



UNFORGOTTEN FORCES

Supporting Scotland's
Older Veterans



The Unforgotten Forces Project Final Report:
An Evaluation of Support for Older Veterans in Scotland

Executive Copy – 2021

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Acknowledgements

The research team would very much like to thank all of the Unforgotten Forces Partner Organisations and their staff for their help and support in pursuit of this research evaluation. We would also like to thank the older veterans who generously gave their time. It is their views and opinions – staff, older veterans and their families - as discussed in interviews, focus groups and observational visits that have provided the richly contextualised data presented in this report. We have really enjoyed working with you and hearing about the experiences in delivering and developing services and in how they have helped and supported older veterans. Thank you all!

Unforgotten Forces Project

Research Context

This is a summary of the final report on the experiences of older – over the age of 65 - ex-servicemen and women and service providers for the Poppyscotland-led Unforgotten Forces (UF) project. In 2014 Poppyscotland identified that there were approximately 280,000 Scottish older veterans (including their dependants), with the average age of the older veterans being 67 years¹, and that there was a need for improvement in their well-being. Similarly significant numbers of older veterans were also recorded by the Ministry of Defence for 2017: 2.4 million UK Armed Forces veterans in the UK, the majority of them – over two-thirds - aged 65 years and older, male, white and either married or in a civil partnership, and between 6-8% of those veterans resided in Scotland (MoD, 2019)². Also, in that year, 2017, The Unforgotten Forces project, a 3-year funded project, was awarded £4 million from the MoD/LIBOR Aged Veterans Fund.

The Unforgotten Forces Project

The Unforgotten Forces project is an innovative Poppyscotland led consortium of 14 complementary partners delivering services to enhance the existing support for older veterans³ in addressing loneliness and isolation, respite breaks, a new day centre, therapeutic programmes in care homes and advice on issues such as benefits, support for those in medical pathways and help with essential transport. Over the 3-year period one organisation withdrew from the project, SSAFA and another two organisations joined, RAFA and Combat Stress. In total there were, over the 3-year funded period, some 17 member organisations of the consortium.

They were:

Action on Hearing Loss

Age Scotland

Armed Services Advice Project

¹ Health and welfare of the Ex-Service community in Scotland 2014. <https://media.britishlegion.org.uk/Media/2274/poppyscotland-household-survey-report-final.pdf>

² Ministry Of Defence (MOD) (2019). Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report. Crown Copyright. [Online] Available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/854400/6.6025_MOD_Covenant_Annual_Report_2019_Accessible.pdf [Accessed 4 September 2020].

³ Older veterans are defined, for this project, as those aged 65 years of age or older at the time of accessing the services offered by the consortium partners.

Combat Stress
Defence Medical Welfare Service
Erskine Reid Macewan Activity Centre
Fares4Free
ILM Highland
Legion Scotland
Luminate
Music in Hospitals and Care
Poppyscotland Break Away Service
Royal Air Forces Association
Scottish War Blinded
Scottish Older People's Assembly
SSAFA the Armed Forces Charity
University of the West of Scotland

Combat Stress, Scottish Older People's Assembly, Scottish War Blinded, SSAFA, and Royal Air Forces Association were all unfunded consortium partners and Defence Medical Welfare Services only received funding for the first two years of the project. SSAFA were the only partner to formally withdraw from the consortium during the first 3-years.

The service delivery partners were keen to deliver where possible a more holistic experience for older veterans: *'...it [shouldn't] matter what door you (the service user) arrived at, you [should] always ... get [directed to] the service that was the right one for you'*.

Consortium partners sought to fast track between services where appropriate or provide older veterans with the information on other support services to allow them to make an informed decision on whether or not they wish to self-refer to services within and outside the consortium for additional support needs. It aimed to put addressing the service needs and support of older veterans at the forefront of the service delivery experience. The aspiration for the Poppyscotland led UF project was for a partnership approach but they *'didn't want competition from within the consortium, we wanted complementary activity, we wanted diversity ...[and]... we wanted them to be joined up'*.

To address this they worked together as a consortium to provide a wide portfolio of complementary activities, working in partnership with like-minded organisations to provide

enhanced, well-defined and a diverse range of services, to enhance knowledge and understanding of what each of the partner organisations does, to ensure that irrespective of which organisation is approached the veteran will be assisted, supported and, where appropriate, signposted to the most apposite service for their needs. Such a model, they believed, would empower service providers to identify and support older veterans to ensure they receive the right service at the right time and in the right place.

This UF project was officially funded from the July 1st, 2017. However, due to recruitment and organisational requirements a date of September 1st, 2017 was agreed for evaluation purposes.

