successful civilian employment. Strong social networks, both military and civilian, are also key sources of information and support for Service leavers and their families and can provide them with insider knowledge on what to expect and how to cope in the civilian world. Through existing transition support, the MOD should do more to encourage Service leavers and their families to tap into existing social networks and, for those with weaker networks, generate new ones[49].

- **Earlier community integration.** To help ease transition into civilian life it is recommended that serving personnel and partners undertake activities with local civilian communities while still in service. The MOD should consider including a 'community commitment' option for personnel[50] just as some civilian employers offer additional leave to employees for volunteering activities. This could also help the Office for Veterans Affairs to achieve its goal of accurate perceptions of the Armed Forces Community by improving and broadening the general public's understanding of the Community, their contribution and skills.

- **Community integration in Northern Ireland.** Given the unique situation in Northern Ireland it is recommended specific initiatives be implemented to build relationships and trust between veterans and the local community. This could include local authorities working with charities to promote public engagement activities for veterans.

- **Veteran-specific advocacy.** Previous research has highlighted the success of veteran-specific advocacy services[51] in building relationships and obtaining positive outcomes for Service leavers across housing, finance, health and employment. It is recommended that such an advocacy service be funded and rolled out on a larger scale to ensure all UK veterans can benefit from the support when needed.

- **Research on relationship breakdown in the ex-Service community.** To fill the current gap in knowledge of the prevalence of relationship breakdown in the ex-Service community, we would recommend a comparative research study be conducted. This could be a standalone project or part of a larger longitudinal wellbeing study.

Measuring success

14.　　Changing policy and practice through evidence generation and influencing activity inevitably takes time, and requires changes in awareness, attitudes and understanding. The measures of success are therefore complex and comprise of a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' indicators. Positive

---

[48] Applying behavioural insights to successful transition, Behavioural Insights Team, 2019
[49] *Ibid*
[50] Lifting Our Sights, Future Agenda, 2021
[51] *Op cit,* The Veterans' Advocacy People2021

relationships could be measured in several ways; the number of individuals a Service leaver has in their social network, the number of serving personnel who take up a 'community commitment' outside of the Armed Forces or a reduction in the number of divorces for Armed Forces families. To measure these however, we first need to capture baseline data and this needs to be followed up with better data collection and sharing by organisations that interact with the Armed Forces Community.

Reflections and next steps

15.   If our policy goal is to be achieved, and all ex-Service personnel and their families achieve positive personal and professional relationships, there needs to be both investment and concerted effort to build on the progress already made and to ensure that family needs are taken seriously. Some of the issues identified in this policy statement are wider societal problems whilst others can be linked to a person's time in service. It is the later that we seek to mitigate in order to ensure that no member of the Armed Forces Community is disadvantaged by their time in service. Forces in Mind Trust will continue to generate evidence that sheds light on needs and on what works best in practice. We will also continue to act as a convenor, ensuring that organisations work collaboratively to support the Armed Forces Community.