



Homelessness inquiry

Communities and Local Government Committee

Royal British Legion evidence submission

1.0 About us

- 1.1 The Royal British Legion was created as a unifying force for the military charity sector at the end of WWI, and still remains one of the UK's largest membership organisations. We are the largest welfare provider in the Armed Forces charity sector, providing financial, social and emotional support, information, advice, advocacy and comradeship to hundreds of thousands of Service personnel, veterans and their dependants every year. In 2014, we responded to over 450,000 requests for help— more than ever before – and spent £1.4m every week on welfare support. For further information, please visit www.britishlegion.org.uk
- 1.2 The Legion also provides a number of specialist welfare services to wounded, injured and sick Service personnel and veterans, and other working age disabled individuals. As well as investing in the Battle Back Centre at Lilleshall and MOD Personnel Recovery Centres, we also assist disabled beneficiaries with accessing statutory benefits to enable independent living and with War Pensions and compensation claims.
- 1.3 The Legion's Outreach Service supports beneficiaries and their families to find practical and long-lasting ways to achieve their potential; lead more fulfilling lives and take responsibility for their own future. Working with 1,200 clients a year, we help those needing support with multiple issues such as homelessness, drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence, mental health and prison leavers. The service achieves success with its multi-agency approach and through supporting people in community and home settings. Building relationships is key to supporting beneficiaries who are vulnerable or marginalised and who are sometimes hard to engage. It is partly through providing this service that we are able to provide evidence to this inquiry.

2.0 General Comments

- 2.1 Homelessness amongst the ex-Service community is an emotive subject and is rarely out of the news in the UK. ESI media, whose titles include the Independent and the Evening Standard, even focussed their Christmas charity appeal around the subject in 2014 and demonstrated the strength of the support the public have for helping veterans who are sleeping rough by raising £700,000 in donations. We are pleased therefore that the Communities and Local Government Committee are holding an inquiry into homelessness and that the Legion has the opportunity to contribute evidence.
- 2.2 During a literature review of existing studies in 2010, the Legion found that the characteristics, profile and experiences of homeless veterans are largely the same as those of the wider homelessness population, although there are some notable differences.

- 2.3 Homeless veterans have been found on average to be older, have slept rough for longer, be less likely to use drugs and more likely to have alcohol-related problems. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been found among a small number of homeless veterans although other non-military related mental health problems were more common.
- 2.4 There is little evidence to support the notion that military life, or institutionalisation, is a cause of veterans' homelessness. There is some evidence that, for a minority, military life, through factors such as trauma of combat, mobility of the job or the drinking culture, had reduced their ability to cope post-Service. In some cases, military life had suspended the impact of pre-existing vulnerabilities and these had resurfaced post-discharge. However, in the main, homelessness had occurred some time after Service. In common with the wider homeless population, a variety of factors and events had influenced and preceded homelessness.
- 2.5 We therefore ask that our evidence is not seen in isolation and wish to highlight that many of the policy recommendations and insight that are presented by colleagues in the homelessness sector would benefit the ex-Service community. This submission however will focus on those areas that are more commonplace or unique amongst the ex-Service community; although some solutions and interventions may benefit from a veteran-specific focus, many of the causes of homelessness amongst veterans are likely to be analogous to the general homeless population.
- 2.6 The Legion would be happy to present oral evidence to the Committee if required.

3.0 A lack of data

- 3.1 As a result of hyperbolic headlines and apocryphal statistics used in popular discourse over the years, there is a popular misconception in the UK that homelessness is both a common outcome of leaving the Armed Forces and that a large proportion of those who sleep rough in the UK are veterans.¹ There is little evidence to support this claim. The national charity Crisis report that 9 percent of adults in England have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives, with 8 percent of under 25s reporting that this has happened to them in the last five years. Therefore within the veteran population, it is not unreasonable to assume that homelessness will be present, particularly amongst single young personnel re-entering civilian life after leaving the Armed Forces. Yet despite 8 different studies between 1994 and 2013/14 attempting to quantify the prevalence of veterans amongst the homeless population, there is no clear picture to reliably draw conclusions from. One estimation that can be drawn from the trend in these studies is that, with the odd exception, the prevalence declines from around 22-25 percent in the mid nineties to 3 percent in 2013/14.^{2,3} It must be noted that this latest figure of 3 percent relates to homeless sleepers in London, however in the absence of recent national datasets it acts as a proxy for a national indication of prevalence. Charities who support the armed forces community, the UK media and the Government must ensure that negative myths surrounding the armed forces or misinformation is countered where appropriate, as they can risk damaging the overall employment prospects of the majority who successfully transition into "civvy-street".

