

'You're in Your Own Time Now': Understanding Current Experiences of Transition to Civilian Life in Scotland

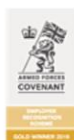
Briefing Report



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FiMT
forces in mind trust
SUCCESSFUL SUSTAINABLE TRANSITION



Key Findings

Key components of transition



Time and timing: Time to prepare for transition, and the timing of resources and measures accessible to the individual, impacted on their ability to engage with the process. Two umbrella themes emerged from the data in this regard. Transition can be a short, sharp process and not necessarily instigated just when an individual ‘hits the exit button’.

Transition has a complex nature which can be defined differently and occur in various ways, at various times and to various people. Time is the resource most valued by those undergoing any type of transition.



Values and behaviours: Many veterans report an inclination towards the type of employment that most strongly reflects the values and behaviours instilled in them during service, such as the emergency services or other uniformed organisations, particularly the uniformed ones. Conversely, many veterans say they do not ‘think or speak civilian’ and acknowledged that this

could be a barrier to understanding the values and behaviours held by their non-military colleagues and neighbours.



Comfort zones: Moving out of any comfort zone can profoundly impact an individual’s ability to adapt to their changed circumstances. This is particularly true for the emotional aspect of transition and can lead to feelings of loss, difficulty connecting with sense of identity, and reluctance to show vulnerability/need to others. Formal and informal networks can

help mitigate this but can also lead to misinformation or incorrectly applied support.



Engagement: In Scotland, effective partnerships between resource providers means that process are now smoother and more effective. Wealth of information can lead to overwhelm both pre- and post-transition, however, and strong local authority engagement in some areas is countered by lack of engagement from younger veterans with local Legions.

Constructive discussion with a transition officer combined with a supportive CO can maximise engagement with the right resources at the right time.



Expectations and decision-making: Many veterans reported that they could not have understood what civilian life would be like until they experienced it, so it was difficult to prepare adequately, whilst identifying that having a ‘veteran buddy’ or a work placement opportunity would have aided this process. Having access before transition to another veteran who had

experienced transition was considered highly valuable.

Impact

- Funding secured to support Wilfrid Owen scholarship for partners of serving personnel , who would not normally be entitled to degree funding.
- Further studies on Armed Forces children in Scottish schools; first comprehensive records of numbers, education, and training needs
- Findings from employers' survey used by ScotGov to promote Employ Veterans Campaign
- SDS working to support recognition for partners of Commonwealth personnel.
- Funding secured to support Scotland wide Research Network/Hub.
- Dissemination to stakeholders e.g., CTP, NHS Scotland, Military Education Committee, Association of Directors for Education Scotland, to inform future policy and practice.
- Working relationships established with key welfare centres to develop education and employment opportunities.
- Recognition of different needs of island population of veterans.
- Five doctoral students , four of whom are veterans

Recommendations

Policy

- Capture mobility factors of serving personnel: Armed Forces and local planning groups should actively collaborate to clarify long-term needs and meet demands.
- National Improvement Framework (published annually by ScotGov) should recognise impact of interrupted learning in education for children of AF personnel and provide additional support where appropriate.
- More in-depth work to understand experiences of veterans in custody, and provision of more targeted rehabilitation opportunities.
- Councils should include a detailed information section on their websites, for personnel transitioning between England and Scotland¹
- Further explore the imbalance between serving personnel and veterans with respect to VAT and Income Tax payments, and between Forces with respect to implementation of reduction in pay at the beginning of the transition process.
- Develop bridging courses (which could be delivered in Welfare Centres) to incorporate prior qualifications in teaching and childcare, to support partners with children; qualified partners could then apply skills to provide 'behind the wire' childcare support.
- Funding to promote opportunities for education and training which are recognised (or could be completed) across all UK nations, e.g., nursing/midwifery/teaching.

Practice

- A consistent, more individualised approach to the transition process, to optimise engagement with resources where most relevant/valuable.

¹ The framework on the Moray Council website is an example of good practice which could be replicated.

