

Research into the housing-related support needs of homeless veterans

Executive summary



Purpose of the research

The Office for Public Management (OPM) Group conducted research for Alabaré in late 2016 with homeless veterans using its supported housing services. The study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the current and emerging needs of homeless veterans living in Alabaré's supported housing in England and Wales. The research had three objectives:

1. To inform Alabaré's current and planned support work with homeless veterans;
2. To identify whether service development might be needed to meet emerging and future needs of homeless veterans; and
3. To convey the different experiences and needs of homeless veterans as individual people in an accessible and human way to key audiences.

Background

There are a range of statutory provisions across the UK including: the **Armed Forces Covenant** and the **Armed Forces Act 2011**; the **Homelessness Act 2002** and the **Care Act 2014** in England and the **Housing Act 2014** and the **Social Services and Well-Being Act 2014** in Wales, which together set out the duty of care of central and local government to homeless veterans.

There is already a level of existing research and other information available on the needs of veterans in general but less on the needs of those who are homeless. Our research drew on these existing sources, aiming to minimise duplication, build on existing knowledge and to focus our primary research interviews with Alabaré's residents to gather information on homeless veterans specifically, in areas where there are currently knowledge gaps or limitations.

Methodology

Our methodology included two distinct phases: a scoping phase and primary research phase with residents. The scoping phase involved rapid review of the existing research literature, review of published quantitative data and review of internal data collected by Alabaré, plus scoping discussions with staff through exploratory interview and a focus group. This was then used to

focus primary research with nine male residents through in-depth interviews to explore the key themes identified in the scoping phase.

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Headline findings from scoping

- There is limited data on homeless veterans in the UK;
- There is a higher prevalence of homelessness amongst ex-Army personnel compared to other areas of service in the Armed Forces;
- Homeless veterans tend to have an older age profile compared to the general homeless population;
- Many homeless veterans present high rates of alcohol and/or drug misuse;
- Many homeless veterans suffer from physical and/or psychological injury or illness;
- Homeless veterans tend to be “managing” significant social/economic/psychological disadvantage that pre-dates their service;
- Homeless veterans commonly experience relationship breakdown (such as divorce or a falling-out with parents);
- Increasingly, homeless veterans enter supported housing after serving time in prison and/or present extreme debt;
- Many homeless veterans have significant difficulty adjusting to civilian life, and;
- Homeless veterans often prefer to live in veteran-only supported housing because of a shared understanding of military culture and the mutual support this provides.

Key findings from interviews with residents

The interviews gathered detailed evidence on the individual experiences of nine different veterans (all male) living in Wales and England and explored the themes identified in the scoping phase to better understand how certain characteristics can make some veterans more vulnerable to homelessness than the majority who make a successful transition to civilian life. The full report presents these themes through the medium of veterans’ own stories, told as far as possible in their own voices. Those interviewed all presented significant vulnerability, often multiple vulnerabilities, across four key areas: alcohol and/or drug misuse; physical and/or psychological injury and/or illness; relationship breakdown and the effects of a culture of institutionalisation. The interviews demonstrated that broadly, these vulnerabilities are experienced similarly for veterans across different ages, areas of service in the Armed Forces, or reasons for leaving the Armed Forces.

Key findings from the interviews include the following:

Veteran-only provision

Demand and need for veteran-only supported housing is likely to remain consistent and high for the foreseeable future. This model is working well for homeless veterans in England and Wales living in Alabaré services, meets many of their emotional and support needs and is strongly preferred by veterans over generic homelessness provision. This is primarily a result of the shared understanding of military culture which enables residents to provide peer support to each other through the transition and re-integration to civilian life.

Added value

Added value is delivered through specialist veteran-only services being provided by an organisation also providing broader homelessness services – ensuring that veterans are able to access a wide range of additional support services to support their transition to and reintegration into civilian life.

Building social capital

Mutual support between homeless veterans derived from their shared understanding of military culture is strong and consistent and they particularly value this benefit of specialist provision. Alabaré's work thus builds new social capital through bonding between homeless veterans and so supports their transition and re-integration to civilian life. The research also identified further work Alabaré is doing to build new *bridging* social capital by supporting residents to engage in community-based activities such as volunteering and training which it will be important to strengthen and consolidate for the future.

Disadvantage predating service

There is a strong correlation between the experience of disadvantage prior to entering service and later veteran homelessness. As suggested by the scoping work both in the evidence review (Johnsen *et al*, 2008) and in the staff focus group, disadvantage predating service including difficult childhoods was a significant factor contributing to veteran homelessness. The interviews with veterans demonstrate clearly and viscerally how problems from childhood or adolescence can be “managed” by serving in the surrogate “family” of the Armed Forces, but are likely to reemerge after discharge, often in a form staff refer to as “childhood PTSD” and often associated with other vulnerabilities such as alcohol dependency and offending behaviour.

Emerging needs

The scoping work with staff in the focus group discussions identified two new areas of potential need that appear to be growing – homeless veterans, particularly younger veterans incurring extreme levels of debt, and increasing numbers of veterans homeless from prison with offending patterns that differ from the generic homeless population. The very high prevalence of alcohol dependency for homeless veterans also suggests that there may be value in considering whether any other service innovation may better help support these needs.

Limitations of the research

The research was conducted within relatively limited resources and therefore necessarily excluded a range of other possible research options and limited the sample number of residents interviewed across Wales and England to nine.

Recommendations for future service provision

These findings have informed the recommendations below for Alabaré's future work with homeless veterans. We suggest that Alabaré should consider:

1. Consolidating existing strengths in maintaining and strengthening its external links with a comprehensive range of referral agencies and support providers including military-focused agencies and specialists in health, housing, employment, alcohol/drug treatment, and mental health.
2. Building on the Welsh experience of prevention-focused work to develop an early/crisis intervention service model, ideally in close collaboration with the Armed Forces, to support them in implementing their duty of care to staff leaving the military for a variety of reasons. This might include early engagement with veterans being made redundant and veterans being discharged for medical reasons or for offending.
3. How to engage early with and provide the best support for younger veterans and others with serious money management issues incurring extreme levels of debt.
4. How to best meet the needs of the increasing numbers of veterans homeless from prison, particularly those in a “revolving door”, recognising that the pattern of homeless veteran offending appears to be very different to other homeless groups, and is more likely to involve alcohol-triggered, violent and serious crimes that are impulsive rather than premeditated.
5. Developing a more structured approach to addressing the needs of homeless veterans with compound/multiple needs rooted in early childhood difficulties and disadvantage.
6. Whether there is a need for other options to ensure “dry” provision for recovering alcohol-dependent homeless veterans who are sober and fully abstinent.

Recommendations for future research

There are a number of areas which were beyond the scope of this study, but which the scoping work suggests may be potential areas for future research for Alabaré and include:

- New and more consistent internal data collection on homeless veterans living in generic supported housing accommodation with Alabaré accommodation;
- New internal data collection on the medical journeys of veteran clients in Alabaré accommodation, including change over time in medical conditions;
- Homeless female veterans;
- Homeless Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) veterans; □ Homeless veterans with a background of offending; and
- Homeless veterans with dependents.