Methodology – Mixed Methods

The Remit

The University of the West of Scotland (UWS) evaluation of the project was to provide an independent evidence base, drawn from the service providers and older veterans who are using the services. One of our primary aims was to understand the inhibitors and facilitators of access to the Unforgotten Forces (UF) consortium. This was challenging as there is no publicly accessible sampling frame from which a representative sample could have been drawn (Scarborough and Tannenbaum 1997: 3-5)⁴. We opted for an open-ended approach, with immersive methodology, to cast light on the motivations and interconnections that commonly lie beyond tightly delimited enquiries (Bryman 2004: 84-7)⁵.

The project thus adopted a ‘mixed’ methods approach. This offered the flexibility to produce data as comparable as could reasonably be achieved. Veterans were accessed through the partner organisations within the UF consortium. As veterans contacted organisations to seek assistance, they were made aware of the project and asked if they would take part in a short standardised survey. The survey was limited to 17 questions. We also attended a number of events that were hosted for these older veterans such as Breakfast Clubs and Music in Hospitals and Care Scotland concerts and undertook observation visits with some of the service providers and to care homes. Additionally we engaged with the service providers to enhance our knowledge of the issues on which these older veterans were seeking advice

4 Scarborough, E. and Tannenbaum, E. (1997) ‘Introduction’, in Scarborough, E. and Tanenbaum, E. Research Strategies in the Social Sciences. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5Bryman, A. (2004) Social Research Methods: Second edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

and/or support from them, but also to understand from the service providers' point of view what might be the enabling or contributing factors to older veterans seeking the help and support that they are both entitled to and need. All in all, we collected a very extensive body of data on older veterans in Scotland. Over the three years of the project, 3000 surveys were returned, 34 Focus Groups, 95 interviews and 16 observation visits were undertaken.⁶

Quantitative Findings

Respondents were overwhelmingly white Scottish (73 percent), males (80 percent), with a background in the British Army (58 percent). They are geographically dispersed across Scotland, living in local authorities spanning Fife and Glasgow to Moray and the Highlands. More than three-quarters (78 percent) are disabled: 42 percent bodily disabled. Yet this should not overshadow the proportions with visual (31 percent), mental (13 percent) or hearing (11 percent) disabilities, and suggests that partner organisations are responding to a diversity of needs surrounding a clientele with physical and non-physical disabilities. These needs may be further understood when viewed in the context of respondents' living arrangements. A plurality live alone (42 percent), or with a partner (36 percent).

Given the average age of the sample, it is not wholly surprising, therefore, that clear pluralities cite health-related issues (28 percent) as their primary reason for seeking assistance. But there are other reasons. These include, seeking assistance for loneliness (18 percent), recreation (13 percent) or have issues with benefits (9 percent) or require social support (8 percent).

Referrals to the UF services were derived from DMWS (34 percent)⁷, Scottish War Blinded (19 percent), Citizens Advice Scotland (11 percent), Poppyscotland (10 percent), Legion Scotland (6 percent), Erskine (5 percent) Action on Hearing Loss (5 percent). However, some are referred from partner organisations. Where this is the case, 47 percent are referred from their GP and/or the NHS.

⁶ As expected, there was a great deal of missing data, suggesting comprehension and technical problems administering the survey. This should not, therefore, imply 3,000 *fully* completed survey returns.

⁷ This is clearly influenced by the high proportion of DMWS clients within the sample.

Qualitative Findings

The evidence shows that there were good relations between the agencies and the personnel representing them at both the management and service delivery interface. However due to the geographical dispersal of services Local Forums were set up to better support the day delivery of services, initially in the North of Scotland; then, based on the evidence of the good local working practice that it produced and on the advisement of the ongoing formal evaluation by UWS, another two were set up – in the West and East of Scotland.

There were a number of issues that were encountered in the setting up of the project such as the cross-referral system and advertising of UF services: while in theory good, in practice didn't quite operate as smoothly as they had hoped. There were also some issues with recruiting of volunteers to support some of the service delivery and service providers reported that saying 'goodbye' was reported for some as quite a difficult experience, especially where a strong relationship had been fostered or when one or more of the older veterans being supported passed away within a short period of time.

Despite these and other challenges what is unquestionable is the value of the local forums. They fostered close and enduring partnerships between the various organisations and our observations of them would suggest that they were effective in establishing extremely good working relationships at the local level. They provided support for each other for particular cases and to get advice on where best to seek additional support for older veterans. They also provided informal support for each other when times were difficult, like losing - 'saying good bye to' - an older veteran. Testimony to the respect for the work undertaken by the UF project can be seen in the expansion of services provided. Some of those who had left the project to take up employment elsewhere then encouraged their new organisations to become involved with the UF project. Recognition of the value of the partnership approach and the quality of the personnel associated with the UF services was part of their reasons for doing so.

They also faced the challenge of reaching the older veteran population for a number of reasons: their misunderstanding of what constitutes a veteran, their stoic independence fostered in their armed forces experiences, and a lack of knowing where to go to get the information they need.

