



## Improving Life Skills in the UK Armed Forces

Life Skills support people to function well, enabling them to deal with the demands and challenges that they encounter in daily life. For those transitioning out of the Armed Forces, having a strong set of Life Skills is therefore crucial. Whilst the majority of ex-Service personnel and their families make a successful transition into civilian life and leave with valuable experience and skills, some struggle, possibly due to a lack of these skills.

## Study Aims

Forces in Mind Trust commissioned QinetiQ and Cranfield University to undertake a study to explore the topic of Life Skills in more detail. Specifically, this study was designed to answer the following questions:

- What is the current Life Skills deficit in the Armed Forces community, and what accounts for this deficit?
- Which Life Skills are most important for Service personnel and their spouses/partners in ensuring they make a successful and sustainable transition to civilian life?
- What support is currently available to develop Life Skills for adults generally?
- Which monitoring and assessment tools could be used to measure the effectiveness of any future Life Skills programme for serving personnel and their spouses/partners?

## Method

A review of relevant literature; 11 stakeholder interviews with employers, relevant bodies and Service charities; an online survey of serving personnel (151 responses) and spouses/partners of serving personnel (51 responses); a review of the evidence on the effectiveness of existing Life Skills programmes; and a Rapid Evidence Assessment and research team workshops to create a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of provision for developing Life Skills within the Armed Forces.



## Key Findings

Outlined below are some of the key findings from the literature review, stakeholder interviews and online survey.

## What are Life Skills?

Life Skills include a range of abilities and competencies that enable individuals to manage their daily activities effectively. These skills are multifaceted and encompass knowledge, values, attitudes, and competencies that are essential for personal development, lifelong learning, and success in various domains. These skills are context-dependent and can vary widely and as such there lacks a single definition of Life Skills in the literature.

For the purpose of this study the following definition was adopted:

“Those skills that lead to the positive behaviours that underpin successful personal, social, work and civic outcomes”<sup>1</sup>.

This definition is broad and comprehensive, thus allowing it to be used across multiple contexts, as well as providing a useful summation of other published definitions.

As the result of this study a framework was developed that divides Life Skills into three levels:

- 1. Foundation Skills.**
- 2. Complex Skills and Abilities.**
- 3. Outcomes.**

This framework is shown in Figure 1.

## Life Skills in the Armed Forces

The findings indicate that overall there is not a significant issue with Life Skills in the Armed Forces community. The majority of serving personnel (87.2%) and spouses/partners (82.4%; N=42) perceived themselves to have good Life Skills. Only 3.4% of serving personnel and 7.8% (N=4) of spouses/partners felt that they did not. The small minority most affected by poor Life Skills tended to be those lower in rank and younger in age, who had not had the chance to develop their skills, or who had poor Life Skills on joining. Individuals were also more likely to be affected by poor Life Skills if they were without a trade; serving in the Army; struggling with mental health issues; and non-UK citizens.

It would appear that Life Skills pose a problem for some due to the Armed Forces lifestyle. A lack of continuity of adult education due to increased mobility and not having to do things for themselves meant that serving personal and their families sometimes lacked the opportunity to hone certain skills.

More practical help is needed to get people the support required to develop their Life Skills. Whilst 66.0% of serving personnel said they had received Life Skills support from the Armed Forces, 92.2% (N=47) of spouses/partners said they had not. 51% of serving personnel and 70.6% (N=36) of spouses/partners said they did not know how to access Life Skills support should they need it.

Whilst serving personnel and their families would like support across a range of different skills, there are some specific areas in which increased help would be particularly useful. This includes: applying for jobs; financial/money skills; digital/ Information Technology (IT) skills (serving personnel); assistance with self-confidence; mental wellbeing; and help with the emotional/ psychological adjustment to civilian life.

### Important Life Skills for a Successful Transition

Pinpointing the specific impact of Life Skills on transition is challenging because of the interlinked nature of factors. The Life Skills most frequently cited by stakeholders as important for a successful transition were financial skills and resilience, closely followed by problem-solving. Although recognised as an important skill by both groups, neither serving personnel nor spouses/partners rated financial/ money skills in the top five Life Skills that they felt they already possessed. In fact, many stakeholders reported financial literacy as a Life Skill which Service leavers struggle with the most. This would suggest that financial literacy is a key Life Skill for transition, and one that is not fully developed at the point of leaving.

