

POLICY BRIEFING

Supporting & Serving Military Veterans in Northern Ireland (NI)

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The presence and actions of the UK Armed Forces in NI both during and post – conflict continue to be politically sensitive issues in the region, and their actions during the conflict subsequently remain in the spotlight. While public attitudes towards the security forces are generally positive, they still reflect community divides (see Armour et al, 2018). As a result, real and perceived security threats to serving and ex-serving Armed Forces personnel in NI continue. These combined issues mean that any attempts to map out the needs of veterans, and the current capacity of services to meet those needs, have taken place in a context of political contention, and a gap in evidence about veteran support needs has been one of the consequences. With these issues in mind, in 2015, Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) commissioned Professor Cherie Armour of Ulster University to conduct a large scale study into the health and wellbeing of Northern Irish veterans.

The Northern Ireland Veterans’ Health and Wellbeing Study (NIVHWS) aims to improve understanding of the support needs of the veteran population living in NI. The development of the study is being supported by full stakeholder engagement, as well as interviews with service providers and focus groups with veterans. The first step in the process has been to map existing services and networks of support available to NI veterans (see Armour et al, 2017). **Supporting & Serving Military Veterans in Northern Ireland** is the first in a series of reports from the NIVHWS. The contents of this briefing have been derived from this report, along with a systematic review of current accessibility and availability of services for veterans in NI. Drawing on both data collected by the researchers themselves, and data obtained from secondary sources, the researchers have:

1) Developed the first comprehensive overview of services and support available to veterans living in NI.

2) Identified channels of communication between government departments, statutory bodies and agencies within the Voluntary and Community Sector.

3) Identified any obstacles to provision, any barriers to the up-take of services, or gaps or duplication in service provision.

4) Identified areas where support to veterans might be improved.

5) Developed as sets of realistic recommendations that will aim to improve services for veterans living in NI.

Key Findings And Recommendations

| Key Findings | Implications | Actions |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of access to mental health services that meet complex needs is a significant concern for veterans in NI and their immediate support networks. Combat Stress is the only organisation with a specific focus on veteran mental health treatment in NI and understands veterans’ needs. | <p>Veterans in NI feel existing mental health services do not meet their needs.</p> <p>Veterans have less access to locally based mental health support than those in GB.</p> | <p>Veterans should be provided with more information about all mental health services they can access.</p> <p>Public mental health services should be more accessible to veterans.</p> <p>Organisations need to work together to ensure there is appropriate coverage across NI.</p> <p>There should be more investment in veteran-specific mental health services.</p> <p>Organisations based outside of NI have a permanent presence within NI, in some capacity.</p> |

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| <p>Many veterans would prefer to access services and/or be treated by health professionals that understand the experience of being a military veteran.</p> | <p>Veterans may be reluctant to seek help from civilian healthcare and service providers.</p> | <p>A programme of training should be made available to public sector service providers. Training has the potential to improve understanding of veteran related issues in public sector service providers.</p> <p>Develop the capacity and resourcing of the local veteran-focused voluntary and community sector.</p> |
| <p>Communication within and between the voluntary services on the ground and decision makers in the statutory sectors is not as effective or formalised as it could be.</p> | <p>Service delivery effectiveness, efficiency, complementarity and information sharing is not optimal.</p> <p>The decisions made by various organisations within the statutory sector are not as transparent as they could be.</p> | <p>Build relationships between the veteran-focused sector and the NI Assembly, Executive and statutory service providers such as Housing Executive and Health and Social Care Trusts.</p> <p>A clear role for elected members who are Veterans' champions, that is consistent across councils.</p> <p>Develop well-resourced, formally recognised bodies and networks to improve collaborative working and communication. The minutes of various fora should be made publicly available.</p> <p>Develop clearer lines of communication between larger UK-based charities and local NI charities.</p> |
| <p>In the rest of the UK, the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) provides a firm commitment that those who have served in the UK Armed Forces will not be disadvantaged as a result of their military service.</p> <p>In NI, the Covenant has not been fully implemented.</p> | <p>There may be differences in health and wellbeing outcomes for veterans in NI and the rest of the UK.</p> | <p>Stakeholders, including veterans, should seek to find an alternative terminology for the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant which would be less politically contentious.</p> <p>An independent review of the differences between health and wellbeing outcomes for veterans in NI and the rest of the UK should be carried out.</p> <p>Statutory agencies and Voluntary and Community organisations should design and implement monitoring systems to capture data on veterans and their families.</p> <p>A working group could explore issues associated with the implementation of the Covenant in NI.</p> |

References

Armour, C., Waterhouse-Bradley, B., Ross, J., McLafferty, M., Hall, M. (2018). Public Attitudes to the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Study. Retrieved from: <https://www.fim-trust.org/reports/>

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