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# Evaluation of The Poppy Factory's NHS-embedded Employment Support Pilot for Veterans

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Dr Louise Thomson  
Caitlin McKenzie  
Ben Vaughan

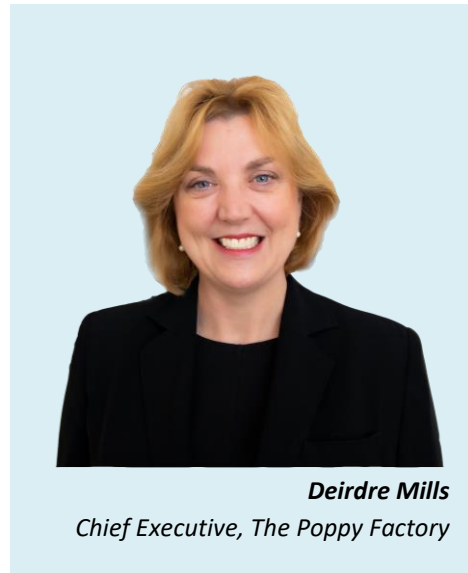
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## Foreword

Commissioning research and delivering a service amidst the Covid pandemic has been challenging. NHS attention has rightly focused on saving lives whilst many of the veterans who would normally present to the NHS have, like the rest of the population, stayed away from traditional sources of support.

Yet even in these difficult times, we have been able to make a difference. This report provides further evidence of the impact of our work, building on the strong evidence base that we have been gathering more generally throughout the same period as the pilot.



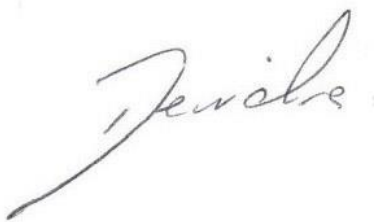
**Deirdre Mills**

*Chief Executive, The Poppy Factory*

Formalising our collaborative work with the NHS has been valuable, resulting in even stronger working relationships and an increase in referrals from NHS sources. We are very pleased with the amplifying effect this pilot has had in helping us reach more of the ex-Forces community.

There has been positive feedback too, from the researchers and from the clinicians, all of whom recognise the clear benefits and impact of our partnership. Best of all, there has been very positive feedback from the veterans themselves.

All in all, the pilot and its evaluation provide a really strong foundation from which to further develop our employment service and work more formally alongside the NHS in other areas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deirdre Mills'.

**Deirdre Mills**

# Foreword



It has been an enormous privilege for our organisation, CWP, to be involved in the employment support pilot for our veterans.

One of our Trust's core values is to help improve the lives of everyone in our communities. Employment is vital to people's feeling of social inclusion our work with the Poppy Factory is an example of this principle in action.

The experience of NHS workers is very different to that of those who have served in the armed forces. To have an employment consultant from the Poppy factory embedded within one of our adult mental health teams in Wirral has created a deeper understanding of the veteran experience and has been an invaluable opportunity to share learning more widely across CWP.

Not only do we have a better understanding of the challenges veterans face when seeking employment, colleagues also have greater consideration for the difficulties our veterans face overall. It also improves the support we provide for those seeking employment.

Since we started working with The Poppy Factory in 2019, over 50 veterans in Wirral have been supported back into work, which has been hugely gratifying to see especially as the pilot demonstrated "A substantial improvement in individuals wellbeing" including a "...boost to their overall mental wellbeing as a result of their time spent with The Poppy Factory, with many veterans feeling more confident in themselves after attending the service".

From the feedback received, it is clear this has been a highly effective partnership with the veterans involved feeling like they were supported and in a safe space. They could build trusting relationships built on a foundation of specialist knowledge both within mental health and the veteran experience, which has naturally led to better communication and joined up working to the benefit of veterans.

We are immensely proud of our involvement in the project and look forward to building on this work for the future.

## **Tim Welch**

Chief executive, Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust  
(Veteran Aware Trust / Armed Forces Covenant)

# Foreword



Forces in Mind Trust exists to improve the success of transition to civilian life for ex-Service personnel and their families. We do this by funding work that improves the knowledge and evidence base underpinning policy and service provision. We also support activities that convene leaders and influencers to consider effective strategies, we collaborate with stakeholders on innovation and lead where it's appropriate. We also support work that can build capacity to achieve the ends we seek. This project reflects many of those mechanisms and our support for this evaluation stems not so much to provide a valedictory of The Poppy Factory's good work in this field – that's a given.

It's much more to evidence the possibility of this model of support being translatable to other regions of the UK, to join the other already numerous examples of statutory providers and charities working together to achieve important impact on the ground.

We recognise that often systemic change takes time, that the real value of individual support and engagement to an individual isn't always immediate. Although most Service leavers experience a successful transition into civilian life, their lives enriched by their time in the Armed Forces, we know that some face additional challenges. For these individuals, a service like the one provided by The Poppy Factory is invaluable. We are therefore pleased to have been able to fund an important project, which clearly has had a positive impact on those who took part. We hope the value of this model of support continues to gain recognition and even replication where it is appropriate.

## **Tom McBarnet**

Chief Executive  
Forces in Mind Trust.

# Executive Summary

## Background

The Poppy Factory pilot project ran in the Wirral for 36 months between 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2022 with the service accepting referrals from 1 October 2019. The service aimed to support wounded, injured and sick (WIS) veterans into employment using an evidence-based and adapted Individual Placement and Support (IPS) approach. IPS is an evidence-based vocational rehabilitation intervention which aims to achieve early return to competitive employment facilitated by employment specialists. IPS was developed to support people with severe mental illness accessing secondary mental health but has also been adapted for other contexts and health conditions. The IPS service provided by The Poppy Factory was adapted to support veterans with physical health conditions as well as those with mild and moderate mental health conditions. The Covid pandemic had a significant impact on both the delivery of the service, the employment environment for veterans, and the other support available to veterans. This summary provides a brief overview of the evaluation of the pilot, conducted by the Institute of Mental Health, Nottingham.

## Methods

The evaluation focused on three sources of data: The Poppy Factory's organisational monitoring data on employment outcomes; data collected from an online survey conducted at baseline and follow-up from veterans assessing change in mental wellbeing, self-esteem, quality of life employability skills and financial wellbeing; and interview data from veterans and stakeholders.

## Results

48.8 % of the sample were in competitive employment 12-months after registration, whilst 54.4% had achieved at least one job start by this date. This is similar to the employment rates reported in other IPS studies which have a 55% mean employment rate at 12 months

(ranging from 78% to 22%). Looking at sustainability of employment, the longest job tenure of veterans ranged from 7 days to beyond 365 days (the maximum registration period). Taking 365 days as the maximum recorded length of tenure due to veterans leaving the service at the point, there was an average of 213 days for the longest period of employment for veterans during their time with the service. Of all the job starts within the evaluation period, 75.9% were sustained for more than 3 months.

For the online survey collecting health-related data, 45 veterans completed the baseline questionnaires and 30 of these also completed the follow-up survey. Although the sample size is small for tests of effectiveness so the results need to be treated with caution, the data showed improvement across all health-related outcomes except financial wellbeing. Mental wellbeing increased from an average of 19.96 to 22.14 out of 35, near the UK national population norm of 23.61<sup>1</sup>. Comparative data specifically for people accessing mental health services in the UK is not available, but a research study of people in Singapore accessing services for depression and anxiety reported scores on the same scale of 19.6 and 20.9 respectively<sup>2</sup>. Quality of life showed a 2.7% increase from 57.57 to 60.27 out of 100. This compares to population norms of 82.8 for the UK general population. Self-esteem, job search behaviours and job search outcomes also increased slightly. Financial wellbeing showed a slight reduction of 2.93 to 2.67, taking it below the national norm of 2.86. Health service use reduced in relation to the number of GP, outpatient, mental health nurse and physiotherapy appointments. However, it is unclear to what extent this reduction in health service use was also affected by Covid and reduced access to services during that time. Based on the limited sample in this study, these reductions are cautiously estimated to represented a saving of £324.32 per veteran for health services.

Fourteen veterans and eight stakeholders took part in in-depth interviews. One of the main themes identified as contributing to the effectiveness of The Poppy Factory service was it being perceived by veterans as a safe space in which a positive and trusting relationship developed between the veteran and The Poppy Factory Employment Consultant (EC). This was founded on the understanding of the veteran experience, their skills, and having a shared language. Furthermore, continuity of the EC was of importance to building that trust, and their accessibility and flexibility to allow rapid support when needed. Veterans appreciated the positivity and encouragement of the ECs and felt cared for. A second theme highlighted the practical aspects of the service which they perceived to be beneficial: knowledge of local employers, not feeling pressured into taking employment and removing barriers to employment by accessing training and providing equipment. Wellbeing outcomes were central to the improvements experienced by veterans, and The Poppy

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<sup>1</sup> WEMWBS Population Norms in Health Survey for England data 2011

<sup>2</sup> Vaingankar et al (2017) Psychometric properties of the short Warwick Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale (SWEMWBS) in service users with schizophrenia, depression and anxiety spectrum disorders. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes*, 15(1), 1-11.

Factory played a crucial role in facilitating these improvements. The outcomes came about through social connections, self-identity through work, and meaningful activity amongst others. The experiences of the veterans with their EC, the way the ECs swiftly broke barriers to employment, and The Poppy Factory's veteran-focus were some of the main characteristics of the service that the veterans felt led to these outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The Poppy Factory pilot service was effective in achieving positive employment outcomes and improvements to wellbeing and quality of life. The most important feature of this service for engaging with veterans centred around the trusting relationship between them and the ECs which developed over the time spent in the service. This was further supported by the understanding of the veteran experience, continuity of ECs and accessibility to them, and the positive behaviours and compassion showed by staff. The adaptations made by this service to the standard IPS model appear to be important in meeting the complex needs of veterans, particularly the step away from a focus on rapid job search and securing a first competitive employment within a short time-frame. The partnership working with NHS and other services further supported the effectiveness of the service and co-location within the NHS was beneficial to this.

### **Recommendations include:**

- The provision of employment services specifically for veterans with a range of health conditions and referred from a variety of different sources.
- Embedding the service within the NHS and developing effective partnerships with other services.
- A person-centred approach with less time pressure on first employment opportunities for those further from employment.
- Employment consultants with a good knowledge of the specific locality within which the service is based and an understanding of the military experience and culture.
- Better identification of veterans on patient/client records needs to support referrals.



## David's story

*A combination of health conditions and low self-confidence left former soldier David struggling to see a way back into employment in his 50s. After his GP referred him for employment support, David now has a rewarding new job at Wirral Borough Council, fitting home adaptations for residents who, like him, need a little more support.*

“When I left the Royal Anglian Regiment at 25, it just felt like I’d been dumped back into the civilian world. I had no idea what to do with my life and I just floated around for a while doing all sorts of jobs. A couple of years ago I was diagnosed with dyspraxia, which affects my physical coordination. I also found out I’m likely to be dyslexic.

“I was being treated by the NHS for sleep apnoea, high blood pressure, mental health and other conditions, and I felt like I was on the verge of a breakdown. Then my GP told me about The Poppy Factory, so I got in touch.

“I went to see The Poppy Factory’s employment consultant, Andrew, a few times at The Stein Centre on The Wirral. He helped me to stop worrying. Then he applied for funding from Armed Forces Bikers to get me a laptop. I’m not very good with technology so Andrew set it up for me and made it easy for me to get online, read emails, and find my way around. It’s a good job he did, because I ended up having an interview online two days later.

“When I had a phone call to say I’d got the job, I was surprised and really pleased. I’d had no income at all for two years, so it was a big relief.

“Now I work for Wirral Borough Council as an Adaptation Technical Assistant, fitting handles and rails for people who have disabilities or have difficulty moving around. It’s very rewarding to be able to make a difference to people’s lives. I don’t feel under too much pressure, but there’s plenty for me to do and I just go out each day and get as much done as I can.”



**David Jones**

*Former soldier supported into employment*

# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 The Poppy Factory Service

The Poppy Factory delivers employment support for veterans with mental or physical health conditions across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It supports veterans referred from charities, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), NHS and other partners as well as self-referral, and helps them to find meaningful and sustainable employment to improve their quality of life, including financial stability and health and wellbeing. Anyone who has served for one day or more in the armed forces or reserves can access the service.

The Poppy Factory recognises individuals as the experts in their own health and care and therefore proof of health conditions is not requested during registration. Health conditions do not need to be connected to time in service.

The pilot on the Wirral saw The Poppy Factory service delivered for the first time in a more concentrated geographical area with a large veteran population and embedded within the adult community mental health team at the Stein Centre, where the Employment Consultant worked full-time as an honorary member of the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership (CWP) NHS Foundation Trust. The Wirral was chosen because historically it has been one of The Poppy Factory's busiest regions for referrals and is also an area with a very high concentration of veterans, lending itself well to a pilot which will be more locally focused in terms of NHS and other partner networks. Alternative areas with a more concentrated veteran population could also work for this pilot.