1 Robinson, D., Bowyer, S., Miller, L., Rickard, C., & McNamara, H. (2014). TIN 2.041 Life Skills. Defence Human Capability Science and Technology Centre. UC-DHCSTC\_I2\_T2\_041/003.

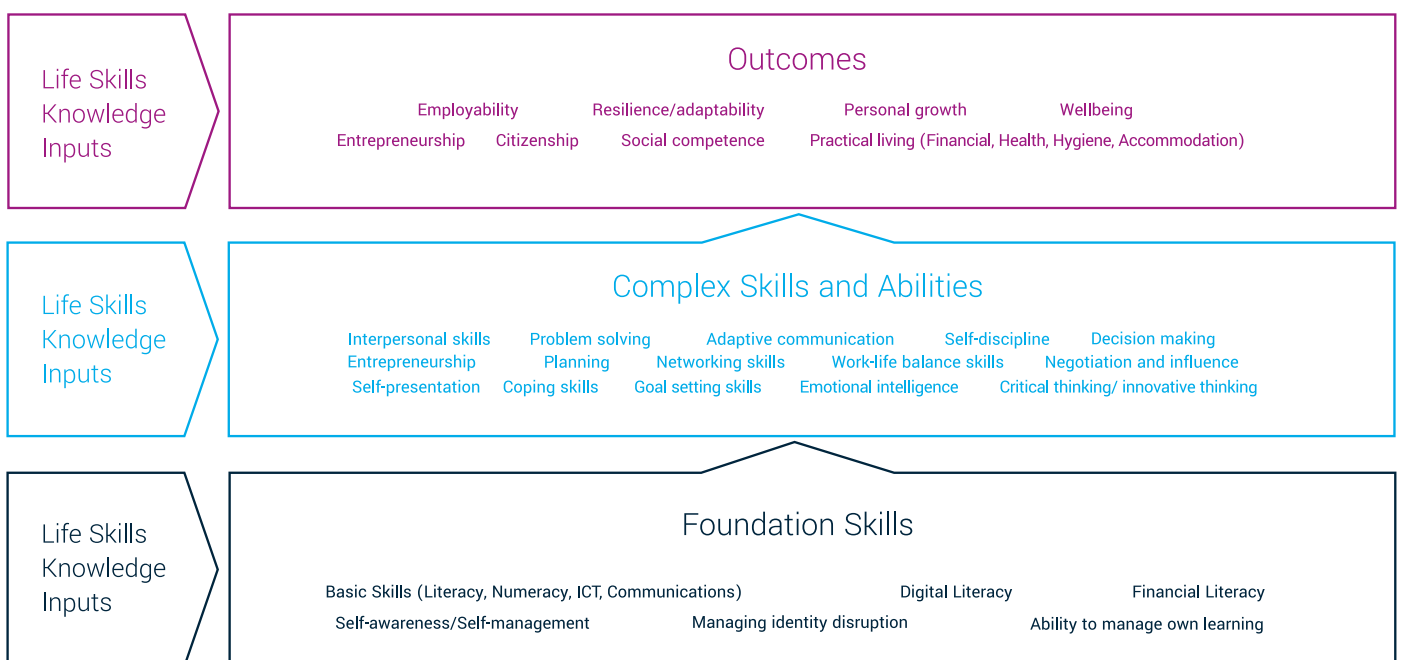
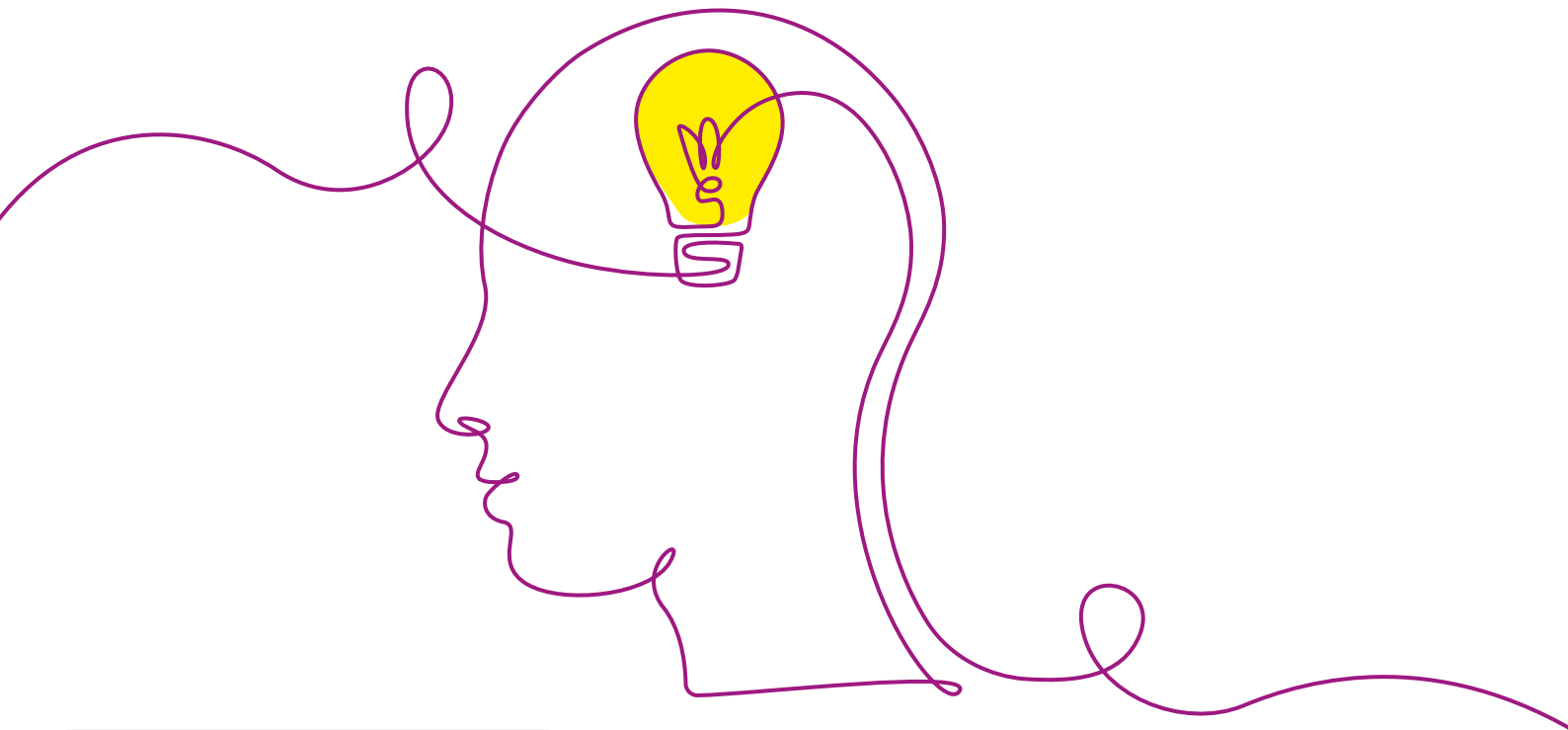


