



Lesser Heard Voices Veterans in Buckinghamshire

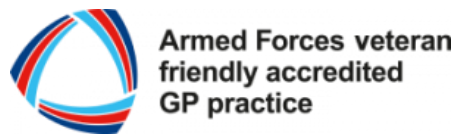
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What was the project about?

Background

Over the past few years, the health and social care of Armed Forces veterans has become a matter of discussion and action within the UK. Within this timeframe the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) has been created and the NHS has identified the wellbeing of veterans within its long-term plans. Alongside this the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) has introduced its Veteran Friendly (VF) accreditation for GPs. The NHS has also introduced the Veteran Aware Hospital accreditation.



A veteran is defined as someone who has been a member of the Armed Forces for at least one day.

“I was a chef in the Royal Navy and never saw action so I don’t really think of myself as a veteran.”

Why did we do this project?

In 2019 Healthwatch Bucks created the role of a Community Lead to work with groups identified as ‘Lesser Heard Voices’. We realised that engaging with these groups required a different approach involving seeking out community organisations and leaders, attending meetings and forums, building long-term relationships and gaining trust over time. Armed Forces veterans were selected as one of three varied groups to engage with during 2019/20.

We wanted to:

- hear veterans’ experiences of Health and Social care in Bucks.
- gauge veterans’ awareness of what they should expect for their Health and Social Care.
- promote awareness of veteran specific health and social care initiatives and provide some signposting.
- encourage veterans to ensure they are “flagged” as such at their GP.
- inform service providers of our project and what they can do for veterans.

What did we do?

To help plan our work with veterans we looked at the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC), the NHS Long-term Plan, the Veteran Aware Hospitals initiative and the RCGP's Veteran Friendly (VF) project. We also referred to other Local Healthwatch veteran projects (e.g. Norfolk).

To meet our objectives we developed the following approach:

- Understand where veterans meet up.
- Design a questionnaire which would capture the veterans' views of what they can expect from health and social care.
- Use the questionnaire to inform veterans of what they should expect of their health and social care.
- Explain the importance of flagging themselves as a veteran, and possible benefits of doing so.
- Pass the results of our questionnaire (quantitative feedback) and the veterans' 'voices' (qualitative feedback) to organisations involved in health and social care.

Additionally, when meeting with GPs and PCNs (Primary Care Networks), we also encouraged them to flag patients who were veterans on their systems, and to consider the RCGPs Veteran Friendly accreditation for their Practice.

What did we find?

Who did we speak to?

We spoke to over 150 people, which included veterans, their spouses and others with Armed Forces and veteran connections.

We heard from 74 veterans at 9 engagement events and individually. We filtered out responses from 6 veterans who we saw at more than one event.

We observed that most veterans we spoke to were over 50. We were unable to speak to any female veterans.

The veterans represented all branches of the services (Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, Army and Royal Marines). We met one veteran who, as a British national, had served with the French Foreign Legion.

Where we met veterans

We went to Royal British Legion (RBL) meetings, Armed Forces Veterans (AFV) Breakfast Clubs, and regimental associations. We also attended the annual Buckinghamshire Armed Forces Day, a 'Veterans Coffee Morning' organised by a local GP practice and visited a veteran care home (the Royal Star & Garter in High Wycombe). We also met individual veterans at other engagement events.

At more formal meetings we were given space on the Agenda, whilst at the AFV Breakfast Clubs it was less formal.

Our typical veteran engagement ran for 15 minutes to 30 minutes, not including any engagement after the 'presentation'. Although, we developed a PowerPoint presentation it was found more effective to talk through the material. Typically, we would:

- Explain why we (Healthwatch Bucks) were there
- Run through our questionnaire - we recorded responses individually or by show of hands
- Raise awareness of national commitments to veterans (through the Armed Forces Covenant and NHS) and what they may expect from their Health and Social Care
- Provide signposting to various organisations or initiatives and explain what they could do to access these
- Ask for experiences and voices of their health and social care, either as a veteran or a general member of the public
- General Q&A with the group - answer queries or
- Engage 1-on-1 after the presentation

In addition to engaging with veterans we also met with, or were informed by:

- Armed Forces and veteran charities and support services (e.g. Royal British Legion, Combat Stress, seAp's Military Advocacy Service, the Royal Star & Garter)
- the Bucks AFC Military Civilian Partnership Board
- local GP Practices, PPGs (Patient Participation Groups), PCNs, the Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust
- other Local Healthwatch

What did we hear?

The following represents responses from our questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The responses are from 74 veterans.

Have you heard of the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC)?

- + Only 24 had heard of the AFC - most are unaware of what the AFC says about veteran's health and social care

We were able to inform our audience of the AFC's commitment to veteran health and social care

"The orthopaedic consultancy I twice got referred to (1 x Stoke Mandeville and 1 x High Wycombe) had not heard of the Armed Forces Covenant. When I explained it to the consultants and their admin staff I was met with a kind of 'who do you think you are?' type attitude, i.e. they had not apparently heard of it. Therefore, 'so what!'"

