

Women in the Armed Forces - submission from Forces in Mind Trust to the Defence Committee

Introduction. Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) welcomes the opportunity to update its previous written evidence on **women in the Armed Forces** as part of the Defence Committee's plans to hold a follow-up ministerial session. We are pleased to know that our 2023 evidence will be used to inform the forthcoming session being held by the current Committee.

While the content of our previous submission holds good, there are a number of developments and fresh evidence that we wish to highlight. We do so using the questions posed by the Committee:

1. How much change has there been in the past two years, when it comes to improving the experiences of female Service personnel and/or female veterans?

While we are aware of some specific initiatives and individual research projects, the shortage of clear and robust data means that it continues to be difficult to evidence, measure and understand how much change there has been in female Service leavers and female veterans' experiences.

However, we welcomed the previous work of the Defence Committee and the Inquiry led by Sarah Atherton, as well as the work taken forward under the previous government to develop a Female Veterans Strategy. We welcome the Government's recent commitment to including a specific section on female veterans in the Veterans' Strategy currently being developed, while also wanting to be confident that the needs of female veterans will be properly reflected throughout the Strategy. The Committee's commitment to reviewing and updating the evidence now is a source of encouragement that there is an intent to help improve the experiences of female Service and ex-Service personnel.

There are other indications that improvements may be in the pipeline at least. For example, we view the establishment of the Female veterans transformation project¹ as a positive step. The project's publication on a Statement of Need – what the evidence tells us about the needs of female veterans is helpful in its identification of needs. What this does is shine a light on the issues that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency, and we are cautiously hopeful that in doing so the likelihood of positive changes to policy, practice and culture will be increased.

2. What specific changes are you aware of against the Committee's initial recommendations?

Our main focus has been on the recommendations made in relation to transition and resettlement (recs.44-49). They are not changes, but we wish to draw attention to:

- **Recommendation 44** has not, to our knowledge, been taken forward; the commissioning by the MOD of large-scale research on the situation of all veterans, with dedicated analysis of differences by sex and gender, ethnicity, housing situation and other characteristics has not been conducted. Instead it was limited to the development and delivery of the Veterans Survey which, while helpful to a limited extent, was constrained in its usefulness by the self-selecting methodology applied.
- **Recommendation 49** which states that there should be a recognition of gender-specific needs and services in the Armed Forces Covenant. The Committee specifically endorsed the recommendation that a metric should be added to the Annual Report on the Armed Forces Covenant on the experiences of veterans by sex or gender and by other protected

¹ The 3-year, UK-wide programme is funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust and NHS England, in partnership with the Cobseo Female Veterans Cluster and the Women's Royal Army Corps Association.

characteristics. This has not been included but we believe it would be a useful as a driver of change and as a mechanism for accountability.

More broadly, although we are aware of the considerable amount of ongoing work by the MOD, much of which is set out in the response to the first Inquiry report published in 2021, it is difficult to assess the extent to which it is having an impact in practice. We would be interested in learning more and contributing to discussions about how progress towards improving the experiences of women in the Armed Forces is being monitored and measured by Government.

We are also aware of, and welcome, on-going improvements in data collection. The introduction in the 2021 Census of the question on whether a person has ever served in the UK Armed Forces, and the analysis work by the ONS means that the ability to understand more about the circumstances of both female and male Service and ex-Service personnel has been enhanced. The Office for Veterans' Affairs work to develop its [Data and Research Framework 2022-2028](#) is a helpful means of becoming more responsive to needs, and enabling knowledge and evidence to better inform change.

While we have not seen the kind of large-scale research by the MOD that was envisaged in Recommendation 44, there are other encouraging developments that, over time, will help to increase understanding of the situation and needs of all veterans. FiMT together with the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund and Northumbria University is co-funding the [Map of Need Aggregated Research \(MONARCH\) study](#) which will collate and investigate health and social care data from multiple sources to inform better understanding of veterans' specialised needs. The data dashboard being created will be capable of analysis by a range of factors, including gender. By examining aggregated data on how the veteran population use health and social care services, it will be possible for data to better inform policy-making for female veterans by charities, local and national government and the NHS. This is an initiative that MOD is supportive of, and we anticipate that in time it will be used to inform positive changes based on more robust and joined-up data analysis.