Figure 1: Life Skills Framework



## Conclusions

Life Skills might best be described as a low-prevalence problem that has high impact amongst the small community that are most affected. Whilst there are clearly groups more in need of support than others, the findings indicate a strong desire from many to receive support to develop their Life Skills. What is needed/wanted varies widely, indicating that personnel require support with different skills and that a 'one size fits all' solution is not the answer. The findings also point to a difference between the Life Skills that are important whilst serving compared with on leaving, the indication being that some Life Skills take on greater importance outside Defence.

## Key Recommendations

Based on the study findings, a series of recommendations have been made. Key ones are listed below.

- The MOD should adopt the suggested definition and framework of Life Skills to ensure that all personnel have the same understanding of what Life Skills are and what they comprise.
- Whilst providing guidance and signposting to required Life Skills support will be sufficient for many, for those most affected by poor Life Skills (and least likely to reach out for help), further help and support is needed. For these groups, Life Skills inputs need to go beyond just signposting, to more classroom-based and/or practical support.
- Defence should provide greater Life Skills support in the following areas: financial/money skills; digital/IT skills (for serving personnel); assistance with self-confidence; mental wellbeing; applying for jobs; and help with the emotional/psychological adjustment to civilian life.
- Transition out of the Armed Forces should start far earlier in the career of a serving person so that military personnel can acquire the skills they need for leaving throughout their military career. This should include active consideration of their Life Skills and where further development might be required.
- A risk-based model should be developed that identifies individuals who are at greatest risk of Life Skills problems both during Service and on leaving. This would allow the MOD to direct their provision more effectively.

The full report can be accessed here: [Life-Skills-in-the-Armed-Forces.pdf \(pcdn.co\)](#)