Have you heard of Veteran Friendly (VF) GP Practices?

- + Only 2 respondents were aware of Veteran Friendly GP practices

We were able to inform our audience of what a VF GP practice is, and whether their own GP practice had the accreditation.

This allowed us to urge the veterans to flag themselves as a veteran at their GP practice (even if not accredited) and to urge their GP practice to consider a VF accreditation.

Have you heard of NHS Veteran Aware hospitals?

- + Only 2 respondents had heard of Veteran Aware Hospitals

We were able to inform our audience of what a Veteran Aware hospital is, and to give feedback on the progress for this accreditation within Buckinghamshire.

Do you have a health condition that you believe can be attributed to your time in the Armed Forces?

- + 18 veterans believe they have a condition related to service. In open forum, feedback was about physical conditions, e.g. hearing loss, back problems, joint problems (knees and hips), and a single incidence of skin cancer. When speaking one-on-one 6 veterans spoke about impact on their mental health, mainly depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

We were, again, able to advise of the benefit in flagging themselves as a veteran, and to signpost to other organisations that could help.

“I was referred to Healthy Minds by my GP. I contacted them and when they found out I had been in the Armed Forces they referred me to Combat Stress and closed the referral. I understand that they are stretched, but just felt that I was being fobbed off.”

As a veteran, do you know where to go for help regarding your Health and Social Care?

- + When discounting going to their GP, only 11 knew where else to go for help. Of these most would look to the British Legion. Two had used the RBL Hearing Aid scheme.
- + We found that two veterans were aware of, and had used, Combat Stress.

This enabled us to do some signposting to relevant organisations and to give a handout developed by a member of one of our local PPGs (Appendix 2)

Outcomes

Impact from engagement events

“I went to my GP to flag myself as a veteran and they said they didn’t know anything about it and why would I want to do so!”

As a direct result of a Healthwatch Bucks meeting we received a call from a veteran who had asked his GP to be flagged on their systems. The Practice was unaware of how to do this or why it was necessary. We contacted the Practice to explain why they should flag a veteran, and how to do. This veteran was then flagged.

We received a call from a veteran regarding his hearing aids and were able to give him comprehensive information regarding the RBL hearing aid scheme. We received three e-mails of thanks from organisations we worked, following our meetings.

In the past year 15 GP Practices in Bucks, representing 23 surgeries, have achieved their RCGP VF accreditation (out of 51 practices in the county). We believe that we influenced four of these new accreditations.

Across Buckinghamshire, as of November 2019, the number of veterans flagging themselves at GPs grew from 17 to 971. We believe that this increase is due to various factors, such as VF

accredited GP practices asking their patients to flag themselves, our own outreach efforts, and “word of mouth”.

We were able to present our project and progress at the Buckinghamshire AFV Military Civilian Partnership Board, which a number of Armed Forces and veteran associations attend.

We have communicated with Healthwatch Leicester who have been running a similar initiative.

The lead of a local PPG produced a newsletter item for Healthwatch Bucks. We also used this as a signposting handout at engagements. It proved very popular.

Some general observations

During our time speaking to veterans we became aware of other points relating to their experience as a veteran.

We noticed that more recent veterans prefer the term ‘ex-Forces’ as ‘Veteran’ has a connotation of those who were involved in WW1, WW2 and the following years of conscription.

We noticed that several RBL branches had closed and that some of the smaller ones no longer had veterans attending. This was commented on by some of the veterans we spoke to.

“The Royal British Legion seems to have lost their way as a place for veterans to meet. Although they provide some good services many of their branches are just social clubs and sometimes there are no veterans left.”

Those who attend RBL branch meetings tend to do so with a spouse, whilst AFV Breakfast Club attendees do not.

The Armed Forces Veteran Breakfast Clubs (3 in Buckinghamshire) are attended by a small, dedicated number of veterans. They are self-organised and are happy to operate as a “drop in” without a formalised organisation or structure.

The regimental association we attended (The Royal Artillery Association) was well attended by both veterans and their spouses. They have a general concern for the welfare of their members. They hold social events outside of their branch meetings, such as barbeques, and were planning to help veterans at a local care home by taking them out on day trips.

The role of veterans’ partners, spouses and family members should not be underestimated as a way of improving the awareness of veterans and motivating them to improve their access to health and social care. They were very active in asking us questions, and in encouraging the veterans to flag themselves and take advantage of various services.

Due to the shrinking size of the Armed Forces over the past 30 years, there are less veterans and it may be harder for them to seek each other out.

Also, experiences in a volunteer force are different to those experienced by those who underwent mass mobilisation and conscription. This “new cohort” will increasingly be represented by female soldiers, and those from minority groups and the LGBT+ community.

It appears that the nature of engagements by our Armed Forces will produce an increase in mental health issues, or at least the willingness to declare these, and need for prosthetics.

Our recommendations

We recommend that:

- each Primary Care Network in Bucks has at least one practice that is Veteran Friendly
- the AFC, RCGP, VF accredited GPs, and Bucks CCG (VA Hospitals) consider improving their communications to veterans for their respective initiatives
- GPs with the support of Bucks CCG, improve their ability to flag existing veterans on their systems and to do so consistently when taking on new patients
- all those planning engagement or work with veterans consider the role of partners and family members in motivating veterans to access services that benefit them.