3. Are there are areas where you hope to see more change?

In both our 2021 and 2023 evidence submissions we highlighted the areas of **employment, health, families and housing**. These remain the areas where would like to see more change. Some of the research evidence that FiMT has funded since 2023 reinforces the need for change, for example:

- The UK Veterans Family Study² found evidence that some women are leaving their service careers because they are finding it too difficult to make family life work while serving. Whether it is the female or male person in the family who is serving, or there is a dual-serving family, the need for continued progress in delivery of the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032 is fundamental to improving the support of women in the Armed Forces. This is one of the reasons that we are currently funding the [Living in Our Shoes Revisited](#) research project which is evaluating the progress made in meeting the recommendations in the original [Living in Our Shoes report](#) published in 2020 (the vast majority of which were accepted by Government and informed the Families Strategy).
- The latest No Homeless Veterans research³ found that while the vast majority of veterans experiencing homelessness or housing instability were male, expert stakeholders described the particular issues faced by some female veterans. The failure of services to respond effectively to the needs of female Service leavers whilst in service was identified by stakeholders working in this area, alongside the complexity of issues experienced. The report recommended that a trauma-informed approach should underpin the resettlement process for female personnel. A

² [UK Veterans Family Study](#), Queen's University Belfast, 2024

³ [No Homeless Veterans - a roadmap to end homeless amongst veterans](#), University of York, 2024

trauma-informed approach for all Service personnel preparing to leave is something that we are actively discussing with MOD at present.

- [Identifying and examining barriers to female veterans making a successful and sustainable transition civilian life](#). This research study is being led by the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) based at King's College, London. It is due to be published in March, but given its relevance, we would like to offer a preview of findings. The research has generated clear evidence on the need to prevent negative transition experiences through:
 - Servicewomen not experiencing discrimination, harassment or assault in service,
 - appropriate knowledge of and support for women's health needs in and out of service,
 - good family friendly policies in-service,
 - use of mandatory indicators by the MOD on progress in supporting Service and ex-Servicewomen in service, through transition and into civilian life to help inform policy making and awareness of ex-Servicewomen's needs in mainstream services.

The report also provides evidence from quantitative analysis which shows that:

- employment levels are similar between ex-Servicewomen and ex-Servicemen and civilian women but ex-Servicewomen are more likely to hold part time jobs.
- ex-Servicewomen more likely to live in areas of material deprivation than civilian women.
- ex-Servicewomen experienced more osteoarthritis and mental health issues (particularly depression) compared to ex-Servicemen and civilian women and trauma exposure, including intimate partner violence and sexual assault was more prevalent among ex-Servicewomen compared to ex-Servicemen and civilian women.

On the basis of the findings, a strategic roadmap has been developed which suggests where resources can be targeted to better support ex-Servicewomen and improve transition policies and practices. These include:

- strong leadership which promotes inclusivity and is accountable for its delivery,
- adapting current practices to include women's needs, and
- where policies and initiatives are being implemented, they are reviewed regularly to ensure they are working well and joined up.

We have provided these findings and recommendations in advance of publication of the research because they offer an indication of areas requiring change, and some solutions for how change might be achieved over time.

4. What has helped or hindered change?

We wish to reiterate the points made in our previous submission of evidence. In particular, we would highlight the importance of collaboration between the Armed Forces and other charities, and the work of Cobseo's Female Veterans Cluster chaired by the Women's Royal Army Corps which has been working to identify, progress and highlight issues specific to female veterans, and to ensure that support services are tailored to specific needs, are inclusive and are considered accessible by female veterans.

We would also like to highlight again the work of the Centre for Military Women's Research led by Dr Lauren Godier-McBard based at Anglia Ruskin University. The Centre was set up after scoping work by the Veterans and Families Institute at ARU showed that very little is known about how women and other minority groups fare following military service in the UK. It undertakes research to deepen understanding and improve provision in the military and veteran community and we view it as a

helpful resource for in the journey towards improving the experiences of women who have served in the armed forces.

The accessibility of support is a factor that can act as a barrier to positive change and is demonstrated by evidence that shows a need for culture change in the provision of support services. The latest research report from our current Transition Mapping Study 3⁴ points to an unwillingness to access veterans' services due to an ingrained culture of stereotyping veterans as male. It notes that "many former Service personnel (particularly minority groups, such as women and LGBTQ+) may not self-identify as 'veterans', and that some communities act as identity 'gatekeepers' by defining who is and, by implication, who is not a 'veteran'". Earlier polling in 2019 by YouGov on behalf of the Office for Veterans Affairs in its [Public Perceptions report](#) found that "the word 'veteran' itself often led to associations with the elderly (often male), the poppy, armistice, and PTSD". We are therefore keen to ensure that providers of support services, and all those working in policy and practice development, give careful consideration to the way in which they describe and promote the support available, so that all who are eligible and in need are happy to access it.

Concluding comments. Forces in Mind Trust is encouraged by the Committee's interest in the experiences of female Service personnel and whether there are unique challenges that are not adequately addressed by current services and policies, and its commitment to continuing to monitor progress. We would be very happy to contribute to the Ministerial session if that would be helpful.

⁴ [Navigating the external environment for military-to-civilian transition](#), QinetiQ, 2024