Veterans Experiences

Confusion and uncertainty amongst older veterans about who a veteran is, meant that many of the vulnerable older veterans were not presenting or seeking support until they were ‘in crisis’.

Furthermore few older veterans are digitally ‘savvy’ but increasingly statutory and third sector organisations are moving towards a more digital presence and consequently many older veterans either did not have or were unable to use technology to access information and assistance they needed.

Despite these difficulties there were many positives to be taken from the UF project. For example, the Fares4Free (F4F) taxi service assisted with hospital visits, trips that otherwise the older veterans couldn’t undertake, and in partnership with other organisations organised trips to commemorative events. Day centres like ERMAC put on a variety of activities asked for by the older veterans attending such as photography, family history sessions, and they worked in partnership with other organisations, such as MiHCS to put on concerts, ASAP to provide benefit support, Age Scotland on a range of issues they can advise on. The sessions delivered by MiHCS led in some cases to active participation and to song-writing with some groups, while the activities provided in a care home setting by Luminare were well received and linked to the needs of the veterans. DMWS assisted older veterans in transitioning from hospital back to their homes and in accessing living aids to support them in being able to continue to live in their own homes. The Legion Scotland also provided a much welcomed befriending service. These services all added to the experiences of overcoming loneliness and isolation in addition to the direct remit of each of the services. In many cases enduring relationships and friendships were forged. Veterans and their families reported that being with and amongst like-minded people – veterans – had a significant impact on the veterans’ wellbeing and the veterans themselves reported that it was invaluable to them.

Covid-19

In March 2020 Scotland found itself in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic which impacted hugely on the lives of everyone as severe restrictions were imposed all citizens living of UK – ‘lockdown’. For Unforgotten Forces this meant suspension or radical changes to the mode of delivery of many of its services for older veterans. However, the initial response from the UF consortium partners cannot be faulted and indeed should be commended for the speed at

which they reacted and adopted different approaches to their service delivery where appropriate to do so in order to ensure that the lockdown had as minimal as possible impact on the older veterans. Phone calls were arranged to replace face-to-face visits, on-line activities developed, medical and food deliveries were undertaken and token gesture visits were undertaken to check up on welfare issues. However for those older veterans who are living alone, in rural areas, with limited support from family or friends and who are not digitally competent did report finding it difficult.

Where Next?

The UF project was not successful in securing the same level of funding to sustain the project beyond the end of the 3-year funded period. However, the desire to continue to work together was evident and with some limited funding over 3-years from the Scottish Government (£250k per year) Age Scotland is taking on the role of lead organisation for UF. We would urge that serious consideration be given to pursuing additional funding and consideration as to how service provision can continue across the range of services. We wish the UF partners well in their future endeavours and hope that they can continue to provide the excellent support we witnessed for older veterans.

Recommendations

The research findings strongly support the following recommendations to ensure the continued support for older – and perhaps other – veterans living in Scotland. As previously acknowledged some of the recommendations made here may be of more relevance to other armed force partners. However, they are of significant importance for the older veterans and it is to be hoped that they will inform other relevant organisations who may read this report.

- Easy access to information for older veterans on what support services are available. They ask for a single point of contact for all veteran services where they can be directed to the correct service for their individual needs. Navigating through the plethora of organisations who offer support can be very daunting for older veterans.

- Information leaflets that are easily accessible and readable on what the Covenant is and what older veterans can expect from it would go some way toward mitigating their misconceptions/misunderstanding of it.
- Clear information on who a ‘veteran’ is including all the various categories such as regulars, reservists, national service personnel etc. would also be helpful for the older veterans.
- Sharing of information between partners to enhance the service delivery for older veterans should be considered. The example of the Fares4Free use of an App in support of the Covid-19 experience is but one example.
- The support needs of those staff and volunteers working with this vulnerable community should also be acknowledged and where possible services provided, such as bereavement counselling.
- Funding mechanisms need to be pursued if the consortium is to continue as such. It is unlikely that it will provide such a structured and holistic service if all the UF service providers are to rely on securing funding for their individual services. Without a cohesive funding mechanism to bring them together the continuation of the close partnership working may become tenuous.
- Developing more community-based activities in partnership with, for example, the Men’s Shed is to be encouraged.
- Exploring how as a consortium they can better advertise for, train and share volunteers should be explored.
- Services for those with impaired hearing and sight should be maintained as they have a significant impact on the day-to-day lives of the older veterans.
- Securing funding for the F4F or a similar type of service to support mobility and ability to attend hospital and other appointments is extremely important as it provides a much needed lifeline.
- Consideration should be given to other novel ways to include older veterans in line with the new service Age Scotland are introducing: a phone based service - Friendship Circles.