What are we doing to ensure these are achieved?

We have sent our findings to Healthwatch England, the independent national champion for people who use health and social care services.

We will share our findings with the RCGP, Armed Forces Covenant, the groups that we visited, the organisations who supported and advised us, the Buckinghamshire AFC Military Civilian Partnership Board, the Bucks CCG and Bucks Healthcare Trust.

We have:

- shared our results and collateral with other Local Healthwatch who are undertaking veteran initiatives.
- improved our own signposting for veterans and run newsletter and website articles, including an interview with a VF lead at a large practice.
- obtained feedback from local GP Practices who have achieved their VF accreditation and fed this back to the RCGP

We continue to encourage GP Practices to consider achieving VF accreditation and to flag veterans on their systems.

We could approach the Armed Forces (Ministry of Defence) with our findings to see if they could help those leaving the services in their transitioning from military to civilian life. This may be relevant considering the pending closure of a large local RAF base.

We could follow up with veterans to see whether their overall awareness of veteran-specific services has improved and to hear their experiences of health and social care.

Service Provider Response

The RCGP has already responded positively to our findings, from both direct veteran feedback on Veteran Friendly awareness and comments received from GPs regarding their experience of achieving their accreditation.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the veterans we met with, as well as their family members. Our thanks also go to the organisations who helped us to meet with veterans and for the welcome extended to us.

Denys Williams of the Cross Keys Practice PPG produced the article in Appendix 2 which we used as a handout at meetings and published in our Newsletter.

Appendix 1 - Veteran Awareness Questionnaire

Veteran Questionnaire

Have you heard of Healthwatch Bucks? YES / NO

Have you heard of the Armed Forces Covenant? YES / NO

Have you heard of Veteran Friendly GP Practices? YES / NO

Have you heard of NHS Veteran Aware Hospitals? YES / NO

Do you have a health condition that you believe can be attributed to your time in the Armed Forces? YES / NO

As a Veteran, do you know where to go for help regarding your Health and Social Care, other than your GP? YES / NO



Internal ref: _____

Appendix 2 - Veteran Awareness Handout

ARE YOU A UK VETERAN OR HAVE A RELATIVE WHO IS?

(Denys Williams)



The Government estimate that there are about 2.5 million veterans in the UK. Thirty percent of whom live in the south of England. We represent a large proportion of the population and have significant needs as we age or on leaving our respective Service with related injuries or medical conditions. The Government has committed to support us through the Armed Forces Covenant. Sadly many veterans and health care professionals are unaware how best to get the medical support we need and deserve.

The most important thing YOU can do is to ensure that your GP or surgery is aware that you or a relative is a veteran. If this is your first GP registration since leaving the Armed Forces, give the surgery a copy of your summary medical record which you should have received on discharge. Your surgery should then code you as a 'Military Veteran'. This is especially important if you have a service-related injury or illness.

Many hospitals and GP practices are now doing extra training to become 'Veteran Aware'. This programme will improve the knowledge of healthcare professionals of the needs of veterans. In the case of a mental health condition you might be referred to mental health services that have an understanding of armed forces culture. Once again it also helps if you remind them you are a veteran!

In many cases, your medical condition due to service may not manifest itself until after discharge. This is particularly true for hearing and mental health issues. If this is your situation discuss with your doctor and consider contacting either Veterans UK or Veterans Gateway for further advice.

Veterans UK is run by MOD and administers the armed forces pension schemes and compensation payments for those injured or bereaved through service. They also provide welfare support for veterans of any age, and their families through the Veterans Welfare Service and the Veterans UK helpline: 0808 1914 218. There is an excellent website [at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk).

Veterans' Gateway is a signposting resource, and the first point of contact for veterans seeking support from healthcare and housing to employability, finances, personal relationships and more. They put veterans and their families in touch with the organisations best placed to help with the information, advice and support they need, such as Armed Forces charities, including the Royal British Legion, SSAFA, Poppy Scotland, Combat Stress and Connect Assist. You can contact Veterans' Gateway at 0808 802 121 or via www.veteransgateway.org.uk.

In recent months, as Chair of my surgery Patient Participation Group, I have spoken with veterans who have paid for hearing aids, when clearly their service duties had a detrimental effect on their hearing. In all likelihood, they would have received them for FREE from Veterans Hearing Help, a charity supported by the Royal British Legion. Another veteran had a cancerous growth removed from his ear. It is a recognised fact that wearing a military cap did not afford sun protection to his ears when serving in hot overseas theatres! So please, take advantage of the support that is available to you or your relative— we deserve it!

In a sentence, make sure your doctor knows you are a veteran, understand and learn about the support that is available to you or your relatives and, if you haven't already done so, get a veterans badge and wear it with pride! (www.gov.uk/apply-medal-or-veterans-badge/apply-for-a-veterans-badge).

If you require this report in an alternative format, please contact us.

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