- Consideration and support of emotional identity of service personnel as individuals, and a more well-defined early transition pathway, to maximise engagement with pre-transition services and reduce negative outcomes.
- Appointment of transition 'mentors' who have already experienced the process, to be available to personnel who are in the early stages of considering transition.
- An informal buddy system facilitated by Welfare Centre Officers with support of veterans, to signpost to appropriate organisations and reduce risk of misinformation.
- Promote positive interventions that can empower AF partners to maximise support of smooth transition for personnel, e.g., RAF Hive system.
- An MOD directive to promote the importance of record-keeping for families of personnel (a 'folder for families') to reflect that used by personnel; this could include details to help support mobility and arrival/departure when relocating.
- Early mapping of skills to increase confidence and engagement pre-transition; followed up with Keep in Touch (KIT) days post-transition.
- Better communication with medically discharged personnel preparing to transition, including additional mental health awareness training for the Chain of Command, to help reduce the stigma associated with mental health challenges.

Education

- Protected time for personnel to use learning credits, to facilitate career development and progression pre- and post-transition.
- Unused learning credits available for partners to facilitate opportunities for study/upskilling for employment. Strong consideration should be given for working more closely with the FE: HE network ADVANCE in Scotland would allow for a pilot of hybrid educational opportunities to be delivered across Welfare Centres for Serving personnel and partners.
- A pilot study to promote stronger integration between Armed Forces and HE/FE providers.
- Recognition of prior learning for commonwealth partners to maximise opportunity for employment or further education.
- Consideration of how the HE/FE funding system in Scotland could support an education transition pathway for personnel, veterans, and their families.

Research

- To be consistent with the Morgan review (Scottish Government, 2020), action plan research should take account of the educational experiences of Armed Forces children and their parents or carers.
- Identify increased, relevant support for Early Service Leavers, particularly with respect to undisclosed pre-service issues which may lead to difficulties post-discharge.
- Develop consistent assessment tools to capture comprehensive data on veteran employment across the UK.
- Explore employment opportunities to develop/support education and employment activities in Welfare Centres, for partners of personnel, in partnership with local HE/FE providers and other relevant groups.
- Build on current research around the use of military dolls/bears to support children with deployed parents.

- Investigate the impact of recent developments in diversity and inclusion policies on the transition process into the Armed Forces
- Explore the perceptions and definitions of the term ‘veteran’ from the perspective of younger personnel, with respect to regulars, reservists, veterans, and the wider community.
- Review current provision of RBLS to ensure relevance and value to younger veterans.
- Investigate aspects of remote and rural life (particularly islands) to better understand the elements which promote the values and behaviours prized by veterans who move there.

Background

Introduction

The challenge to the UK in terms of transition in and out of the Armed Forces is a complex one. While some may remain in service until the age of 60, it is recognised that the majority will retire or move into civilian life beforehand. For the country, and the Ministry of Defence (MOD), managing this changeover is important as it embodies a resource that can continue to give value, or a burden that can incur both personal and societal costs.

The Armed Forces pride themselves on being composed of highly competent, professional, confident individuals who are resourceful, adaptable, problem solvers. A question therefore arises as to why transition should be regarded as such a significant issue of concern for this latter group in comparison to their civilian counterparts. This question is even more acute for Scotland where the national self-image is of a welcoming liberally-minded country, proud of its military, and where in theory, transition should be ‘easier’. The Scottish Government has stated its aim to “make Scotland the most attractive destination for service leavers and their families, offering high living standards, great job prospects and a society that respects and values their contribution” (Scottish Veterans Commissioner, 2020).

The veteran’s population in Scotland is estimated to be in the region of 240,000, with an estimated additional 1,800 ex-service personnel and their families planning to settle in Scotland annually. While the Scottish Government appears to extend a welcome to veterans and embraces the Covenant on all levels of its structure, there are features of life in Scotland which may suggest otherwise. This paradox between policy and practice is clearly evident in several areas explored in this study.