¹ Examples include: "9,000 ex-service personnel homeless after leaving the military", *Daily Mirror* July 2013, "up to 25% of the homeless were veterans", *quote from mail online article* June 2012

² Randall, G and Brown, S, *Falling out: A Research Study of Homeless ex-Service people*, 1994

³ St Mungo's Broadway, CHAIN Annual Report, *From Street to Home*, 2012/13

3.2 Despite the apparent prevalence being on a downward trend, this does not diminish the importance of addressing the needs of veterans who are homeless. The coinciding decline in the overall numbers of the regular armed forces could go some way to accounting for the decrease, rather than a reduction in individual need. The last few years have seen significant redundancies from the Armed Forces with substantial numbers still undergoing the transition to civilian life in addition to the standard annual outflow of Service personnel leaving the Armed Forces. Over the last three years, the UK Armed Forces has seen an outflow of nearly 68,000 Service personnel (21,370 in 2011/12, 23,520 in 2012/13 and 23,000 in 2013/14).⁴

3.3 Without accurate estimates of how many of those leaving service go on to be part of the homeless ex-Service community, not only will misleading and inaccurate statistics continue to inform the public narrative but they will also contribute to ineffective policy making. In 2011, the Government enshrined the Armed Forces Covenant in legislation; thereby pledging to ensure that policy making took into account the needs of the Armed Forces community. The Covenant is the nation's recognition of its moral obligation to members of the Armed Forces and their families, and establishes how they should be treated, stating that the Armed Forces and their families "deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment". The two key principles underlying the Covenant are:

- 'No disadvantage': the Covenant commits the Government to removing, where possible, disadvantage experienced as a result of Service. For example, when Service personnel and their families are posted somewhere new, they should not experience difficulty in getting their children into local schools.
- 'Special treatment': for personnel and veterans who are injured as a result of their Service, or for families bereaved by Service, it is sometimes appropriate for the principle of 'special treatment' to be applied e.g. the provision of higher grade prosthetics for those who lose limbs as a direct result of their Service.

3.4 The Government's obligation to ensure that no member of the serving or veteran Armed Forces community is disadvantaged as a result of their Service is conditional on effective assessment of need. In order to provide no disadvantage or special treatment, there are veteran specific support services that a council may need to commission, such as being able to provide alternative accommodation to hostels which may be inappropriate for veterans struggling to integrate with an undisciplined civilian culture. Barnsley Council run just such a scheme, where in circumstances where a hostel is not appropriate, they have a number of private rented properties in which the council can place people and manage the tenancy. Furthermore, full housing benefit is paid on the property if the tenant is on benefits, allowing the beneficiary to find their feet in a secure environment. Yet without asking whether an applicant has a service history, a local authority is unable to effectively commission the type and scale of these necessary specialist services.

3.5 We would encourage the Government to invest in further research into the homeless veteran population in the UK and encourage local authorities to proactively "ask the question" as to whether a presenting applicant for support has ever been a member of the UK Armed Forces. Both the NHS and local authorities have had the ability to record this information for many years, yet experience shows that reliance on proactive self-identification fails to uniformly identify the ex-Service population and therefore treat them with appropriate support services; without knowing the benefits it may bring, veterans may see no relevance in disclosing their Service history if not

⁴ Ministry of Defence, *UK Armed Forces Monthly Personnel Report*, 2015

asked. Identification of a veteran at the point of contact with a local authority would not only enable appropriate sign posting to external support services but enable local authorities to live up to the commitments of the Armed Forces Community Covenant scheme through service commissioning and enable effective nationwide data collection.

4.0 Barriers to support

- 4.1 Delivery of statutory support for members of the ex-Service community who wish to register as homeless is variable across the country and the Legion has assisted veterans who have found themselves unable to access appropriate support from their local authority. It is at this point of contact with a local authority that housing and homelessness interventions and support can be most effective, yet the delivery of them can present as an unhelpful barrier; six percent of those discharged in the last 5 years report problems getting a council or housing association place.⁵ Veterans who fail to access support can turn to agencies such as the Legion, but it is not unreasonable to believe that there is an unquantifiable further number who fail to access support and do not seek support from us or partners in the advocacy sector. The Legion's Household survey found that there is significant evidence of members of the ex-Service community who are unwilling to seek support. Outside of health needs, of those reporting some sort of personal or household difficulty only one in four reports using a source of support in the last year.⁶ Rather than access third-sector help, there is a further risk that veterans may turn to the comradeship of Service and become a hidden community of informal homeless, staying on sofas of friends and families, either delaying critical need or failing to seek vital support.
- 4.2 If a former member of the Armed Forces becomes homeless they may make an application for assistance with housing to a local authority under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996. Authorities must assess whether homeless applicants are unintentionally homeless and in 'priority need.' These 'priority need' categories are set out in section 189 of the 1996 Act and include "vulnerable former members of the armed forces". We are pleased that the ex-Service community can be recognised as a priority need, however it is reliant both on identification of that status (as outlined above), and a successful application as homeless. We are aware that barriers to both exist.
- 4.3 Worryingly, beneficiaries have informed the Legion that upon presenting as homeless to a council, they end up filling out a housing application and are told they will only be a band of priority which may not reflect their need. They are not informed that if they go and present to the housing options team and go through a homeless application then they may be offered temporary accommodation depending on their circumstances and the outcome of the homeless application could increase their housing application banding.
- 4.4 Of further concern, we have experience of veterans who have requested a homeless assessment but one is not completed. In these circumstances it can be only because the Legion Outreach team contact the local authority and advocate on the applicant's behalf that a homeless application is undergone. Whilst, those who seek help from a charity such as the Legion can be assisted and advocated for, as mentioned above, there are those who will not.