The pilot, funded by the Forces in Mind Trust, ran from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2022 with the service accepting referrals from 1 October 2019. Recruitment of participants to the research study began on 1 October 2019 and ended on 30 September 2021 with follow-up surveys collected until 31 March 2022.

### **The core principles of The Poppy Factory employment service are:**

- Person-centred support to help clients find meaningful and sustainable employment.
- Working at a pace that is appropriate for the client's needs or circumstances.
- Working collaboratively with other services to provide joined-up support for clients.
- Exploring veterans' skills and experience, to identify barriers to employment and setting achievable goals to help them move into work.
- Developing relationships with employers based on a veteran's work preferences to find sustainable job opportunities.
- Offering up to 12 months' support for clients and their employers to sustain and make progress in employment.
- Empowering clients to find and sustain work for themselves in the future.

The service for the Wirral pilot is an adapted form of the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) service, designed to fit with the needs of veterans and in line with the principles above.

**Notable adaptations to a typical IPS service include:**

- Supporting veterans who have physical health conditions, as well as those with mild and moderate mental health conditions.
- Only partially embedded: veteran numbers are spread thinly across many NHS services, so whilst the Employment Consultant will be embedded with one host team they will work collaboratively with clinicians across all settings.
- Employment will always be the end goal, but The Poppy Factory will work with veterans to tackle all barriers to employment, which may include support accessing training or education, and associated funding; health and wellbeing services; securing volunteering.

## **1.2 Working in Partnership**

The referral pathway varies depending on the type of service and job role of the person making the referral. One of the more common NHS referrers was via the CWP Adult Mental Health Access Team that reviews patients' needs and circumstances to determine where they are best supported. This may result in them receiving support from the adult mental health team, or being redirected to primary care support. Should the Access Team member assessing the client become aware of a veteran with employment needs, they would make a referral to The Poppy Factory service. This could be via a referral form, an email or through a conversation with the Employment Consultant to discuss whether The Poppy Factory support is right for the client.

Once a referral had been made, the pilot service worked collaboratively with other organisations to ensure a more joined-up service for clients. These included primary and secondary health services, police and probation services, local authority services, DWP Job Centre Plus, integrated community care teams, drug and alcohol recovery services, veteran charities and associations. The EC worked collaboratively with statutory and non-statutory organisations to determine the needs of clients, with ongoing dialogue to discuss their specific progress and support requirements, and with collective input on decision making around action planning, and establishing areas of responsibility. Where necessary, the EC organised or attended multi-disciplinary meetings to ensure all support and actions are aligned. A number of partnerships were formally established and critical to the working model of the service.

## **Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust**

The Poppy Factory EC was embedded within the Birkenhead Adult Mental Health Team and co-located in the Stein Centre, where the team operated from. This enabled effective working relationships to be developed with all colleagues including a broad range of clinicians and practitioners. Co-location allowed for open dialogue with regards to mutual patients/clients as well as enabling a mutual exchange of general advice and support. This extended to other Mental Health teams based at the Stein Centre, such as the Access Team (triage), Wallasey & West Wirral Adult Mental Health Team (WWWAMS), Home Treatments and Psychiatry Liaison.

Regular attendance of the EC at Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) meetings enabled direct engagement with clinicians and practitioners to discuss specific needs and report progress and support requirements of patients/clients, with collective input on decision making around action planning. One-to-one engagement between the EC and clinicians and practitioners further enhanced this collaborative working.

### **Primary Care & Other Services**

ECs also engaged with Primary Care services such as GP surgeries and Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) clinics to utilise the surgeries and clinics as a location for meeting with clients, as well as to discuss specific needs, and to report the progress and support requirements of patients/clients.

Other specific services that the EC engaged with to ensure all support and actions were aligned for clients included: Op Courage; Veterans in Mind; Merseyside Police TCAP (Street Triage); The Spider Project; JourneyMEN; Tomorrows Women; Probation Service (Wirral Justice); Project NOVA; Social Services (Child & Adult); Wirral Borough Council (Local Authority); Integrated Community Care Teams; DWP Jobcentre Plus; Wirral Ways To Recovery (Alcohol/Drug Recovery Support Service).

## **1.3 The Impact of Coronavirus**

The coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on service delivery and on the evaluation of the service, coming at a critical time – six months after the service started recruiting.

*NHS engagement and referrals into the service:* the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdowns put immense pressure on NHS services, so opportunities to work collaboratively reduced significantly and referrals were affected during this initial period. The Employment Consultant was unable to be physically present at the Stein centre from March 2020 until April 2021, but continued to support veterans referred from non-NHS sources. Participants were therefore recruited from local job centres during this period.

Once the Employment Consultant returned to the Stein Centre, NHS referrals increased significantly, however time on-site was restricted to a maximum of 2 days per week with NHS quite rightly prioritising the vaccination programme and catching up on delayed treatments.

There is no doubt that Covid has had a significant impact on this pilot and associated research but the teams adapted and overcame challenges to continue delivering a much needed service to vulnerable veterans and to deliver meaningful research.

**Impact on clients:** The Employment Consultant observed that many of their clients were often isolating or were more cautious about finding work due to fear of contracting Covid. Therefore, making progress towards employment was in some cases slower, and many clients reported a significant impact on their mental health.

**Impact on Job Market:** With a lot of uncertainty in the job market, the number of job opportunities and the quality of those jobs were also affected by the pandemic, with fewer permanent roles and more short-term contracts. Despite this The Poppy Factory was still able to support a number of veterans into employment, with a notable uplift in roles to support the pandemic response effort.

**Resourcing:** The pandemic affected resourcing of this pilot with the embedded Employment Consultant leaving during the first lockdown and furlough of a number of other employment consultants. However, cover was provided from within The Poppy Factory's North West team until a permanent replacement was recruited in February 2021 when the vaccination programme was underway and the Covid cases were falling.

## 1.4 Evaluation Project

The aim of this report is to provide a full account of the evaluation of the IPS service. The evaluation was conducted by the Institute of Mental Health. This evaluation aimed to provide formative and summative evaluation on the impact of the service on outcomes, and to assess the implementation process and barriers and facilitators to effectiveness.

### Specific objectives were to:

- Assess changes in employment outcomes at 3, 6 and 12-months using organisational monitoring data collected by The Poppy Factory.
- Assess changes in health-related outcomes using online survey data from veterans, including mental wellbeing, health service use, self-esteem, quality of life, employability skills and financial wellbeing.
- Explore the experience of veterans using the service to identify contextual factors and mechanisms associated with positive outcomes through interviews with veterans and stakeholders.

## 2.0 Methods

### 2.1 Procedure

All veterans registering with the services were invited to participate in the evaluation by completing a baseline survey within 3 weeks of registering. The survey was hosted on JISC online surveys and included both the information sheet and consent questions prior to the survey questions. Those who consented to take part completed the baseline survey which took 15 to 20 minutes. Consent was recorded through the online survey at both baseline and follow-up.

For follow-up, participants were originally contacted 12 months after completing the baseline. However, in May 2021 this was reduced to a follow-up period of 6 months to ensure that data from more veterans could be included in the evaluation as there had been low recruitment of participants resulting from the impact of Covid and general restrictions throughout the NHS and nationally. Participants were provided with a £15 voucher for their participation in both the baseline survey and again for the follow-up survey.

Employment outcomes data was collected routinely by The Poppy Factory for all veterans registered with the service and shared anonymously with the evaluation team.

Once participants had completed the follow-up, they were contacted by the lead qualitative researcher to ask if they wanted to take part in an interview to discuss their experiences with The Poppy Factory's service. The participants were contacted via email, phone, and WhatsApp. If they expressed their interest, they were emailed a copy of the participant information sheet and the consent form. They were contacted again in one week to ask if they had accepted and if they had any questions. If they agreed, a date for the interview was set.

The interviews took place over the phone and were recorded on an encrypted audio recorder. After the interview was conducted the participant was debriefed and provided with a £15 voucher. Links were provided to support services if they required. The participants were asked if they had any family members whom they thought would want to be interviewed. Stakeholders were also approached to take part in interviews and included The Poppy Factory staff, NHS staff and stakeholders from other veteran and employment services. Stakeholders were given the option of being interviewed via Microsoft Teams or phone. Teams interviews were uploaded to Microsoft Stream. Stakeholders were not provided with a voucher for their time. Interviews lasted between 10 and 50 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

## 2.2 Participants

Employment outcome data was available for 68 veterans who had registered with the service. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the demographics for this overall study sample.

Table 1. Demographics of veterans

	Percentage % (n)	
	All Veterans (n=68)	Completed Baseline Survey (n=45)
<b>Gender</b>		
Men	92.6 (63)	93.3 (42)
Women	7.3 (5)	6.6 (3)
<b>Age</b>		
19-28	7.3 (5)	2.2 (1)
29-38	29.4 (20)	26.7 (12)
39-48	22.1 (15)	24.4 (11)
49-58	29.4 (20)	33.3 (15)
59-63	10.3 (7)	8.9 (4)
Missing	- (1)	- (2)
<b>Type of Health Condition</b>		
Mental Health	20.6 (14)	18.6 (8)
Physical Health	32.4 (22)	32.6 (14)
Both	47.1 (32)	48.9 (21)
<b>Referral source</b>		
Charity	1.5 (1)	0 (0)
Healthcare	36.8 (25)	37.8 (17)
Military charity	10.3 (7)	6.7 (3)
Non-health statutory	41.2 (28)	44.4 (20)
The Poppy Factory self-generated	10.3 (7)	11.1 (5)
<b>Previously supported by The Poppy Factory?</b>		
Yes	13.2 (9)	15.6 (7)
No	86.8 (59)	84.4 (38)
<b>Of those employed, disclosed health conditions to employer?</b>		
Yes	25.0 (10)	15.4 (4)
Unknown	75.0 (30)	84.6 (22)

Recruitment to the online survey study was closed in September 2021 to allow for 6-months follow-ups to be completed by March 2022. Of the 68 veterans who completed registration, 45 (66.2%) completed the baseline and 30 (44.1%) of these also completed the follow-up survey.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of veterans taking up the service were male (92.6%), aged between 29 and 58 (80.9%) and referred either through NHS services (36.8%: 14.7% from primary care and 22.1% from secondary care) or other statutory services such as Job Centre Plus (41.2%). Just under half of the veterans using the service had both mental health and physical health problems (47.1%), with those with just physical health problems making up around a third of clients (32.4%) and one fifth (20.6%) reporting just mental health problems. Musculoskeletal conditions were common for those disclosing physical health issues, whilst mental health issues ranged from mild to more serious conditions including anxiety, depression, PTSD, bi-polar and schizophrenia. 86.8% had not been previously supported by The Poppy Factory, demonstrating that a lot of new veterans were reached through this service. Although the numbers are relatively small, those completing the baseline survey showed a similar demographic profile to the overall veteran group using the service.

The final qualitative sample size consisted of 14 veterans and eight stakeholders. Of the stakeholders, three were Poppy Factory staff, four were NHS staff or support workers who had worked with The Poppy Factory, and one was a family member of a veteran who was interviewed.

## 2.3 Measures

Employment outcome data included measures of:

- Employment status at month 3, 6, 9 and 12-months following registration
- Time to first job start after registration

The following standardised scales were used in the online survey to collect data on health-related outcomes:

- Mental wellbeing: 7-item Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al, 2007)
- Quality of life: EQ-5D (EuroQoL, 1990)
- Self-Esteem: 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)
- Employability skills: Job Search Self-Efficacy Outcomes and Behaviours (Saks et al, 2015)
- Financial wellbeing: Financial wellbeing scale (Stromback et al, 2017)
- Health service use: Client Service Receipt Inventory (Chisholm et al, 2000)

The interview questions for veterans covered the following topics:

- How was the experience of the IPS service for the veterans?
- What key factors influenced that experience?
- What other services or support do they currently receive?



- What were the main outcomes of attending the IPS service?
- Are there any other outcomes (e.g. family relationships)
- What were the key factors in achieving these outcomes?
- Are there any barriers and facilitators that impact on the effectiveness of the service?
- What was the impact of Covid on the service?

The interviews with stakeholders will aim to address the following questions:

- What are the benefits of the IPS service for veterans
- What are the mechanisms and factors that affect these outcomes?
- What contextual factors that support these outcomes?
- Are there any barriers and facilitators that impact on effectiveness?
- What are the challenges to implementing the IPS service?
- What was the impact of Covid on the service?