Leaving an environment where structure, excellence, discipline, and service, are core to the ‘workplace’, and moving to one where it may be difficult to identify a ‘civilian equivalent’ must be bewildering to a service leaver, particularly those with a long service history. Personal choices must often be made with minimal guidance, and even the work or wider values of the community of which they are now part may require sensitive exploration. These aspects are addressed in this study through a deeper comparison of life in the Armed Forces with that in the wider community, when viewed through the lens of the service leaver and their partner.

The report provides a detailed account of the Armed Forces milieu in Scotland set against developments and future plans for the expansion of several bases across the country. This set the scene for the study and allowed for an improved understanding of the implications and the outcomes of the study and how findings may be applied.

Aim

The aim of our project was to provide an evidence base that would influence and underpin policy making and service delivery to enable Veterans and their families to lead successful civilian lives.

Method

This study adopted a mixed methods approach drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. This approach maximised the potential to understand experiences of resettlement/transition from military to civilian life in Scotland. Throughout the study we met with an Advisory Board made up of key stakeholders.

Key components of transition

Time and timing

Hitherto, we understood that transition generally occurred over a two-year period once an individual had served a full contract with the military, but further investigation revealed a much more complex picture, particularly for those transitioning before the end of their contract. As soon as an individual formally indicates their intention to terminate, two stages should then follow; the first line assessment interview, and the mandatory resettlement advisory brief, which should occur in the last few months of service. Both must be completed before the service leaver can be referred to CTP. Our data identified that the timing of many of these interventions varies widely; in the Royal Navy, for example, transitioning personnel may be on a submarine until two weeks prior to exiting the service.

Having protected time to engage with transition resources was identified as key to transition preparation and success. Positive experiences were often attributed to the supportiveness of a CO in enabling leavers to prepare, for example giving time off to look at accommodation, attend workshops, or use learning credits. Respondents recognised, however, that even a supportive CO might not be in a position to release them for these activities, due to the operational needs of the service.

With respect to unplanned transition (e.g., medical, or disciplinary), timing is often very different, and much shorter; consequently, many of these activities could be truncated, and some personnel might not be in a position to make the best use of the resources available to them at that point in time.

When relocating during service, differences in education systems between nations mean that parents have to spend more time supporting their children to adapt. In Scotland, it is particularly challenging for parents of children with additional support needs, as even more time is required to provide a detailed picture of the identification of need, learning experience, interventions, partnership involvement, outcomes, and future planning. This can be exacerbated by frequent and repeated moves across educational jurisdictions. Records compiled by schools often get lost, are incomplete, or are of variable standard. Advance awareness of the need for an organised history of family home, along with health, education, and wellbeing contacts and actions, would serve and support an Armed Forces family.

Values and behaviours

One of the many positive outcomes of military life is arguably the set of values and behaviours which are instilled in Service Personnel, enabling them to make a meaningful contribution in their next role. Indeed, many veterans report an inclination towards the type of employment that most strongly reflects these values and behaviours, such as the emergency services or with other service organisations, particularly the uniformed ones.

This can be something of a double-edged sword, however, particularly in situations where those values are not perceived to be shared by others. For example, someone who is not familiar with non-military ways of interacting with colleagues may struggle to communicate with those who they perceive do not hold the same standards or ways of working. It may also be reflected in the community into which the veteran settles, particularly if they are returning to somewhere they have not lived for a long time.

Many veterans referred to their inability to 'think or speak civilian' and acknowledged that this could be a barrier to understanding the values and behaviours held by their non-military colleagues and neighbours. Consequently, transition interventions that were considered to be the most successful were those that helped to translate military terms, thinking, skills, and attributes into a civilian equivalent. Where personnel could see this clearly, they were more likely to engage with a resource. Interventions that did not work well either tended to lack this mechanism, or there was no opportunity to engage with them. We have observed a growing shift in the way in which service leavers are moving through the transition process, and their ability and willingness to recognise in themselves the skills and attributes they possess (or need) for use in civilian life.

Comfort zones

It is arguable that anyone undergoing transition is by definition moving out of a comfort zone. The consequences of this can profoundly impact the ability of the individual to adapt to their change in circumstances.

