

Service Needs of the UK Armed Forces Community: The Officers' Perspective

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Abstract

Public awareness and interest in the UK armed forces has increased over the years as a result of their involvement in various conflict situations. Research has also identified the increasing support and services that the armed forces community needs, including mental wellbeing and transition to civilian life. The voluntary sector has played a key role in providing support and services for the armed forces community in the UK. Gaining a more in-depth understanding of the armed forces community and their needs would help the various service charities to plan and deliver their services as well as promote themselves more effectively. The purpose of this research was to understand and identify the service needs of one cohort of the UK armed forces - officers and their families. Qualitative, in-depth interviews of case workers and beneficiaries of a service charity working with officers and their families were carried out, as well as observations and discussions with various service charities and attendees of veterans outreach services. Thematic analysis of the interviews, observations and discussion notes helped identify eight specific service needs that are important to the officers and their families.

Keywords: *Service needs, UK Armed Forces, Voluntary Sector*

Introduction

Recent research published by The Royal British Legion (2014) defines the UK armed forces community as service personnel who have served and are currently serving in the armed forces, their spouses/partners (including separated and widowed) as well as dependent children. The voluntary sector has played a key role in the provision of health and welfare services to the UK armed forces community (Gribble et al.,

2014). Although research has been carried out on the armed forces community both by academics as well as the charity sector themselves, more in-depth understanding of the various cohorts of the armed forces community are needed. Amidst increased support and awareness of the UK armed forces (Ashcroft, 2012), this research aims to understand the different service needs of one segment of the UK armed forces community - namely, the officers and their families. Gaining this understanding will help the various charities supporting the armed forces community to tailor their services to the officers and their families. Additionally, it will provide insights into how to position their brands in order to ensure their services are publicised more effectively.

Theoretical Background

There has been an increased interest amongst the public and the media about the armed forces and more specifically on what happens to them after they leave the service (Iversen et al., 2005). Media often focus on the minority of veterans who face problems once they have left the service, which include homelessness, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), alcohol abuse and so on. Recent research has found that, contrary to common myths, a majority of veterans leaving the service make a smooth transition and enjoy a perfectly normal civilian life (Iversen, et al., 2005; The Royal British Legion, 2014). However, even those who have made smooth transitions may need help and support in the future. The prevalence of a multitude of armed forces charities in the UK and the public support for these charities indicate that there is a need for these services. It is estimated that approximately 20,000 service personnel leave the UK armed

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forces each year (Hatch et al., 2013). This number is set to increase due to the planned cutback of the armed forces by the Ministry of Defence by the end of 2017 (BBC, 2013). This would mean that the various armed forces charities would need to be better prepared to meet the needs of the armed forces community.

Most research published on the subject of the armed forces has been carried out in the US, and relatively little research has studied the UK armed forces (Iversen et al., 2005). Although the existing research on the US armed forces provides great insights, cultural and administrative differences make these studies not very relevant in the UK context (Ashcroft, 2012). There is, however, some interesting and insightful research emerging on the UK armed forces from academia as well as the charity sector, such as The Royal British Legion (2014) and Forces in Mind Trust (2013). Most of the existing research from both the US and the UK focuses on understanding the mental health issues faced by veterans during and after their service as well as the transition of the armed forces into civilian life (Hatch, et al., 2013; Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006; Iversen, et al., 2005; Jordan, 2011). Very little research has been carried out which studies the service needs of the UK armed forces and how charities can best meet these needs. Some inroads have been made into this by the armed forces charity sector (e.g. Forces in Mind Trust, 2013; The Royal British Legion, 2014), but more research is needed here.