## 2.4 Analysis

Due to the small sample size, the majority of analysis is descriptive, examining the frequencies and mean scores of the outcome measures. Where possible, this is broken down by referral source, to allow comparison of each descriptive for veterans referred through the NHS with those from other sources. Although the original aim for the service was to receive referrals via NHS healthcare services, due to Covid the referral routes into the service were widened to include non-healthcare referrals. Therefore, this breakdown allows comparison of both the baselines scores and follow-up scores by these different referral routes.

Descriptive analysis of employment outcomes and online survey data was carried out using SPSS 19. First, frequency graphs were generated to show the distribution of responses at baseline, and mean scores for scales were calculated for baseline (n=45) and follow-up (n=30). The follow-up data varies in the time point it was collected in relation to the baseline data collection (i.e. the follow-up data could be from 6 months or 12 months after the baseline data was collected). This means that the results may not be a completely accurate indication of how responses have changed.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis with the coding process managed using the software NVivo 12. All analysis was conducted by one researcher and coding reviewed by a second researcher. The thematic analysis of the interviews was guided by [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#), and their six phases of thematic analysis:

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. Familiarising yourself with the data | 4. Reviewing themes           |
| 2. Generating initial codes             | 5. Defining and naming themes |
| 3. Searching for themes                 | 6. Producing the report       |

## 3.0 Results

In this section we provide details of the results relating to the following data:

- Employment outcomes collected by The Poppy Factory service
- Health-related outcomes collected at baseline and follow-up through online surveys
- Qualitative data on the experience of service users and stakeholders

### 3.1 Employment Outcomes

Table 2 shows the employment status of veterans at month 3, 6, 9 and 12-months following registration, with additional break down by referral source. This shows that the proportion of veterans in employment gradually grew between 3 months and 12 months. Of those that data was available for at 12-month follow-up after registration (n=41), 48.8% were in employment at 12-months. Due to Covid, the majority of veterans referred via the NHS joined the service more recently, so data on their employment status at 12-month follow-up is not available for the majority of them.

**Table 2. Percentage in employment at 3, 6, 9 and 12 months after registration<sup>3</sup>**

Time	Percentage (n)		
	Total Sample (n=68)	Healthcare Referral (n=25)	Other referral (n=43)
3 months after registration			
Employed	34.3 (23)	48.0 (12)	24.4 (10)
Not employed	65.7 (44)	52.0 (13)	75.6 (31)
6 months after registration			
Employed	36.2 (21)	41.2 (7)	32.5 (13)
Not employed	63.8 (37)	58.8 (10)	67.5 (27)
9 months after registration			
Employed	43.8 (21)	45.5 (5)	43.2 (16)
Not employed	56.3 (27)	54.5 (6)	56.8 (21)
12 months after registration			
Employed	48.8 (20)	45.5 (5)	50.0 (15)
Not employed	51.2 (21)	54.5 (6)	50.0 (15)

<sup>3</sup> The percentage actually in work at these time points of 3 months, 6 months, 9 months and 12 months

Table 3 shows the percentage of the veterans who had achieved *any* job start by 3, 6, 9 and 12-months following registration. Again, it shows that those referred from healthcare sources achieved a higher rate of job starts with the first three months of being registered with the service (52%) than those from other referral sources (30.2%).

**Table 3. Percentage with any job starts 3, 6, 9 and 12 months after registration<sup>4</sup>**

Time	Percentage (n)		
	Total Sample (n=68)	Healthcare Referral (n=25)	Other referral (n=43)
Had at least one job start by			
3 months	38.0 (26)	52.0 (13)	30.2 (13)
6 months	44.1 (30)	56.0 (14)	37.2 (16)
9 months	54.4 (37)	60.0 (15)	51.2 (22)
12 months	54.4 (37)	60.0 (15)	51.2 (22)

Table 4 presents the data from the overall sample for the number of job starts, the time to their first job start after registration, the length of their longest job tenure. 40 out of 68 (58.8%) veterans had a job start with an average of 0.93 job starts across the sample. Of the 40 veterans with a job start, the average number of job starts was 1.6 which represents a relatively stable employment situation. The maximum number was 5 job starts within the time with the service. However, only a small number of clients had a higher number of job starts (7 had three or more job starts) and this was typically due to a number of reasons including moving to more desirable roles, short-term contracts and dismissals. Of the 64 job starts achieved by the pilot, 53.1% were still active after 12 months in the service or when the project evaluation finished, 7.8% had finished due to the client finding successful alternative employment, 10.9% finished due to an end of contract and 9.3% had finished due to the client handing in their notice.

The average number of days to their first job start was 119 days, but this ranged from 4 to 616 days. The average longest job tenure was 213 days, ranging from 7 to 365 days, with 365 days being the maximum possible days as The Poppy Factory stops contact with a veteran after 12 months of continuous employment as they no longer need support. Veterans could still be in employment beyond 12 months. This variation is typical of supported employment interventions. For many they will find work quickly and retain their initial job, but for others their journey into employment will be quite different due to their

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<sup>4</sup> The percentage achieving any job start by the time period stated, but not necessarily still in employment at that date.

needs and even short periods of temporary employment will be significant stepping stones into more sustainable employment outcomes.

**Table 4. Job starts, time to first job start and average longest job tenure**

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	N (Total sample of participants)
Number of job starts for all registered veterans	0.93	0	5	68
Number of job starts for registered veterans that had at least 1 job start	1.6	1	5	40
Number of days until first job from date of registration	118.45	4	616	40
Longest job tenure (days)	212.55	7	365	22

Furthermore, for the first job starts made by veterans, 33 out of 40 (82.5%) were sustained for longer than 3 months. Of all job starts recorded by veterans, 44 of 58 (75.9%) were longer than 3 months. This excluded job starts notified towards the end of the project, where an end date could not be calculated due to data collection ending. This is higher than the benchmark figures provided by IPS Grow (2019) of 60% sustaining employment beyond 13 weeks.

Table 5 presents the same data but comparing those veterans referred from healthcare services with those referred from other sources and indicates slightly better employment outcomes for those former. 16 out of 25 veterans (64.0%) referred from healthcare services achieved job starts, compared to 24 out of the 43 (55.8%) referred from other sources. The average number of days to their first job start was 96.96 days for veterans from healthcare referrals and 132.96 days for veterans from other referrals. The average longest job tenure was 165.80 days for veterans from healthcare referrals and 132.96 days for veterans from other referrals. However, these data should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample sizes which also mean that further causal analysis that might explain these differences is not possible.

**Table 5. Job starts, time to first job and average longest job tenure by referral source**

	Healthcare referred					Other referral				
	N	Mean	Min	Max	Range	N	Mean	Min	Max	Range
Number of job starts for all registered veterans	25	1.16	0	5	5	43	0.81	0	4	4

Number of job starts for registered veterans that had at least 1 job start	16	1.81	1	5	4	24	1.46	1	4	3
Number of days until first job from date of registration	16	96.69	4	616	612	24	132.96	11	503	492
Longest job tenure (days)	10	165.80	16	365	349	12	122.88	7	365	358

### 3.2 Health-related Outcomes

Data on health-related outcomes was collected via an online survey, and a smaller sample completed both baseline and follow-up surveys.

Table 6 presents the data on mental wellbeing, quality of life, self-esteem, employability skills, and financial wellbeing. It compares the baseline and follow-up scores of the sample providing data at both time points (n=30), as well as the data for the larger sample of baseline scores (n=45). This shows improvements from baseline to follow-up across all health-related measures except financial wellbeing. Examination of the items for the financial well-being measure suggests that this reduction was largely due to concerns about their future financial situation and retirement, rather than their current financial situation. Due to the small sample size we are unable to test for the statistical significance of these improvements in the outcomes. Table 6 also shows that the sample who completed both baseline and follow-up surveys scored slightly higher than the total sample at baseline.

**Table 6. Summary of Health-Related Outcome Data**

	Sample providing baseline and follow-up (n=30)		Total sample at baseline (n=45)
	Mean at baseline	Mean at follow-up	Mean at baseline
Mental wellbeing <sup>1</sup>	19.96	22.14	18.84
Self-esteem <sup>2</sup>	23.17	23.56	23.42
Quality of life <sup>3</sup>	57.57	60.27	55.95
Job search behaviour self-efficacy <sup>4</sup>	3.19	3.33	3.09
Job search outcomes self-efficacy <sup>5</sup>	2.71	2.87	2.61
Financial wellbeing <sup>6</sup>	2.93	2.67	2.85

<sup>1</sup> SWEMWBS Mental wellbeing scores can range from 7-35 where 35 indicates highest level of wellbeing.

<sup>2</sup> Self-esteem scale scores can range from 0-30 where 30 indicates the highest level of self-esteem.

<sup>3</sup> Quality of life scale scores can range from 0-100 where 100 indicates the highest level of quality of life.

<sup>4</sup> Job search behaviour self-efficacy mean scores can range from 1-5, where 5 indicates the highest level of JSSE-B.

<sup>5</sup> Job search outcomes self-efficacy mean scores can range from 1-5, where 5 indicates the highest level of JSSE-O.

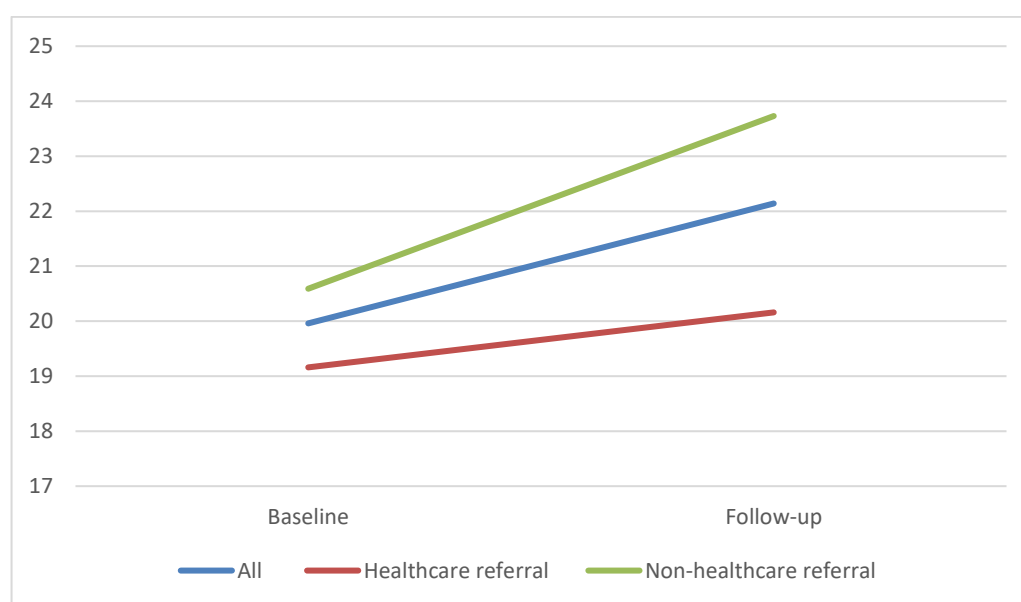
<sup>6</sup> Financial wellbeing item scores can range from 1-5, where 5 indicates the highest level of financial wellbeing.

**Table 7. Summary of Health-Related Outcome Data by Referral Source**

	Veterans referred from healthcare services (n= 12)		Veterans referred from non-healthcare services (n= 18)	
	Mean at baseline	Mean at follow-up	Mean at baseline	Mean at follow-up
Mental wellbeing	19.16	20.16	20.59	23.73
Self-esteem	22.00	22.88	24.10	24.10
Quality of life	51.67	59.17	61.50	61.00
Job search behaviour self-efficacy	3.05	3.07	3.30	3.54
Job search outcomes self-efficacy	2.28	2.34	3.06	3.29
Financial wellbeing	3.32	3.07	2.59	2.32

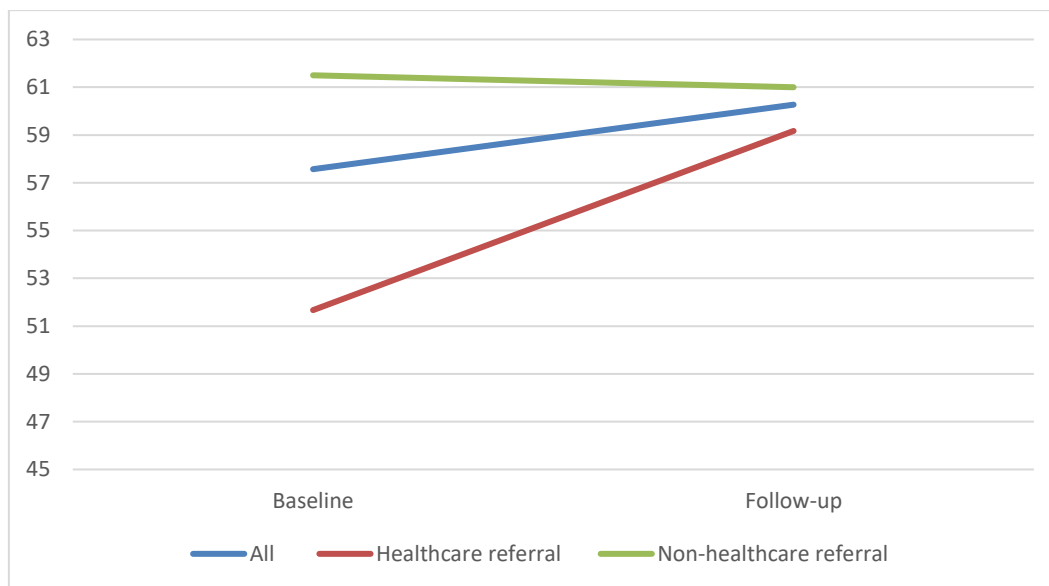
Table 7 presents the health-related outcomes data comparing those veterans who were referred through healthcare services with those who were referred through other sources. Although the numbers in each group are small because they are those who provided data at both baseline and follow-up, this does indicate that veterans referred from healthcare services had lower baseline scores on mental wellbeing, self-esteem, quality of life and job search behaviours than those veterans referred from other sources. This is to be expected as these veterans were already in receipt of mental health services prior to their referral to the service.