Where this presented a particular challenge for service leavers was in the emotional aspect of transition, and could lead to a sense of loss, a shift in perception of identity, and an increased need for camaraderie. For many veterans, this led them to join formal or informal networks after transitioning, allowing them the company of others who understood their experience, and sharing values and behaviours that may be lacking in other areas of civilian life. It has been noted, however, that reliance on these informal networks, rather than engagement with more structured support, could risk leading to wrong information or incorrectly applied support, and it is important for this area to be addressed in the future.

This could be further complicated by a lack of willingness to self-identify as a veteran (although it is acknowledged that this could be for other reasons). Another widely reported issue in this regard related to a reluctance to show perceived vulnerability to military colleagues, even veterans. This was also borne out during the interview process, where many interviewees remarked that they would not have taken part had they not been speaking to a civilian. Many respondents said that they were aware that more formalised support existed but were unwilling or felt unable to take the initiative and reach out themselves, even though they would have welcomed contact from others.

As with other themes, comfort zones can also present a challenge during service, and for families as well as the personnel themselves. Some personnel reported feeling uncomfortable mingling with those of different ranks at networking events, and interestingly, the same is

true of their partners, many of whom reported feeling isolated at base social events shortly after relocating. This can lead to delays in settling and integration, hindering the effectiveness of the 'transition' process. Some of the welfare centres held briefing events for families, including support for commonwealth groups, who often felt disadvantaged due to cultural barriers. Moreover, the welfare centre was often perceived as a place for those who were struggling, and consequently they were reluctant to engage unless it was really necessary. This sense of pride and reluctance to ask for help was a common theme across interviews with active personnel, veterans, and families. It was recognised by most that there is no 'magic wand' to alleviate this discomfort, but increased awareness of these challenges may mean that it doesn't impact the effectiveness of the process quite so much going forward.

Engagement

In Scotland there is clearly an effective partnership between SDS, CTP and SCQF, and with the associated tools and resources available, these have the potential to benefit service leavers in Scotland in a way that is not matched elsewhere in the UK. The processes that CTP and the partnership are putting in place now are arguably more organised and smooth flowing, meaning service leavers do not need to go to different locations to get the information they need. Examples of good practice examples include the National Transition Officer for Armed Forces Children, Lothian Armed Forces Veterans Group (LAFVG), and the Scottish Veterans Wellbeing Alliance (SVWA). There was also evidence of strong local authority engagement with the veterans' community on the islands of Lewis, Harris, and Uist. However, there was also strong evidence of the lack of engagement by younger veterans with the local Legions.

In practice, this joined-up approach does not always lead to effective engagement with resources. Many veterans reported feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information available both pre- and post-transition and found it difficult to understand what was relevant. In many cases, this was alleviated by discussion with a transition officer (or equivalent) who could signpost the individual appropriately. It is clear that these issues have improved over the last few years, but it is important to recognise that even with the advent of new and improved processes, there are still some personnel going through the 'old' process who may risk slipping through the net in this regard. Many interviewees consequently identified the need for a more individualised approach to transition. This is not to say that there is an expectation of one-to-one support throughout, and indeed this would not be logistically possible.

Education is an area with much potential for improvement. Restrictions on the use of learning credits can be problematic, particularly when they are not available to partners in most cases, and partners may not be in a position to be able to use them. Most partners were interested in self-development through opportunities to study/upskill but recognised the difficulty of accommodating childcare needs. Moreover, there is the need to address the disadvantage faced by many personnel and their families living in AF accommodation in Scotland, who are ineligible for Higher Education funding.

It is clear that some personnel engage effectively with the process and resources available; it is equally clear that some are reluctant to accept the reality of transition and its consequences, which can result in a last-minute, rushed transition. Engagement with resources might also be hindered by issues such as legal status (e.g., veterans in custody). As with other themes, engagement with resources is generally far more effective when personnel can see a clear link from military to civilian equivalents.

