

## **Written evidence submitted by Forward Assist to the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill**

Forward Assist is a multi-award winning charity based in the North East of England. Forward Assist is led and peopled by professionally qualified staff with extensive experience in the social care and military charity sector. See [www.forward-assist.com](http://www.forward-assist.com) for more details.

We at Forward Assist, believe that the role of Local Authority Armed Forces Champions should be enshrined in law and best practice guidelines developed in partnership with multi-disciplinary teams of social care services to ensure that any 'due regard' to the Armed Forces Covenant fully meets the needs of veterans and their families, especially those from minority groups or those with multiple complex needs. Such guidelines would also ensure consistency, openness and transparency.

The development of best practice guidelines for Armed Forces Champions would help ensure everyone understood the role and responsibilities of that position. These could include a declaration of any conflict of interests including an open and transparent complaints procedure.

It's interesting that the 'too many service charities' belief still persists, as its the smaller service charities, CIC's, Individuals and unincorporated community groups that have stepped up to the mark to support the most vulnerable during the current pandemic. Sadly, their outstanding work has not been recognised by the Department for Veterans Affairs nor have they been consulted on their views or opinions during this process. As much as we agree that there is a need for 'evidence based practice' we also think 'practice based evidence' speaks volumes and should be considered when designing and tailoring support to each geographic area.

The sad fact is many Local Authorities and Armed Forces Champions do not understand or are aware of the services in their locality. Across the country the thousands of veteran centric smaller organisations report being ignored by their local authority and/or Armed Forces Champion.

Small independent operators do not have a voice, so the creation of regional Veteran Service User Reps could help decision makers in Local Authorities better understand the multiple and complex issues faced by veterans and their families struggling with the transition and assimilation to the civilian world.

Funding from the Forces in Mind Trust (FIMT) could be made available to initiate research that would help everyone get a real understanding of unmet need whilst also making LA's aware of support services and referral pathways in their area. Many small organisations supporting veterans operate on a volunteer basis only and their generosity of kindness and spirit is often exploited by larger charities who refer veterans to the smaller organisations but do not offer funding to support service delivery.

We have heard LA representatives say they don't know how to engage veterans or know who operates in their geographical area. Life is a two way street and LA Cllrs need to proactively seek out veteran centric support groups in their area and support them with both financial and in kind support.

We believe that the role of an Armed Forces Champion should have a statutory duty to ensure services are not replicated or duplicated in their area as this only causes confusion for those trying to access support. Similarly, not knowing what services are out there and not

recognising their contribution or favouring others can be divisive and create unnecessary tensions and frustration. None of which are in the interest of veterans and their families.

The sad reality is, it still feels like it's open season on small charities and the larger service charities seem keen to get rid of them and/or discredit them. Yet if you look at the current direction of travel and areas of identified need such as; Veterans involved with the Criminal Justice System, Mental Health, Adjustment, Identity, Transition and Assimilation issues, Suicide, the lack of services for Women Veterans, Vulnerability, Homelessness, Addiction, Traumatic Brain Injury, Moral Injury, Military Sexual Trauma etc. All of the above were identified by grassroots organisations in the first instance and later picked up as areas of interest by the larger military charities.

We believe, the Armed Forces Bill affords everyone the opportunity to consult with small community groups and it should encourage services to work together and not compete for services, funding or recognition. The Armed Forces Champions can play a crucial role in making that happen and best practice guidelines would go a long way towards ensuring no veterans slipped through the welfare safety net.

### **Service Justice System Reforms**

We think that the term Military Sexual Trauma (MST) should be adopted and enshrined in the Armed Forces Bill. This would make the MOD accountable for the trauma caused by MST and specialist services could be designed and procured by the Office for Veterans Affairs to take care of MST Victims after service. Processes need to be put in place to mitigate MST within the ranks. The Armed Forces Bill could mandate the MOD to identify the process of prevention, the training of staff and support the long term recovery of those traumatised by MST. Survivors need military leaders to both hear them and protect them when they make complaints. Sadly, in many cases the current system allows victims to remain hidden, silenced and unacknowledged whilst perpetrators are free to offend again. More needs to be done to support those who report sexual assault and more training delivered to reinforce the message that sexual assault is both unacceptable and a serious criminal offence. Sexual assault... is sexual assault and rape... is rape, it should not be minimised by calling it unacceptable behaviour.

*The American Department of Veterans Affairs defines MST as any sexual activity that you are involved with against your will. Examples include:*

- *Being pressured or coerced into sexual activities, such as with threats of negative treatment if you refuse to cooperate or with promises of better treatment in exchange for sex*
- *Someone having sexual contact with you without your consent, such as when you were asleep or intoxicated*
- *Being physically forced to have sex*
- *Being touched in a sexual way that made you uncomfortable*
- *Repeated comments about your body or sexual activities*
- *Threatening and unwanted sexual advances*

*Anyone can experience MST, regardless of gender. Like other types of trauma, MST can negatively affect a person's mental and physical health, even many years later. See [Military Sexual Trauma - Mental Health \(va.gov\)](#)*

As mentioned above sexual assault and harassment can have a long term impact on the victim/survivors physical and mental wellbeing. Survivors can experience serious psychological and emotional difficulties, including post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse and alcohol addiction, social isolation, relationship difficulties and sexual dysfunction. These traumatic experiences may be further exacerbated, long after service especially if the abuse involved digital harassment, revenge porn, and/or bullying and harassment via social media.

The negative impact of sexual assault after military service cannot be underestimated as it brings with it shame, guilt, trauma, moral injury, confusion, loss of self-esteem, loss of self-respect, loss of dignity, pride, loss of trust and feelings of despair betrayal and violation.

Many suffer in silence as they cannot cope with the fact they were never believed and/or somehow complicit in the abuse. Not surprisingly those impacted by the above struggle to re-establish themselves in civilian life and a combination of limited life opportunities, poor mental health and behaviour related medical conditions result in what are now known in the USA as "deaths of despair"

It's a high price to pay for a policy change that could easily influence an upstream fix.

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