For mental wellbeing, those referred from other sources had a higher level of mental wellbeing at baseline and made a larger improvement between baseline and follow-up than those referred from healthcare services, as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Change in Mental Wellbeing from Baseline to Follow-up by Referral Source**

For Quality of Life, the pattern was reversed. As depicted in Figure 2, those referred from healthcare service showed a much larger improvement in quality of life scores compared to those who were referred from other sources. This was despite having considerably lower quality of life scores at baseline.



**Figure 2. Change in Quality of Life from Baseline to Follow-up by Referral Source**

Table 8 presents the health-related outcomes data comparing those veterans who achieved a job start during their receipt of the service with those who did not.

**Table 8. Summary of Health-related Outcome data by Job Start**

	Veterans achieving a job start		Veterans not achieving a job start	
	Mean at baseline (n=24)	Mean at follow-up (n=15)	Mean at baseline (n=12)	Mean at follow-up (n=3)
Mental wellbeing scale	19.39	22.66	17.75	19.59
Self-esteem scale	23.46	23.33	23.33	24.67
Quality of life scale	62.58	68.86	46.39	40.22
Job search behaviour self-efficacy scale	3.26	3.65	2.77	1.77
Job search outcomes self-efficacy scale	2.76	3.10	2.30	1.67
Financial wellbeing scale	2.98	2.73	2.58	2.38

This shows some interesting patterns, although the small sample size is a limitation into what we can interpret from this data. As depicted in Figure 3, those who achieved a job start had a higher baseline level of wellbeing than those who did not achieve a job start, though both groups showed a similar improvement. Furthermore, the quality of life scores are considerably better at both baseline and follow-up for those who achieved a job start. Whilst quality of life increases for those with a job start, it actually decreases for those who do not achieve employment during their time with the service.

The Client Service Receipt Inventory (Beecham and Knapp, 2001; Chisholm et al, 2000) was used to assess changes in veterans’ use of Health and Social Care Services. Those who completed the online survey gave details on their attendance and average length of attendance for various health and social care services over the previous three months. Differences in the mean number of service attendance at baseline and follow-up were calculated with the corresponding financial savings in terms of service unit costs and costs of one-to-one contacts.

Table 9 shows the changes in health service use between baseline and follow-up for those that provided both baseline and follow-up measures. This shows a mixed pattern in service use changes which is often expected when people access new interventions and are sign-posted to different types of support. For veterans accessing The Poppy Factory pilot service, there appears to be a reduction in the use of outpatient clinics, GP appointments, mental health nurse appointments and physiotherapy, but a slight increase in A&E visits. However, some of these changes may also reflect the challenges of accessing some of these services during the Covid pandemic.

**Table 9. Health service use**

Health service	Sample providing baseline and follow-up (n=30)		Total sample at baseline (n=45)
	Total number of visits at baseline	Total number of visits at follow-up	Total number of visits at baseline
A&E	12	19	22
Day case (surgery)	10	11	14
Outpatients’ clinics	62	27	75
Community based day services	12	14	17
Inpatient hospital stays	8	4	11
Inpatient hospital days	75	9	87
GP appointments	77	56	123
Nurse appointments	17	21	44
Mental health nurse	69	38	115
Physiotherapist	32	9	35
Social worker	6	13	11



Applying unit costs to these services (where recent unit cost data is available) can also provide some interesting figures, although these do not reflect the full social costs associated with the care and support that might be received by the veterans (e.g benefits payments, prescription costs, other service use). Table 10 shows that there was an average reduction in unit costs between baseline and follow-up of £324.32, demonstrating a cost saving in health and social care service per veteran. However, this figure does need to be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and also due to the impact of Covid on the accessibility and use of many of these services. Furthermore, Table 10 does not include costs related to inpatient hospital days as these are no longer included in the most recent published unit costs (Jones and Burnes, 2021). The average cost of an inpatient stay is included at £827 per stay instead. Using the previously published costs (Curtis, 2016), hospital days were costed at £222 per day and an additional estimated saving of £488 per veteran is estimated based on these figures. However, the reduction in hospital days can be attributed to just three individuals who accounted for 66 of the 75 days at baseline and 4 of the 9 days at follow-up.

**Table 10. Health service use and available associated unit costs**

Health service	Average service use, per veteran (n=30)			Unit cost <sup>1</sup>	Mean cost difference
	baseline	follow-up	change		
Day case (surgery)	0.33	0.37	+0.04	£840	+£33.6
Outpatients clinics	2.06	0.90	-1.16	£137	-£158.92
Inpatient hospital stays	0.27	0.13	-0.14	£827	-£115.78
GP appointments	2.57	1.87	-0.70	£39 <sup>2</sup>	-£27.3
Nurse appointments	0.57	0.70	+0.13	£22 <sup>3</sup>	+£2.86
Mental health nurse	2.30	1.27	-1.03	£22 <sup>3</sup>	-£22.66
Physiotherapist	1.07	0.30	-0.77	£67 <sup>4</sup>	-£51.59
Social worker	0.20	0.43	+0.23	£67 <sup>5</sup>	+£15.41
Mean Cost Difference per veteran					-£324.32

<sup>1</sup> Unit cost values taken from the PRSSU 2021 (Jones and Burns (2021))

<sup>2</sup> Average cost for 9.22 minute contact

<sup>3</sup> Average cost for 30 minute contact with Band 4 practitioner

<sup>4</sup> Average cost for one-to-one session

<sup>5</sup> Average cost for 60 minute contact

### 3.3 Qualitative Interview Results

The interview results are presented below and described separately for veterans and stakeholder.

#### 3.3.1 Veteran Interviews

Five themes were identified from the data from veteran interviews (Table 11). The first two themes (safe space and practical support) focus on the distinctive features of The Poppy Factory pilot service which the veterans described as being key mechanisms in providing effective support and developing other positive outcomes, which are described in the third theme (positive outcomes). The fourth theme (Covid) describes the impact that the Covid pandemic had on veterans and The Poppy Factory pilot service, and the implications of that for outcomes. The final theme (looking forward) brings together suggestions for improvements that the veterans described during their interviews.

**Table 11. Themes and Sub-themes from veteran interviews**

Themes	Subthemes
Safe space	Understanding the veteran experience
	Accessibility
	Caring and honest
Practical support	Locality is key
	No pressure
	Efficient and professional
Positive outcomes	Mental wellbeing (reconnecting with the self)
Covid	Life goes on
	The Employment Consultant furlough
Looking forward	Raising awareness
	Social events

#### **Safe space**

Engaging with The Poppy Factory was an opportunity for veterans to speak openly to someone who understood the differences between the military’s culture and “civvy street”, as well as the common barriers the veterans faced to employment. When veterans had a single Employment Consultant (EC) they described how they could grow to trust them and open up more to them, which appears to be associated with the best outcomes for veterans. However, when there was a change in the EC during the course of their support that relationship and trust was not as strong. Some of the descriptions of the relationship

between the veterans and the EC highlight the importance of shared background, experiences and language in enabling veterans to feel safe talking to the EC as well as the accessibility, continuity, caring atmosphere and the honest communication between them. These sub-themes are explored in more detail below.

*V05: "The talking is more than anything in my opinion. Talking to someone who is as low as I was made me feel more better than if someone gave me a million pounds... all the rest, I can deal with that... not having money, not having all that, they don't have to offer you money, just talking about it mate."*

### **Understanding the veteran experience**

The veterans felt that the veteran-specific focus of The Poppy Factory was a major contributor to their outcomes, and that a more generic employment service would not have been as effective. The fact that many staff members had lived experience of being in the Armed Forces and of making the successful transition to civilian life was seen as extremely valuable and ensured the respect of the veterans. Where ECs did not have this lived experience themselves, they were able to demonstrate real understanding of the military background and context. One of the main reasons given for this understanding being so important was that it enabled the veterans to feel that they were in the hands of someone who understood where they were coming from, and that helped develop a sense of safety. It also meant that the ECs understood the types of skills that veterans had and how these skills would be transferable to the job market. Veterans also felt that ECs were able to understand their mind-set and the specific way that veterans were likely to approach seeking work and the kinds of cultures that they would thrive in.

*V06: "Where The Poppy Factory came into play was the understanding of military personnel and what they have been through."*

Military culture can be quite insular, and it was not uncommon for veterans to be guarded and untrusting of civilians, which can prevent them from properly engaging with both employment and mental health services. Veterans described having much less fear in opening up and talking to the EC as they were perceived to have an innate understanding of the veteran due to their shared experience.

*V08: "It makes such a difference because civilians do not think like us; we are very proud men, but we accept help provided it comes from someone who understands where we are coming from."*

This was contrasted with other services providing employment support, such as DWP Job Centre and Work Programme services.

*V07: "There's a lack of understanding through the job centre of what makes a serviceman tick, and what buttons not to press."*

The shared veteran experience between the veterans and the ECs allowed them to break through this emotional barrier and contributed greatly to the working relationship that

formed between them. A shared language was highlighted as being important too, and a perception that the veterans could be themselves, and not add a filter.

*V13: "We all talk the same language. Not much political correctness in the language either so we were able to say what we think when we think, whereas if civilians are doing it, you are guarded, you're not saying how you feel as you will do to someone who has been in the same boat."*

### **Accessibility and Continuity**

While the shared veteran experiences helped the ECs to connect to the veterans, it was the ongoing accessibility of the EC and the continuity of the same EC over time that enabled that trust to be built. It was clear that shared experience and understanding on its own would not have been impactful if the veterans had to re-establish these shared experiences with a new EC every time they contacted The Poppy Factory. This was frequently illustrated through veterans' experiences at the Job Centre, where the lack of familiarity veterans had with the employment advisors at the Job Centre was a major reason that many disliked and disengaged from the service. They contrasted this with the benefits of having a single EC at The Poppy Factory who was always available to them.

*V11: "When you are in your jobseeker's [sic], although you get one person, they might not be there [every time]. So, you speak to the next person, then you speak to the next person, and then you end up explaining yourself two or three times, it's very frustrating, and then you just feel as if you just keep repeating yourself and then you sort of give up. Whereas with [EC], you know you are speaking to [EC], and because you have had conversations with [EC], you have got that continuity, so you get that little bit of trust and you feel a bit more confident in them."*

Having a single EC who understood the veteran's unique situation allowed for quick and efficient communication that would not have been possible if the veteran had to explain their situation repeatedly. This led to many veterans feeling as though they could very easily get into contact with their EC, allowing for rapid problem solving.

*Interviewer: "Were there certain things that helped you make the most of the support you received in The Poppy Factory?"*

*V03: "The fact I could email or text [EC], because of me working nights, obviously I wasn't awake a lot during the day, so I could text or email [EC] and then we'd arrange a time for me to phone [EC]... so the [communication] to [EC] was spot on."*

This also further contributed to the development of trust which was so critical to the advisory relationship between the veteran and EC.

*V06: "Primarily I had one representative- it wasn't a chopping-and-changing kind of situation which meant again you have reliability, you had trust... most importantly I suppose was the understanding of you as an individual."*

The importance of a single EC in developing that trust became most apparent when interviewing one veteran, who went through four different ECs for various different reasons. Although this was primarily due to the Covid pandemic and unforeseeable, the experience of these transitions between ECs was difficult. It was clear that factors such as trust, consistency and continuity in terms of staffing are very important to veterans, and for this veteran changing ECs had an overall negative impact on the veteran's experiences with The Poppy Factory as he began to lose trust, which affected his ability to engage with his EC and reach positive outcomes. At this point he considered withdrawing from the service. The participant identifier has been removed from the following two quotes to protect anonymity.