⁵ Royal British Legion, *A UK Household Survey of the ex-Service Community*, 2014

⁶ Royal British Legion, *A UK Household Survey of the ex-Service Community*, 2014

- 4.5 For members of the ex-Service community who may become homeless and be in need of support, it is vital that administrative barriers are minimised. Despite there being little evidence to link military service “institutionalisation” to homelessness, being in Service can be an indicator of other factors that may contribute to vulnerability. Those who join the UK Armed Forces at a young age as an alternative to pursuing higher education or civilian employment experience are reliant on the training and skills provision within the Forces to be able to successfully enter “civvy-street” after transitioning out of the forces. The Army tends to recruit for infantry from more deprived areas of the country and up to 50% of Army recruits have literacy and numeracy skills below Entry Level 3, equivalent to the standard expected of primary school leavers at age 11.⁷ The Forces themselves do provide multiple opportunities to improve skills and undertake qualifications, however these are not mandatory and personnel can be left unprepared for the bureaucratic nature of civilian welfare provision, resulting in not just an unwillingness, but an inability to engage with statutory support amongst some leavers.
- 4.6 Whatever the barrier to accessing support, the Legion, and other third sector agencies, can provide support to members of the ex-Service community and act as advocates, but only if approached to do so. We would welcome a strengthening of the statutory offer for homelessness applicants to include a right to an advocate *with* effective signposting and referral to accredited agencies who could provide this service. This proactive signposting would rely on habitual identification of ex-Service personnel but could potentially ensure that vulnerable veterans are linked up with wider support services at this critical stage, reducing the cost to the state, the charities and to the personnel themselves in the long term.

5.0 Scotland and Wales

- 5.1 In addition to detailed information that is available via the Joint Service Housing Advice Office, the Scottish Government has produced a simple and clear pathway for finding accommodation on leaving Service. Measures that focus on prevention can be some of the most cost effective interventions; therefore a simple and plainly presented pathway that ensures that service leavers are able to clearly understand their rights and responsibilities is beneficial. As well as presenting housing options for Service personnel approaching transition, the Scottish pathway also contains the following clear information on rights and responsibilities with relation to homelessness:

“Help! I can’t find anywhere to stay

If you are in this position you should contact your council as soon as possible to let them know you may be homeless, and ask to speak to a member of staff in their homeless team.

If you haven’t been discharged yet, you should also speak to a member of your welfare team, who may be located at your base or another base in Scotland, as soon as possible.

This team will also be able to give you some support. In Scotland, all homeless households or those threatened with homelessness (if you don’t have anywhere to stay or your current accommodation is not suitable or you are at risk of losing it) must be given temporary housing and free information and advice by local councils. If the

⁷ Vorhaus, J, Swain, J, Creese, B et al, *Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study*, 2012

council find that you are homeless through no fault of your own, they must find you housing, but you may be offered somewhere temporarily before accommodation becomes available.”⁸

5.2 In Wales the Legion is currently calling for a similar pathway to be constructed as one of our key recommendations in our recently published Wales Manifesto 2016:

“The next Welsh Government should produce an Armed Forces Housing Pathway, which outlines clearly what members of the Armed Forces, veterans and their families are entitled to under devolved housing policies.

This document would also act as an information source for the Armed Forces community in Wales, and serve as a training resource for staff in local authorities and housing associations. Key partners in the sector such as Shelter Cymru, Community Housing Cymru and the Welsh Local Government Association should be involved in the preparation of such a document.”⁹

5.3 We would welcome similar clear pathways being produced for all Service leavers.

5.4 It is important to note that in Wales we also welcome improvements brought in by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 which aims to ensure more is done by local authorities and their partners to help people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, but we are yet to truly assess the impact of the new legislation on our beneficiaries.

6.0 Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Despite welcome improvements in services and rights for the ex-Service community since the introduction of the Armed Forces Covenant into statute in 2011, there is more that can and should be done. No-one currently has an accurate assessment of the scale of need for the homeless ex-Service population and therefore support cannot be as effectively targeted as it could be. The Legion would welcome recommendations from the committee to the Government on practical steps it could take to ensure that any Armed Forces leavers ending up on the street aren't cut off from the support they are entitled to.

6.2 Legion recommendations:

1. Local Authorities should record whether statutory support applicants have a history of being in the armed forces in a standardised format.
2. This data can then be used to commission and signpost effective veteran specific homelessness services
3. Members of the ex-Service community should be proactively offered access to independent advocates and signposted to third party support services to overcome barriers to accessing support services.
4. More should be done to encourage the sharing of best practice between local and national governments, for example looking at replicating simple but effective tools such as the Scottish Housing pathway for Service leavers.

⁸ Scottish Government, *A Housing Guide for ex-Service Personnel*, 2013

⁹ Royal British Legion, *Building a Better Future for the Armed Forces Community in Wales*, 2016

**For further information or clarifications, please contact Andy Pike, Policy Adviser,
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