The research that has been based on the UK armed forces has largely looked at the armed service as a single cohort. There are significant differences between ranks, and especially between officer and non-officer ranks. For instance, MacManus et al. (2012) studied the anti-social behaviour of armed forces personnel before joining the service and its impact on mental health and behaviour during and post-service. They found that only 6% of Officers reported anti-social behaviour prior to joining the service. This was attributed to the comparatively higher educational achievement of those joining the service as an offi-

cer. Iversen et al. (2005) investigated the transition of the armed forces personnel leaving the service, and Officers were less likely to leave the service early than junior soldiers. These differences amongst the ranks indicate that the service needs of these groups of the armed forces would also differ. Although the service charities such as The Royal British Legion have started to investigate the service needs of the UK armed forces community, differences between officers and other ranks have not been looked at in detail. Furthermore, The Royal British Legion (2014) estimates that 1 in 20 members of the UK armed forces community had unmet needs for support. This research aims to fill this gap and provide some insight into the service needs of officers of the UK armed forces and their families.

Methodology

This is an exploratory research which aims to understand the service needs of the officers of the UK armed forces community. Consequently, a qualitative research method was used. Secondary research looked at published research from some of the UK armed forces charities. This was followed up by personal conversations and interviews with some armed forces benevolence charities and visits to outreach services held for the armed forces communities. Following this, in-depth interviews were carried out with case workers and beneficiaries of a service charity which provides services to the officers of the UK armed service community. In total, eight case workers and eight beneficiaries were interviewed. The interviews, observations from outreach services, and interviews with benevolence charities were thematically analysed to identify service needs.

Findings

The findings of the research is summarised in the Figure 1. As the figure suggests, the research identified some catalysts that creates the need for various services.

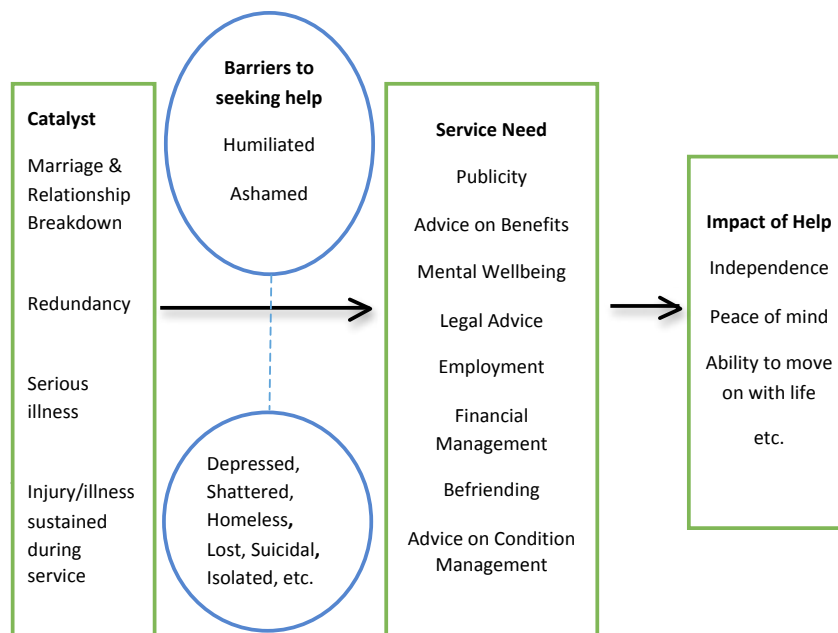


Figure 1. Summary of Findings

The majority of beneficiaries needed the services of a benevolence charity due to relationship breakdown. This agrees with research carried out in the US which identified that the armed forces and their families increasingly needed counselling due to pressures and stress placed on relationships due to deployment (Jordan, 2011). Other catalysts include redundancy (this could be being discharged from the armed forces or being made redundant from a civilian job post-service), serious illness to self or a dependant family member, and also injuries or illnesses sustained as a result of service in the armed forces.

As a result of some of these catalysts, the ex-officers and their families can be left homeless, depressed, isolated, and in some rare cases, feeling suicidal. As many case workers reported, in addition to being identified by the beneficiaries themselves, this is a segment of the community that is very proud and has experienced a higher standard of living, so asking for help is an alien concept to most of them. The participants described their feelings as humiliation and being ashamed of having to seek help. In some cases, the participants have not disclosed to their extended family or friends about their contact with armed service charities. However, some participants explained

that they had a sense of pride in overcoming these barriers and taking the first step in sorting their lives out by seeking some help.