*"I just felt at the time like they were not really caring... I had loads of promises and they came to nothing... I was really just thinking about just knocking it on the head completely and just forgetting about it."*

Despite the lack of trust at that point, this veteran was compelled to stay in the service because of The Poppy Factory's unique veteran focus. This convinced him to stay with The Poppy Factory long enough to be transferred to a local, available EC who was able to repair the broken trust he had experienced. The experience of this veteran really highlights the importance of the continuity of the EC in developing that trust, and of the qualities of ECs that are critical in achieving those positive outcomes, which will be further explored in the next theme.

*"I thought the only thing really left is to continue with The Poppy Factory so I stuck with them, because I had more in common with them because they are all ex-service personnel... There were other places to go, but they were not any good..... but then all of a sudden, I was linked to somebody different [in The Poppy Factory] and everything just seemed to flow along... I got a lot of help and support from the last person who was helping me so that was a lot better."*

Ongoing access to a single EC also allowed for a level of flexibility that the veterans had not experienced elsewhere. This was especially useful for putting some veterans at ease because they did not have to worry about things like missing appointments, which could be quite stressful for them. This made it easier for the veterans to reach out the ECs whenever they wanted.

*V06: "You can pick your environment that you are going to meet in... it's about finding something that each of you are going to be comfortable with... I found them very accessible, very flexible. A couple of times maybe we've changed appointments due to my commitments rather than theirs and yeah, very flexible."*

Veterans clearly appreciated the flexibility and the lack of rigidity provided by the ECs. The fact that they understood that 'things come up' and appointments can be moved, further developed the sense of safety in veterans.

*V11: "With [EC], I know if I have missed his call he would either call back or he will just say "I have rung", you know, "when you are free give me a call back"... He would take*

*the time as well, so if it wasn't a time that we were talking, so say we have got an appointment at 11 on Thursday but I had questions for [EC], I could contact [EC] anytime and I would always get a response, so it was a lot more flexible."*

To summarise, veterans who had a single, local EC reported overwhelmingly that it helped facilitate rapid, stress-free communication. This accessibility led to flexible working arrangements that contributed to a feeling of safety and security among the veterans.

### **Caring and Honest Atmosphere**

The safe environment The Poppy Factory created for veterans also seems to be due to the caring, friendly and positive atmosphere generated by their ECs.

Several of the veterans interviewed had experienced loneliness and isolation since leaving the forces and they felt that The Poppy Factory Service really encouraged them to get out of the house and break that feeling of isolation by inviting them to face to face meetings. These meetings and chats over coffee were described by some as a lifeline in terms of making them feel cared for. Not only did this give them an excuse to get out of the house but it was also seen as an invitation and validation of the need to focus on themselves, their own aspirations and spend time thinking about and discussing what they wanted and what their next moves might be in terms of training or seeking work.

Feeling cared for by The Poppy Factory team was valued very highly by the veterans who all felt that just having that phone call or invitation to meet up made them feel like someone was rooting for them. This meant so much to them and seemed to be a key factor in the success of the service. The meaning attached to these phone calls and meet-ups was that it helped to counteract the isolation some of the veterans were facing and it also gave them a reason to go out. It seemed like an incredibly valuable element of the service and contrasted with what the veterans experienced through other employment services.

*V01: "It's that attitude from everyone involved. Nothing's too small, nothing's too big. There's no such thing as a stupid question. Even when there is kind of what would seem negative, you know, job applications are going through and they are all coming back saying "no".*

*V05: "[The EC] is just so bubbly and just so helpful and so nice, it is the people because they are the only support that I have asked for from The Poppy Factory really, the support of the people which I am getting 100%"*

This positivity was coupled with their direct, realistic honesty that helped form a trusting relationship between the veterans and the ECs. This was because the veterans were used to receiving straightforward, honest answers during their time in the military, and this was conducive to the highlighting of negative behaviours that often prevented them from engaging with the service.

*V07: "I was told at the beginning that I was very very negative... they do give you feedback as well and I did not realise what I was doing until one day [my EC] said to*

*me you are very very negative... then you think about it and go "oh right" so it has helped me realise what I was doing... I would rather people tell me like that... I can relate to that rather than someone lying to me."*

Together, these elements of shared understanding of the military experience, continuity and accessibility and a caring yet honest atmosphere all appear to be critical mechanisms to developing the trust that veterans have in The Poppy Factory service, which in turn allowed them to feel in a safe space and fully engage with the service.

*V10: "Trust is a massive issue for me, in previous experience from a child and being in prison, so to have that, that you can trust somebody, they did what they said they were going to do. You know there wasn't any false promises and all they went above and beyond, that made a massive difference."*

## **Practical support**

As well as this psychological sense of safety and trust, the veteran identified key aspects of practical support which they experienced as important features of The Poppy Factory service. The practical assistance the ECs provided to the veterans was highly praised almost universally. This support was facilitated by: the fact the ECs understood the local area; that there was a perceived lack of pressure to find employment if the EC determined that the veteran was not fit for work at the moment; the speed with which ECs helped the veterans solve barriers to employment such as training needs and technology, and the professionalism associated with their conduct. These sub-themes are explored in more detail below.

## **Locality**

Some veterans thought that being local to The Wirral allowed the ECs to give a higher quality of advice, and to use their existing contacts with local businesses to make networking much easier.

*V13: "They knew what I was talking about, the employment situation round here, whereas if it would have been someone from down in Cornwall, or up in Scotland, you would not have a clue what the situation is in Birkenhead."*

The understanding of the local area also meant that the ECs would be able to consider some of the practical barriers to certain employment opportunities in the wider area.

*V07: "[The Wirral] it's a peninsula... you've got Wales one side, Liverpool one side, but people always seem to think oh he can get a job there, it's not that far, but it is when you try to drive there in the mornings, you are like on an island, you are stuck."*

For others, being locally based in The Wirral meant that there was more opportunity for face-to-face conversations with ECs, which was not always possible anyway due to the effects of Covid. Having these face-to-face meetings also helped to further develop trust.

*V10: "Where I have been everything is face-to-face, because then you can see if people are genuine, so it's hard to build that relationship, so I would rather have had face-to-face, but I did understand."*

However, there were several veterans who downplayed the importance of face-to-face meetings over zoom calls.

*Interviewer: "What was the impact of Covid on The Poppy Factory service?"*

*V01: "Only the lack of face-to face meetings and being able to speak to someone and talk through a document for example. Teams has somewhat negated that a little bit, because of the ability to share documents and what have you, and for some people it really works well for, for others probably not so much because they prefer a face-to-face rather than a phone call, but I was happy with either, so it didn't affect me very much."*

## **No pressure**

In contrast to the stressful environment of the Job Centre, veterans perceived that The Poppy Factory service was more relaxed about the importance of getting the veteran in touch with an employer rapidly. This was a positive to several veterans who felt that the service was more person-centred, rather than target-focused.

*V05: "[The Poppy Factory focus is] not so much employment opportunities... they are going off of how I am feeling and they will not push me if I do not feel... if you are not up for it at that present time, you are not fit for work. They are not going to push me into anything."*

This was also contrasted to the perceived pressure and stressful experience of Job Centre services, which was described as being rushed and focused on achieving specific activities and providing evidence of those.

*V11: "You don't feel as if you have got that pressure, I think it is a lot easier, you don't feel as pressured. With the job centre they give you a list of things to do, they don't really explain what they are just so we need evidence of this, or we need this or this, and it's all quite rushed... whereas [EC], I don't know whether he has got a bit more time to be able to spend with you, so if you have got a question, you get it explained properly, so you understand."*

This more person-centred and tailored approach, taking into account the veterans' specific health issues and situation, was highlighted in the experience of one particular veteran who was interviewed. One veteran was currently undergoing a considerable amount of physical and mental health issues, for which he is receiving NHS treatment. Because of this, his EC



decided it was best to pause his search for employment while these treatments were ongoing. These quotes have been further anonymised to protect the veteran's identity.

*"We agreed that because of the medication that I was on, there wasn't really much point in continuing as we were because things were probably subjected to possibly dramatic change, for better or worse"*

When asked what would have happened if his EC had kept up the pressure to find employment at the same time he was receiving these treatments, he agreed it would have been unhelpful.

*"Probably worse. My state of mind at the time and my physical wellbeing was really bad and kind of being forced to get into it when my head wasn't in it, probably wouldn't have helped at all."*

This veteran's situation illustrates that, while employment is still the primary focus for many veterans, a deviation from the standard IPS principle of the 90-day 'rush' to employment may be appropriate in some scenarios. Despite the break in the employment search, the veteran still reported positive outcomes overall.

*"I know we didn't achieve much in terms of getting into employment but the conversations with [the EC] really did help a lot, just having someone to talk to, someone who understood my situation, someone who didn't judge, just talking to [EC] helped a hell of a lot, so yeah, it didn't achieve anything in terms of job-wise, [the EC] really, really did help mentally, definitely."*

### **Efficient and professional**

The ECs were praised for their professionalism, which contributed to the high-quality support the veterans received. This expressed itself in several different ways. Some veterans commented on the speed by which their barriers to employment were solved. For example, one veteran did not have a computer, so could not attend virtual job interviews. The Poppy Factory's EC quickly fixed this for him.

*[quote anonymised to ensure identity is protected]: "It's the willingness to just go above and beyond. Like I said, the laptop thing, I said "oh I've got a problem with this", and it was like "right no problem", and then literally a day later, "right, I have got funding for this, I can speed this up". [The EC] was just like "leave it with me", it was never an issue, it just got done, [the EC has] been absolutely amazing."*

Another veteran was trying to attend a training course to gain driving skills, but Covid was making it difficult to find an availability. As soon as the dates were provided, his EC immediately sorted the rest.

*[quote anonymised to ensure identity is protected]: "Once the training provider said here are some dates do you want them, I was straight on the phone to [EC], he was straight on the phone to the funding provider and bish, bash, bosh it was done"*

Several veterans commented on the professional knowledge of the ECs, which also further enhanced their engagement with and trust in the service.

*V04: "I received quality information from people who knew what they were on about and it was always a very warm place to be, if that sounds strange or, it was always an enjoyable experience when I did have conversations or met for a coffee and stuff like that, it was always very professional and like I say I would certainly recommend anybody to go to them if they needed any help so."*

The communication skills of the ECs were also specifically mentioned, as they were able to explain things clearly and veterans felt able to go back to them for further clarification if needed.

*V11: "I think he has got really good knowledge as well, he is obviously very experienced in like his field, so he was able to, you know, articulate that really well and explain things well. So you know, any problems he would explain it further, so you know, you can always, you know, go to [EC] with questions and you would get the answer you needed."*

The practical support provided with CVs, identifying relevant skills and with sharing job opportunities were also highlighted as important to veterans.

*V14: "[EC] knew what [they] was talking about. [They] helped me with my CV. I sent [EC] my CV and [they] sent it me back with just a huge list of suggestions and things to change and things that have possibly improved a little bit and just everything about [EC], [they were] just professional. [The EC] knew what [they were] doing, knew what [they were] talking about. [The EC] was knowledgeable. [They were] sending me links for jobs so clearly doing the work in the background despite me not giving as much as I was receiving and [the EC] was desperately trying to help me and was pointing things out and actually sending links to apply for various jobs and various websites and things like that, [the EC] was just brilliant."*

*V03: "Well it made me realise I was actually a better person for the jobs than I actually realised because half the stuff that they were asking for, for some jobs, I instantly put myself down saying "well I haven't got that qualification, I haven't done that, I haven't done that" and when I spoke to [EC] about it, [the EC] explained, "well you did that when you are in the [services]" and he helped me word it in a sense that I realised actually half the jobs that I was turning down because I didn't think I was qualified for, I was more than qualified for, I just didn't have the civilian version of it, I could only use it in the military."*

The practical support provided to veterans by the ECs were important features of The Poppy Factory service. These included the knowledge of the local employment context, a person-centred approach with less urgency for employment outcomes within a specific time frame, and the professional knowledge and skills of the ECs applied in a timely manner.

## **Positive outcomes**

Almost every veteran interviewed reported a substantial improvement in their wellbeing, most notably in relation to financial stability, housing, familial relationships, meaningful employment and self-actualisation. Most veterans were comforted by the continued support The Poppy Factory provided even after finding long-term employment for them, as several held anxieties about being “dropped” as soon as that was the case. When asked about the outcomes associated with attending the service, it was the impact on their mental wellbeing that was highlighted.

### **Mental wellbeing (reconnecting with the self)**

Almost every single veteran commented on the boost to their overall mental wellbeing as a result of their time spent with The Poppy Factory, with many veterans feeling more confident in themselves after attending the service.