Expectations and decision-making

A concept often observed during interviews was the ‘double transition’. Veterans would settle in one place and then relocate again a few years later. This might be in part due to the somewhat itinerant nature of service life, or to changes in circumstances; nevertheless, veterans often reported that they relocated because their expectations were rather different to the reality in which they found themselves. This might be related to the local community, or to employment. Some individuals moved away from mainland Scotland to the islands because they perceived the values of the island population were more in keeping with their own.

Some personnel reported feeling devalued as soon as they ‘hit the button’ to start transition, which could foster feelings of ‘neglect’ and add to the sense of loss. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the ongoing operational needs of the military to maintain service and did not expect to be ‘spoon-fed’ at any point but would welcome a less utilitarian approach to the different stages of transition. This would enable them more effective engagement with relevant resources, better use of limited time, and maximise the opportunity for successful transition.

We note that this form of ‘triage’ is already practised successfully in battlefield medicine; whilst approaches to treatment are consistent, the triage process itself is a tailored approach to application, depending on the situation. We understand that this already happens within the medical discharge process, and a similar approach to the transition process would be valuable in planned transition, where ‘triaging’ would happen prior to engagement with CTP. As with battlefield medicine, where experienced medics provide effective support, this could involve input from veterans who had already experienced the transition process.

Summary

Overall, it is evident that there is solid support for veterans in Scotland, starting with the Scottish Government, who along with the other UK Governments, launched the Strategy for Our Veterans in November 2018. The Strategy set out a vision and principles to support veterans and their families; the Scottish Government published their refreshed action plan this year². The very existence of a Cabinet post with “veterans” in its title is a positive indication of a national welcome to members of the Armed Forces community and is echoed through the formal structures in Government. The Armed Forces Covenant has been signed by all 32 Scottish local authorities, all NHS Health Boards, the majority of Scottish universities, and the Scottish Government itself. In addition, since 2014³ Scotland has had the specific post of a Scottish Veteran’s Commissioner whose office has produced a range of valuable reports related to key aspects of the Armed Forces Covenant and its implementation in Scotland.

This study has demonstrated several similarities with other studies⁴ that have previously been conducted in relation to transition experiences in England and Wales. While not unexpected,

² [strategy-veterans-taking-strategy-forward-scotland-refreshed-action-plan.pdf](#)

³ The third Scottish Veterans Commissioner was appointed in 2022.

⁴ Discussed in greater detail through the literature review in our Interim Report: <https://www.napier.ac.uk/-/media/youre-in-your-own-time-now--interim-report.ashx>

it was interesting to note that many of the concerns experienced by the Scottish group in the process of transition were in line with those in other parts of the UK.

Our study provides a more nuanced understanding of the transitional support needs for veterans, serving personnel and their partners, contextualised in Scotland. It highlights the demand for continued services and the need for these to be expanded where possible, to support the wider AF community including partners and children, in relation to educational opportunities, employment, wraparound childcare facilities, and recognition of qualifications both from commonwealth groups and across the UK nations.

There is significant potential for the development of Welfare Centres, drawing from positive examples such as the Hive, and the use of social media by the Wives' Committee at Lossiemouth. Where social media has been used, updated, and maintained it has proved to be extremely helpful. Moreover, a major difference in this study is the clear pattern of partnership working evident in those who support our Armed Forces in Scotland.

Findings from our study suggest the need for further development to enhance engagement with the education system. The current funding system in Scotland hinders the development of an educational transition pathway and creates disadvantage for partners and children who may wish to engage with higher education. Furthermore, differences in national qualifications create barriers in recognition for education or employment. There is perhaps a lack of awareness in some areas of Veterans Champions across local authorities in Scotland, although this information is available on the excellent website run by Veterans Scotland.

Finally, the service leaver thinking of settling in Scotland must acknowledge the fact that in leaving the Armed Forces, they are moving from a UK-wide organisation to a separate nation within the UK. This change will be most marked for families physically relocating from elsewhere in the UK. Scotland, particularly since devolution, has developed in ways that are superficially similar to the rest of the UK, but which are fundamentally different. The political landscape of Scotland is also unique. These many factors – and others – will impact the service leaver, and so should the support that is provided for them.