When it comes to specific service needs, publicity, advice on benefits, mental wellbeing, legal advice, employment, financial management, befriending, and advice on condition management were identified as recurring themes and therefore more relevant.

In most cases, those who needed help were not aware of specific service charities that they can approach for help. Although a majority of service personnel and the public are aware of the biggest service charities such as The British Legion and Help for Heroes, there are a multitude of more specific service charities (Gribble et al., 2014). Most officers and their families were either unaware of these charities or did not understand the various ways in which the charities can help them. As one participant mentioned, *'knowing that there are people out there that we can go to would be the first service anyone can provide us'*.

The needs for advice on eligibility and availability of state benefits as well as legal advice were two key service needs. Officers and their families are not famili-

ar with the benefits system and are not aware of the various state aids that are available to them. As well as advice on eligibility of state benefits, the respondents also mentioned that they would need someone to help them '*navigate the benefits system*'. The need for legal advice stemmed from various issues such as divorce settlements, child custody issues and redundancy.

Mental wellbeing was a major service need that was reiterated by all participants. Recently, there has been growing concern about the impact of military deployment, especially to Iraq and Afghanistan, on the psychological wellbeing of the armed forces (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006; Jordan, 2011; MacManus, et al., 2012). In a study of US veterans, Hoge et al. (2006) identified that the use of mental health care services for the entire armed forces population has had a linear increase over time since 2000. As well as serving personnel, deployment also has an impact on spouses and partners (Mansefield et al., 2010). This research found that, for the officers and their families, mental wellbeing encompassed issues such as relationship counselling, stress, anxiety, and depression.

A research study on the UK armed forces community identified that 33% of officers mentioned that one of their biggest concerns about leaving the forces was finances and budgeting (Ashcroft 2012). This corresponds with the findings of this research where respondents identified the need for help and advice on managing their finances effectively. Employment was also an important service need. A recent survey by The Royal British Legion (2014) identified that for those aged 16-54, employment was a major concern. Although the survey did not differentiate between officers and other ranks, this study concurred with those findings.

Befriending was a need mentioned by almost all participants in some form or another. For some it was a case of knowing that there is someone who understands their situation and can keep them motivated through a difficult stage of their life. For others, it was a simple need of having a friend that they can talk to. Hatch et al. (2013) found that service leavers experienced less social participation outside of work and experienced more social isolation and disengagement. Although the Hatch et al. study did not differentiate

between officers and other ranks, this research identified it as a need among the officer community. A further need was of condition management. Families who had members who became seriously ill or injured as a result of the service, mentioned the need for advice on adapting their lives to be able to live with the condition.

Conclusion

This research helped understand and identify the service needs of the officers of the UK armed forces and their families. The needs identified here will help organisations assisting officers and their families to target their services more effectively to their beneficiaries. This way, the service charities can ensure that the specific needs of the officers are catered for and their services make a genuine impact on the lives of their beneficiaries. It is important to note the barriers to seeking help and its implications to branding and marketing the charity services. As a result of these barriers, organisations serving the armed forces community, and especially the officers, may need to communicate their message in such a way that the feeling of 'asking for help' is considerably minimised. In other words, the marketing efforts need to focus on building a brand image that promotes the theme of serving the armed forces community as opposed to the armed forces community seeking and receiving help.

Although the research here is focussed on a relatively small sample, it is noteworthy that all interviews elicited similar responses. This may indicate that for this cohort of the UK armed forces (i.e. officers), these needs apply in general. This also further highlights the benefits of applying the principles of market segmentation to segment the armed forces community with a view to gaining a better understanding of the different cohorts. This will help various service charities to cluster their services to different cohorts and thereby making their services more relevant to the respective cohorts.

This study only focussed on those who are currently beneficiaries of a service charity. Future research needs to expand this study further so that current and future potential beneficiary needs are also taken into account.

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