*V05: “Happiness, happiness is the main outcome. I am happy now. I am sitting in my own flat with my feet underneath me, my son can come and see me, just happiness mate. [The Poppy Factory] have just made me feel so happy and have helped my life progress from the hole that I was in, do you know what I mean?”*

For some veterans, the social connection was an important factor in generating their improved wellbeing.

*V07: “In the end it has been absolutely fantastic, and they have got the time to listen as well so you know you can just jabber on about anything and it brought me out of myself, it made me feel happier and I never used to get that, so I have had a good experience with them, and it is a great thing they are actually doing.*

Some veterans felt that the employment they had achieved was the main source of their positive mental state, with differing reasons. V08 described how his new job allowed him to reconnect with his self-identity as a worker.

*V08: “I like to be able to work, and that defines who I am, I still to this day do not say that I am a civilian, I say I am an [military job title] and I will always be an [military job title], because that defines me and not being able to work, not being able to go to work and do a job it was bloody soul destroying, so just having that pride back of being a working man again, it makes such a difference to me.”*

Similarly, after The Poppy Factory helped V07 get a specific diagnosis, he was able to find work that played to his strengths, which allowed him to feel more comfortable with himself. He describes how his work has directly improved his wellbeing by keeping his mind occupied and connecting with other people.

*V07: “Once that was explained to me, a lot of things started falling into place, I could then understand why I was doing certain things... once I had that I got in me head and with the help I was getting as well, chatting and that, I just started to come out of myself a bit more... [In my work] you get to have quick chat with somebody you are*

*probably never going to see again. Nothing is the same, everything is different each day and that keeps me mind occupied, so I have improved myself with that, so I am a lot more outgoing than what I was to start off with."*

The financial benefits of employment also contributed to the mental improvements of some veterans.

*V13: "Last Christmas and I had no money coming in, money going out and I was getting into a really dark place with that. Without them I would not have a job basically. They sorted out the funding for me, which I did not even know I was entitled to. To pay for the course, which I did and through that course I am [working] and earning 30 grand a year, so because of them, I am where I am now."*

The safe space the ECs created for the veterans and the effectiveness of their advice improved their confidence, both in terms of believing in their ability to seek employment and in themselves in general.

*V04: "Yes they were very encouraging. Obviously, they know my background and they know the qualifications I have and stuff like that and my ability, if anything they strengthened my resolve to do it because they gave me encouragement, they have seen something in me."*

This theme shows how improved mental wellbeing was a universal outcome for those interviewed. But this came through different sources including: social connections, self-identify through work, meaningful activity, financial stability, and belief in themselves.

## **Covid**

All the veterans acknowledged that Covid had a negative impact in one way or another: on their mental health, employment opportunities, their ability to socialise, etc. However, these effects of Covid were barely touched on by the veterans, because it was viewed as just a fact of life, and nothing The Poppy Factory can be blamed for. The only exception to this is that there were a few cases of ECs being switched around or furloughed that caused significant issues for the veterans at the time.

### **Life goes on**

For most veterans, Covid was not considered as a major factor affecting their experience. Interestingly, many of them did acknowledge that it was a barrier to employment at the time, as many employers were no longer hiring, but it did not negatively affect their impression of The Poppy Factory.

*V01: "There has been a lot less of face-to-faces, that kind of thing, because of the nature of the world we live in, but that would be the wrong way of criticising anything. You can't offer an improvement if there's none there."*

Veterans appreciated the difficulties that The Poppy Factory and its ECs experienced at the time. There was a sense that Covid had been a negative experience for everyone at that time, and that was shared by all.

V03: *"I think it was harder for [EC] working from home because [they] didn't have direct access to everything that [they] would have had in the office or something, so, in terms of us being together, it wasn't really that bad because obviously I could just text [EC] or email [EC], which suited me better because me working nights; I slept during the day. But the lack of jobs available during Covid though, because of everyone going on furlough, obviously it wouldn't have helped."*

For some veterans, their contact with the ECs was a significant boon to their mental health during that difficult time.

V10: *"It was very hard because I, without building trust in a relationship and on the phone, you know with where I have been everything is face to face, because then you can see if people are genuine, so it's hard to build that relationship, so I would rather have had face to face but I did understand, but as I say the way [the EC] was on the phone it did put you at ease and what [they] said [they] did and that made a massive difference."*

### **Disruption to the continuity of ECs**

As mentioned in the Safe Space theme, the initial transition into lockdown did provide some negative outcomes for some veterans in relation to the loss of continuity and accessibility to ECs. Most notably, this affected two interviews whose quotes are not identified to protect their anonymity.

For the first veteran, his EC was furloughed due to the pandemic, leading to a considerable amount of time spent with an EC he was unhappy with, due to their lack of local knowledge. However, despite these issues, he did not have anything he would change about The Poppy Factory in its current form.

*"No. Because since the beginning, because I was there when they started doing it, to then now, coming towards the end of it, it's now found its feet... Covid has messed everything up, even you know, [we] got to the end of Covid and then everything started up again and it seemed to improve a lot... but at the moment I can't think of anything else where they can improve it because I just don't think they have the time frame."*

The second veteran also found that his EC was furloughed once Covid began, however due to the IT barriers in place for this veteran he was unable to engage with The Poppy Factory online, and as such lost contact with them entirely.

*"At the beginning there was [EC]. [The EC] was very nice, very good, was very understanding and used to meet me once a month and face to face used to sort a lot of problems out and find the best way forward... then because of Covid I believe [the EC's] employment got terminated.... That was my main problem, the IT world... it's just a pain, been a pain in the backside for the last 12 months, especially with me only being able to afford this old phone and it's not even on, you know, I can't get a network on it most of the time so it has been, that has been the main hindrance to me."*

This veteran was stuck in an unfortunate position, as he could not talk to anyone from The Poppy Factory due to the lack of signal and internet, but since his EC was furloughed, to him

it did not seem like anyone at The Poppy Factory knew of these barriers. As such, when the interviewer reached out to the veteran via a phone call to ask them if they would like to participate in this study, it was the first spoken contact he'd had with The Poppy Factory in a significant amount of time. This veteran tried to get in contact himself, but his limited knowledge of technology made this difficult.

*"I honestly thought somebody might have made a little bit more of an effort to get in touch with me or some sort of meeting, but again I know we keep coming back to Covid and things like that, I think the last time I was supposed to go for a meeting that meeting was cancelled because people couldn't meet up at a centre because of the amount of people, so again Covid has been getting in the way but I haven't heard much off them at all really."*

The experiences of these two veterans highlight the few negative experiences of The Poppy Factory service due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the first veteran's experiences highlight that once a veteran is placed with a new, local EC, trust can be rebuilt, and things can become more effective.

## **Looking forward**

When veterans were asked about possible improvements to The Poppy Factory service, they overwhelmingly commented that there was no room for improvement. When questioned further a few made suggestions including: raising awareness of what The Poppy Factory does to drive engagement, strengthening ties with local relevant groups; and providing ways for veterans who have worked with The Poppy Factory to help the veteran community, for example with social gatherings. Generally, there was an acknowledgment that this service was unique and filled a much-needed gap in the employment services landscape, and a desire for the service to continue and to grow to enable more veterans to benefit from it.

*V07: "I just hope they carry on doing what they are doing because I think there's a lot of people, because in the last two years I have sort of met and listened to a lot more people that I didn't realise were suffering sort of like I was as well and they are all ex-forces as well and there didn't seem to be a great deal out there for us, if that makes any sense."*

## **Raising awareness**

Several veterans wondered why they hadn't heard about this service before, and how they can ensure as many veterans as possible had the chance to engage with it. There was a desire for other veterans to be able to access the support that the interviewees had been provided. Veterans suggested that there could be better marketing of the service so that more people knew about it.

*V06: "Probably would be awareness... I suppose the biggie for me would be publicising through current media formats and just growing accessibility for ex-servicemen and*

*[so they have access to] proper support, real support that is appropriate to them and recognises to some degree what servicemen are about and what they have achieved and treated with appropriate respect."*

### **Social events**

Some veterans expressed the desire for some more social events, now the lockdown restrictions have been lifted. There are clear elements of peer support in what is described in these quotes, whereby veterans express their wish to help and support other veterans by sharing their experiences.

*V10: "I don't know if you have meeting places, you could have like an after-care thing... where somebody could meet up for a coffee or something, like in a sense success stories for other people who are going through that you could meet up and try and help them... an after support where somebody who has been through it can help The Poppy Factory would benefit as well."*

The possibility of group-based sessions facilitated by an EC was specifically mentioned.

*V11: "So I would have liked if I had gone and done like a.... session where, even if there was a few of you where you can go in and, you know, just talk about where to access stuff and look, and have [EC] there"*

### **3.3.2 Stakeholder Interviews**

Table 12. Themes and Sub-themes from veteran interviews

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Care over everything	Less Pressure
	IPS Fidelity
	Veteran and employment focus destigmatises care
Barriers for involvement	Covid
	Identifying the veterans
	Building up relationships with The Poppy Factory
Stakeholder perspectives on veteran outcomes	Collaborative working
	Employment and volunteering

Three themes were identified from the data from stakeholder and family member interviews (Table 12) concerning the person-centred caring approach of The Poppy Factory service, barriers to accessing the services, and the effects that collaboration with the stakeholders can have for the veterans.

## Care over everything

The stakeholders acknowledged that The Poppy Factory's focus on caring for veterans was first and foremost- the ECs took care to work with other services to maximise the mental wellbeing of the veterans, even working with veterans who were not yet a part of The Poppy Factory service. This was remarked upon as being a unique factor of The Poppy Factory.

*S02: "I think the nature of our service which is lower caseloads, and we don't have a restricted time limit in terms of the support that we provide to a veteran, I think is something which is particularly unique and special about the support we provide."*

This was contrasted with other employment services.

*Interviewer: Are there any other services that have [The Poppy Factory's] attitude?*

*S04: "No, none.... You know, it's just, [EC] was such a good support worker, or coach, I don't know what his exact role was, so helpful and that's quite rare."*

## Less pressure

The less-pressurised and target-driven approach of The Poppy Factory helped put veterans at ease, which enabled them to break down the barriers more easily to engagement.

*S01: "The starting point for the work with The Poppy Factory was quite difficult and fragile to begin with [a lot of time was spent] you know developing that rapport before then taking those steps to sorting employment."*

*S05: "[Our support] is client-centred... what we don't do is try and progress at a speed that is likely to jeopardise the recovery of the client and equally set them up to fail."*

This means that other stakeholders can see the benefit of referring veterans to the service even if they seem a long way from employment. As The Poppy Factory worked with veterans for a long time to help them prepare for employment, referrers can see that this could be the start of a long journey that it is worth starting early even if it would ultimately take a long time to reach employment.

*S04: "[The EC] has also said no leave it with us, we don't expect them to immediately go into training and work, you know, I think [the EC has] done, you know, 12 month kind of prep with one individual and he knew it would take a very, very long time to get him ready to go to work. So they can see the potential even if its not there at the point of referral and they will work with them, which is really good."*

This is particularly true for veterans referred via mental health services, for whom the referrer might be concerned about referring into a more pressurised, target-driven service. In contrast, the Poppy Factory service is perceived as being more appropriate for a client whose mental health is at a lower point and who might need a bit longer to get into employment.



*S04: "That's what [The Poppy Factory] are able to do, you know, very gently get them back into [employment]. Because some of [our service users] they come to, obviously a single point of access and their mental health is really, really problematic and it's a case of if I refer [to the Poppy Factory] at that point that's okay because you know they will go and have that assessment with them and see, you know, is there any scope for slow, really slow support over a long period of time which gives the person some hope as well."*

### **Straying from IPS fidelity**

Their commitment to care sometimes led to The Poppy Factory taking on veterans that did not technically meet the requirements of an IPS scheme. But this lack of exclusion has also helped contribute to the sense of safe space that The Poppy Factory fosters.

*S04: "they are not excluding anybody, even if they are short term right we'll pass you on to somebody else because the chances of the training and employment are not, you are not at that point yet. They seem to want to help everybody... A lot of services is like sorry no that's not for us, sorry that's not for us and I never got that from [EC]. He was a Godsend."*

Even if a veteran was not deemed fit for a referral to The Poppy Factory by a support service, The Poppy Factory's ECs were happy to provide support for the veteran however they could.

*S04: "I used to refer quite a lot that were appropriate, but even the ones that were not appropriate for the criteria I could still go to [EC] for help and advice about them as well."*

*S06: "[The EC] .... is looking still now towards whether there is any supported living for veterans or sheltered [accommodation] that sort of thing so he has honestly been a key part in this whole process."*

The deviation from IPS fidelity was justified by the idea that veterans have specific, complex needs that some principles of IPS can hinder. Two examples of this are included below.

A more relaxed timeline to employment in order to better support the treatment of veteran-specific trauma.

*S05: "In addition to the mental health challenges that somebody may have, [veteran] trauma is often related to different factors... it is a trauma that is often encountered in a completely different environment being within a military context."*

Breaks in the employment focus to facilitate the treatment of more immediate concerns such as medication changes.

*S05: "We have some cooling-off periods, so we offer treatment on hold... not to say that IPS doesn't do that... but we are talking pre-employment now."*

Overall, The Poppy Factory is able to provide detailed justifications for the unique approach it has taken, and this flexibility has been positively received by stakeholders as a way to increase the quality of care The Poppy Factory is able to provide.

*S05: "I think The Poppy Factory is unique in its delivery of IPS. Firstly, whilst we support the principles of IPS, not delivering to fidelity allows us the flexibility... we try to ensure that it is structured to the benchmarks of IPS while also making sure that our learned experience of supporting veterans tailors the elements of IPS to meet those veterans' needs."*

### **Veteran and employment focus destigmatises care**

Stakeholders commented on the fact that The Poppy Factory's unique niche as focussing on veterans, employment, and care, allowed them to break down some of the barriers that would prevent a veteran from engaging in more generic services. Services that are predominantly care focussed can put off some veterans for a variety of reasons. If they are required to seek care by the government, generic care services can seem like a punishment that veterans do not want to engage with.

*S01: "[in the mind of the veteran the EC] is a benign force for good and I am a dark force of coercion."*

Other veterans might dislike generic care services they feel are infantilising, and don't take their military service into account. In contrast, The Poppy Factory offers a service that understands their background, experience and nature of their condition, and therefore feels more trusted.

*S01: "Lots of people we work with don't necessarily wholly accept the totality of their needs or their needs as we perceive it, and yeah, [The Poppy Factory service] is more of a friendly face of help and support that isn't coming from a sort of paternalistic medicalised model... I think for some people it's a lot easier to, and the fact it's linked, it feels like it's linked to an important part potentially of their life, you know their Army background and things like that."*

*S04: "Some of the feedback I've heard from clinicians who've said veterans often struggle to engage with some of the NHS mental health services because they don't necessarily feel that the clinicians fully understand the nature of their conditions and their experiences, so I think having a veteran specialised support is really valuable for them."*

### **Barriers for involvement**

#### **Covid**

All the stakeholders interviewed had started engaging with The Poppy Factory during the Covid pandemic, so they could not offer their experiences as to how the service had

changed during this time. Covid also impacted their ability to judge the Poppy Factory's performance in more detail.

*Interviewer: "Do you think there are any other facilitators that might impact the effectiveness of The Poppy Factory?"*

*S01: "Difficult to say really because it's a bit pandemicky, things are a bit in flux aren't they?"*

Covid did have an effect on the activities the veterans could attend, which prevented further involvement with The Poppy Factory, as noted by a veteran's family member who was interviewed.

*F01: "So because he had lost that contact, could not go to the breakfast club, it did have an effect on his mental health because of he sort of went back into his shell again, because again, he was back on his own... I think it was just the lack of being able to meet up with people was the biggest impact."*

Due to the effects of Covid on the NHS, referrals to The Poppy Factory were greatly reduced. This also prevented the close pairing of mental health and employment services that The Poppy Factory had initially sought to achieve.

*S02: "Due to the impact of Covid, the referrals were not forthcoming, unfortunately, and we weren't able to be physically present within the [NHS Centre] because there were lots of restrictions around that due to Covid, so kind of having that physical presence to make those strong connections and relationships wasn't there as well."*

*S03: "I think that the main thing was, [EC] was not able to be physically present, you know visible, so he is not visible at the [NHS Centre], which will affect and has affected referral numbers. As lockdown has eased, had initially eased, then you know [EC] was allowed to get back in and he kept the relationships going, you know re-engaged in the referrals picked up."*

## **Identifying veterans**

The Poppy Factory may have been affected by the quality of recording the status of veterans across different support services. This improved as The Poppy Factory was able to spread the word about their service but can still impact The Poppy Factory in two ways: being able to gain referrals, and their ability to understand how many veterans remain in need of support in the Wirral.

*S02: "I've mentioned challenges with identification of veterans, I think obviously it's not consistently being recorded in a way that people can actually report on... obviously veterans aren't being identified, that's an issue in terms of getting referrals in and really understanding their potential as well is challenging."*

*S03: "There are no barriers for clients engaging with the service, veterans could slip through the net by not being informed about us...the biggest barrier would be the awareness, the awareness to refer in and that."*

## Building relationships with The Poppy Factory

While relationships between other services and The Poppy Factory are increasing, for many support workers they were surprised to find out about The Poppy Factory's existence.

*S04: "It wasn't that long ago I learned because a colleague who had come from the Community Mental Health Team informed me of it but I was not aware that they existed prior to that, I didn't know that they were in the building, I didn't know that that was a resource. There was no real advertising about it and considering I worked in the team that was the single point of access for all mental health resources on the Wirral it was quite disappointing that we weren't aware of this resource."*

Suggestions for increasing awareness and building relationships with other services included using social media more

*S04: "A lot of services including, you know, our NHS services we are using Twitter, we are using Instagram, you know, putting social media posts out about this help and support. I have never seen one social media sort of advertisement about The Poppy Factory, ever."*

The Poppy Factory needs to do more than just make itself known; they also have to convince the other organisations that they are essential to veteran care.

*S01: "Sometimes [support services] can get quite processy and see things like The Poppy Factory as more of a kind of luxury or whatever, not an essential part."*

*S03: "Not just the NHS but any other supporting organisation making sure they have the confidence and the trust to refer in to us and that will only be achieved in the long run."*

Part of this is due to the fact that The Poppy Factory's veteran-focus means that only a small percentage of an NHS service's clientele will be of relevance; this impedes their ability to meaningfully connect with any singular NHS service, as they need to spread their attention across a large number of NHS services to find suitable clients.

*S02: "When you have quite small cohort and you're not getting a large number of them from just one service, they're accessing lots of different services, that makes it quite hard to actually build up a good level of awareness and build those relationships and I think that's a particular challenge building those relationships and maintaining them."*

However, The Poppy Factory has been tackling this barrier since the easing of Covid lockdown restrictions, and significant improvements are being made to build meaningful connections with relevant stakeholders. An example could be the multi-disciplinary task and finish group instigated by the EC to ensure support was coordinated between all agencies for complex cases. These included NHS practitioners, Social Services professionals, the Probation Services, homeless hostel staff and representatives from other charities who were providing support to specific individuals.

It was acknowledged by stakeholders that things have been steadily improving for The Poppy Factory's ability to make themselves known now that the lockdowns and Covid restrictions have ended. Overwhelmingly, The Poppy Factory is viewed as being exceptionally easy to contact now that they are better known.

*S01: "If anybody in our team took a straw poll and you said what services are available for veterans, people would instantly be talking about The Poppy Factory."*

*S04: "So [EC] has got the resources and the knowledge of what is out there because I didn't know Bloom Housing existed and although [EC]'s role is meant to be predominantly supporting ex-military who need training and employment, he helps the practitioners, Mental Health Practitioners, with any need of any veteran if we ring him."*

*S06: "I think they are quite known, I mean I've only been working in the [NHS service] for the last six months.... you know, The Poppy Factory has always been talked about."*

### **Stakeholder perspectives on client outcomes**

This section explores the opinions of stakeholders on the outcomes of their collaboration with The Poppy Factory for their clients, and on the way the support provided is tailored to the specific needs of the individual veterans.

#### **Collaborative Working**

The perspectives of the stakeholders allow for the exploration of the effects that collaborative working between services affected outcomes for the veterans. While the stakeholders from other services usually worked with The Poppy Factory on a limited scope, i.e., only involved with one or two veterans who are also engaging with The Poppy Factory at the same time, they can provide some more technical insight into the benefits of collaboration on veteran outcomes. This is because the veterans' experiences tend not to draw a distinction between different organisations; this can lead to misdrawn conclusions as to what leads to certain outcomes, and what lessons can be learned for The Poppy Factory.

One noted benefit of collaboration is that it allows for both services to gain access to more information about the veteran, assuming that the veteran has agreed to the information being shared.

*S06: "We will even get in touch weekly just to check if [EC] has spoken to the gentleman in question or I have, and we just update each other really. It has been a really good collaborative piece of work to be honest."*

This can be especially useful if the veteran is more comfortable talking to one service than to another, as it allows information to be shared without the veteran having to repeat themselves or talk in detail to a service, they may be less willing to speak openly to.

*S01: "The [EC] has been usefully updating me when the lines of communication with myself directly with the person haven't been so great. It's been useful... a barometer of where they're at and a mechanism through which I'm able to be kept updated on how they're doing with a key aspect of their life and their goals as well as about their recovery."*

Secondly, collaboration allows The Poppy Factory to be more flexible in the support they can offer, as they can seek assistance from other services when required.

*S04: "Now [EC] along with another local company, really, really supported this guy through a crisis... they assisted him with daily/weekly support... getting him settled, therapy and crisis support, I think they saved his life by inputting all that... the support that The Poppy Factory gave this guy, without it I don't know who would have offered that intense support other than a crisis team."*

*S04: "When I heard that feedback, I thought oh my god... he has done that with another resource on the Wirral and they have managed the situation so well with their support and if that wasn't there it probably would have been a really different situation for the guy in question."*

This flexibility complements The Poppy Factory's holistic approach to employment support. The holistic approach was explained in terms of "cogs", with each cog representing a different element of support that can be provided.

*S05: "So, the client has the option to "right okay you are going through some treatment at the moment", or, "you have got a medication change"... we just need to pause the employment cog and we need re-engage all the other cogs because they are a priority at the moment."*

If it is decided that the veteran would benefit from the "employment cog" being put on hold, inter-service collaboration allows for a wider range of options as to the next steps for that veteran.

*S05: "It might be better that The Poppy Factory says 'you know what, the criteria review being alcohol dependence is far greater than the factors relating to veterans, so you'd be better off working with this case worker.'"*

This allows for the veteran to be more rapidly assigned with whichever service would best suit their needs, which facilitates them receiving the best care possible. This operates in tandem with the opportunities that collaboration presents to break down barriers to communication between services, allowing for more efficient communication. An example comes from a streamlining of referral forms which had been numerous.

*S05: "[A clinician said] 'We have got 17 referral forms... it has been a nightmare.' I said, 'it would be easier to have one form and just tick a box as to who you are referring to'... we are now 11 months in, and that soft suggestion has been taken forward by the teams so now they have one form... so I have been involved in undoing some of the bureaucracy."*

The breaking down of these internal barriers to communication, and the information exchange it promotes, has had tangible benefits for veterans needing support from multiple different services simultaneously.

*S06: "It would have come to a crisis if no one knew about it [the client's state], and if [EC] tried to deal with everything himself... I don't think it would have been able to be resolved, all of these things without collaboratively working together."*

*S05: "We have got really good working relationships with the social prescribing teams, so a lot of it is about collaboration, making sure that we are linking in and utilising skills, knowledge and experience to the best it possibly can be to give the client the best possible chance."*

As time passes and The Poppy Factory becomes more well-known among the local services, a mutual trust can begin to foster which encourages more rapid cooperation, potentially leading to much more efficient and effective care.

*S06: "Obviously I've got a basic awareness of what [The Poppy Factory] can support with, but it would have come through a lot further down the line so going forward now [The Poppy Factory] would be one of my first initial contacts really because it has been invaluable to be honest."*

Collaboration between The Poppy Factory and training providers can also be beneficial for veterans.

*S05: "The key part of this is about building effective relationships with other service providers... I have got a good working relationship with [other support services], and with that, they often share opportunities in relation to training. You then start to build relationships up with the training providers themselves who then share opportunities with you... so there is a whole spectrum of partnerships that developed in relation to overcoming those barriers."*

## **Employment and Volunteering**

In the examples stakeholders provided about the veterans they had supported alongside The Poppy Factory, there was an underrepresentation of veterans that had achieved competitive employment. This is to be expected, the veterans that are receiving ongoing support from the NHS and other relevant services are more likely to require a greater amount of support before employment is a viable option, relative to the overall clientele of

The Poppy Factory. However, other outcomes for veterans included volunteering opportunities, a significant increase in quality of life, and the avoidance of more serious crises.

*S04: "[The Poppy Factory's] record of getting them into employment is brilliant, I think it's more holistic... they try and help get someone in the right direction... they are quite supportive in getting them to where they need to go."*

*S01: "Employment was a key thing, very important both financially and in terms of her own self-worth and self-esteem. So that employment part is important."*

The above quotes encapsulate the feeling among service providers that employment was recognised as an important outcome, but other outcomes such as mental wellbeing and quality of life improvements were of equal importance.

*S05: "[The Poppy Factory] has a really high retention rate in relation to employment. Success isn't always about volumes of referrals to and conversion to employment because for any number of reasons clients may go on hold."*

Volunteering opportunities, while not being able to improve the veterans' financial outcomes, helped some of the veterans in many of the same ways that employment would have, and was a more obtainable goal for some veterans that were not yet ready for it.

*S01: "So the fact that [The Poppy Factory] were able to strike [a difficult balance with a 'prickly' veteran], get her to work on some of [her mental barriers to employment], to do some practical work about preparing for, 'how would you fill out an application form?'... really important practical useful stuff that she could work on which she did and then secured some voluntary work, so yeah very positive."*

*F01: "He was able to do some voluntary work... it got him out of the house because I work full-time so I was out of the house all day... It got him engaged with other people... it just helped build his confidence again."*

Even in cases where the chances of employment opportunities for a referred veteran was slim, the stakeholders were still overwhelmingly positive about the outcomes The Poppy Factory was able to achieve for them.

*S06: "[EC] identified that it is not actually possible for this gentleman to go to work... so the emphasis has been put on 'so how are we going to improve his life and how are we going to sort out his issues'... all the steps that need to be taken before he can even look into part time work... his quality of life is just unbelievably better and I think the collaboration between me and [EC] has just been massive for this person."*

For the veteran discussed in the stakeholder interview that was able to find employment, the outcomes described by the veteran's wife was much the same as what has been discussed in the veteran's section of this report.

*F01: "He seems to have got his spark back. He is receiving a wage so there is money coming in. He is not having to ask me for money. He can go and do his own thing. He has got a new group of friends that he has got through work. He is more outgoing, so yes it has had a major impact on him."*



## 4.0 Summary

This report aimed to assess the impact of The Poppy Factory's adapted IPS pilot service on the employment and health outcomes of veterans and to explore some of the barriers and facilitators to the effectiveness of the service.

The findings described in this report highlight that The Poppy Factory pilot service was effective in achieving positive employment outcomes and improvements to wellbeing and quality of life. However, due to the small sample size this evaluation is based on descriptive statistics only, rather than any inferential statistical tests.

### Employment Outcomes

The employment data shows that 48.8% of veterans using the service were in employment at 12-months, and 54.4% had achieved any job start within a year. Those referred from healthcare sources achieved a higher rate of job starts with the first three months of being registered with the service (52%) than those from other referral sources (30.2%). The 12-month employment rate of 54.4% is comparable to other IPS services which average an employment rate of 55% in international trials (Bond et al, 2020) and 46% in UK-based trials (Burns et al, 2015). In contrast, Work Programme services report 32% of claimants achieving job outcome over a 2-year period (Department of Work and Pensions, 2020). The average number of days to a job start for The Poppy Factory veterans was 119 days, which also compares favourably to IPS services which range from 72 to 462 days (Frederick and WanderWelle, 2019). Of all the job starts within the evaluation period, 75.9% were sustained for more than 3 months. This is higher than the benchmark figures provided by IPS Grow (2019) of 60% sustaining employment beyond 13 weeks. Furthermore, as 87% of veterans had not been previously supported by The Poppy Factory, this shows that the service was reaching people that were not normally engaged through other referral sources and successfully supporting them into sustainable employment. Overall the employment outcomes achieved by the pilot service for veterans with physical health conditions as well as those with mild and moderate mental health conditions were very positive. The adaptations made to the standard IPS model in order to tailor this service to the veteran community were effective and the outcomes achieved comparable to, and often better than, standard IPS.

### Health Outcomes

Health-related outcomes showed improvement from when veterans registered with The Poppy Factory service to their follow-ups 6 to 12 months later. However, due to the small sample size, the changes in the health-related outcomes could not be tested for statistical

significance and need to be interpreted with caution. Health outcomes are influenced by multiple factors and without a larger sample size the data generated by the evaluation was unable to have any inferential statistics applied to allow some causal interpretation of the data. The broader context of this evaluation taking place during the Covid pandemic is also important to consider. The health-related outcomes measured during this evaluation were likely to also be influenced by the changes that occurred during the pandemic such as: restricted access to NHS services and associated delays in accessing treatment; changes in personal circumstances such as caring responsibilities and isolation; the impact that the pandemic had on mental and physical health.

Nevertheless, descriptive analysis showed that mental wellbeing improved to just below the UK national norm of 23.61 (Warwick Medical School, 2022). Furthermore, these improved to higher than a similar sample accessing services in Singapore for depression and anxiety (mean scores of 19.6 and 20.9 respectively; Vaingankar et al, 2017). Although Quality of life showed a 2.7% increase from 57.57 to 60.27 out of 100, they improved more substantially for veterans recruited via healthcare services (7.5%). Furthermore, the use of various health services (outpatient clinics, GP appointments, mental health nurse appointments and physiotherapy) by veterans decreased during the use of The Poppy Factory service. Although based on limited data, associating these reductions in health service use with unit costs suggests a potential saving of £324.32 per veteran in our sample.

### **Barriers and Facilitators**

Some of the most interesting and insightful findings come from the qualitative interviews. The veterans interviewed as part of this evaluation first engaged with The Poppy Factory for a wide variety of different reasons from seeking casual employment close to retirement or struggling with severe mental health issues. However, the responses were, on the whole, overwhelmingly similar and positive. Regardless of the veteran's background, the main thing on almost every interviewee's mind was the extraordinary kindness, patience, positivity, knowledge and professionalism shown by the ECs. The practical aspects of the service provided to the veterans through employment advice and training were undoubtedly helpful, but it is not what stuck in the veterans' minds long after they finished. The outpouring of positivity about the ECs was such that on occasion simply asking if there were any barriers or room for improvement was met with a stern rebuttal. Nevertheless, the findings from the qualitative study identify some of the key features of the service that contribute to its effectiveness.

The importance of a veteran-specific employment support service was highlighted as a key factor in facilitating the effectiveness of the service through developing trust and openness through shared understanding and language. The service gave veterans a sense of psychological safety which allowed them to open up and engage more effectively with this service than any others they had experienced. This sense of safe space was based on critical mechanisms, shared understanding of the military experience, continuity and accessibility and a caring yet honest atmosphere which combined to enable the development of the

trust required for veterans to fully engage with the service. The importance of the trusting relationship between EC and veteran was highlighted when there was a disruption to the continuity of the service for veterans and a change in EC due to the Covid pandemic. Stakeholder interviews also emphasised the importance of the veteran-specific service, which was more holistic, addressing the multiple needs of veterans and much better at engaging with veterans than services that were predominantly employment-focused (DWP services and programmes) or care-focused (NHS services).

Once engaged in the service, veterans were able to use the practical support provided by the ECs to achieve employment and health-related outcomes. These aspects of practical support included the knowledge of the local employment context, a person-centred approach with less urgency for employment outcomes within a specific time frame, and the professional knowledge and skills of the ECs applied in a timely manner. One of the adaptations this service made from the standard IPS model was to take a more flexible and less time-focussed approach to achieving competitive employment. Veterans felt under less pressure to rush into any employment and therefore felt more supported because of this. This longer-term approach to achieving employment seemed to contribute to more practitioners referring patients into the service, knowing that the service would build up to employment but only when it was appropriate. Stakeholders praised the person-centred approach which promoted engagement with veterans who might not be 'ready to work', but benefitted from the service in the longer-term way without the pressure of short-term employment outcomes expected by other services. This feature of the service was thought to be particularly important to address veterans' specific needs and reflected a more holistic approach within the service. It also represents a significant adaptation from standard IPS as it moves the service away from two of the eight principles of IPS: the explicit aim of competitive paid employment as early as possible; rapid job search starting within 4 weeks with or without vocational training.

Effective partnership working between services was another facilitator to the effectiveness of the service. This was enhanced by co-location and embedding of the service within the NHS, which is one of the eight principles of the standard IPS model. The importance of this feature was highlighted in stakeholder and veteran interviews. The impacts of the Covid pandemic, when the service was unable to be co-located within NHS premises, also brought the benefits of co-location into sharp focus as the nature of the referrals and the level of multi-agency support provided was severely affected at that time. However, the nature of effective partnerships for this veteran-specific service went beyond that between the service and the NHS to include a myriad of other partners often involved in the complex needs of veterans.

The nature of the support provided by the service enabled veterans to achieve improvements in a wide range of outcomes, not just employment. The most frequently cited outcomes by veterans were that their mental wellbeing improved through better social connections, and they had an increased self-identify through work, more meaningful activity, better financial stability, and stronger belief in themselves. This is consistent with

the extensive evidence on the wider benefits of employment for mental health (e.g. Dich, et al., 2019; van der Noordt et al, 2014).

## 4.1 Recommendations

The evaluation findings on the employment and health outcomes from The Poppy Factory pilot service for veterans, and the key features of the service that enable this, lead to a set of recommendations for veteran services and for commissioners of employment and health services.

### For Services for Veterans

- An employment service specifically designed for veterans and adapted from the standard IPS model can be effective in delivering excellent employment outcomes and positive changes in health and wellbeing for veterans with mental and physical health challenges.
- Adapting the IPS model to provide the employment service to veterans with mild and moderate mental health *and* those with physical health problems is effective. The specialist nature of this service means it worked for veterans regardless of the nature and severity of their health condition.
- Embedding a veteran-specific service within the NHS is highly effective in building the critical partnerships for success. This allows trust to be built between the service and mental health practitioners, leading to better communication and joined-up working to the benefit of veterans. Senior level buy-in from the NHS is essential for implementation.
- An employment service for veterans should include the following features: EC knowledge of the area within which the service is based; flexibility over the readiness of the veteran for work and less time pressure on first employment opportunities for those further from employment; an understanding of the military experience and culture; partnership working with other agencies and support services working with veterans.
- The service should accept referrals from a wide range of sources including primary and secondary care to ensure employment support can be used as an early intervention before health conditions escalate, or can be used as part of a veteran's recovery plan from more serious conditions.

## For NHS Commissioners

- A veteran-specific employment service needs to be providing support for veterans with a full range of mental or physical health conditions referred from primary and secondary care to be able to reach sufficient numbers to ensure service delivery remains cost-effective and person-centred. It is not likely to be cost-effective to have a specialist IPS service to serve veterans with serious mental illnesses seeking employment support due to the small cohort within one NHS trust. Being open to all health conditions, specifically mental health in the primary care setting where patients are referred in and receive early interventions, may also act as a prevention to the decline of their mental wellbeing, and avoid escalation which may result in them needing access to secondary care. This is because the employment support aims to also address barriers, which may be central to the cause of decline in a person's mental wellbeing.
- The service should also seek to support veterans with longer term aspirations of employment: IPS services typically seek to get patients in front of employers within the first 30 days of support. This is a barrier to entry for those patients who may be further away from work. By offering a service to veterans with longer term aspirations of employment, and offering support to access training, volunteering or education as first steps back to work, reduces this access barrier and provides more options for clinicians to consider when planning a patient's recovery.
- Delivering employment support in a smaller area (e.g. covering one or two trust areas, rather than a region) allows the employment consultant to practically deliver more personalised support for veterans. This builds trust with the veteran and means the employment consultant has more time to build better quality relationships with local services and employers.
- The service should be open to referrals from a range of sources, not just from NHS: Due to issues with identification of veterans within healthcare, coupled with some NHS services not being setup to make referrals for social needs, the employment service should also be able to accept referrals from other locations, such as job centres. As long as the eligibility criteria around health conditions is robust, then it shouldn't matter where a referral comes from.
- The service should be embedded within a primary or secondary care mental health team such as an IAPT service or adult community mental health team, with the consultant given honorary NHS status: Whilst only a few referrals may come from the embedded team, by giving the service a 'home' helps with communications, establishing trust and forming ongoing relationships across other services. It has proved very helpful on this pilot and is one of the IPS principles that was a key facilitator to effectiveness.
- Identifying veterans on patient records needs to be accelerated: Specialist veteran services such as The Poppy Factory are hindered by low numbers of veterans being

coded on patient medical records. This makes it harder to understand levels of need and resources required to meet that need, as well as inhibiting referrals into these services.

- The standard IPS model was not considered appropriate to meet the specific needs of veterans. Adapting the IPS model to allow for a more person-centred, holistic and flexible approach to employment would be recommended to provide the tailored support that veterans need.

#### **For Department for Work and Pensions**

- Identification of veterans should be a priority for job centres: The research has provided further evidence of the importance of specialist services for veterans, and many are missing out on support which could prove valuable in getting them into work, because their veteran status hasn't been recorded on records.
- Targeted promotion of available support to veterans will help services with fewer resources for outreach: To help raise awareness of the support available from veteran-specific services job centres should seek to target communications to registered veterans promoting available support and inviting them into job centres for drop-ins with relevant services.

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