

CASE STUDY OF A CLINKS MEMBER - NORTHERN LEARNING TRUST

Supporting ex-service personnel released from prison

January 2016



Northern Learning Trust Case Study:

Supporting ex-service personnel released from prison

Introduction

This case study focuses on the delivery of an employability project in the North East of England, targeted at offenders who have served in the Armed Forces. The project, the Veterans Mentoring Project (formerly the Veterans Employment Support Project), is delivered by an educational voluntary sector organisation. The host organisation, the Northern Learning Trust, is well known for delivering community-based learning to groups who have been excluded from education, but less well known for their work with offenders. They have created a peer-to-peer model in which ex-service personnel, both paid and volunteers, provide services to other ex-service personnel who have been to prison.

Background

There are around four million former service personnel living in England and Wales¹, most of whom have made a good transition from military to civilian life. Others however, after leaving the Armed Forces, experience family breakdown, homelessness, substance misuse, and mental health problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression. Whilst involvement in the military is not considered to be a cause of offending behaviour (indeed, the Armed Forces has lower percentages of offenders compared to the general population), the experience of a military life can make it difficult for those who have been to prison to make the transition to life back in the community. Although precise figures are unknown, it is estimated that former service personnel make up around 3.5 percent of the prison population.

¹ Phillips, S. (2014), Former Members of the Armed Forces and the Criminal Justice System: A Review on behalf of the Secretary of State for Justice, HM Government.

Northern Learning Trust (NLT) is a charity based in Newcastle upon Tyne that works across the North East providing literacy, numeracy and skills for life support for disadvantaged groups. They deliver their services in a range of community locations, bringing learning to those who have been most excluded from education. Their work has considerable impact and significant progression can be seen in those that use their services. A Skills For Life Tutor who works for NLT illustrated this:

"I saw John the other day, he was working as an outreach worker at the community project. He was one of my first clients ... I took him through his Level One in English. Now that's community development in action!"

More information is at www.northernlearningtrust.org.uk

Support for this group of offenders is a priority for the National Offender Management Service and there have been several recent reviews into the specific issues experienced². The UK constitution has an Armed Forces Covenant, which states that no one who has served in the Armed Forces, or their dependents, should face disadvantage because of that service. There are also around 2000³ charities in the UK focusing on the welfare of ex-military, several of which focus on ex-offenders from the forces. However, the question of how to provide specific resettlement services for this group of ex-offenders remains unclear.

"If it wasn't for VMP I don't think we would be picking these guys up. They wouldn't know about us, or what we could do to help them. They would just fall through the cracks." British Legion

² E.g. HMIP (2014) People in prison: Ex-service personnel and Murrison (2010) Fighting Fit.

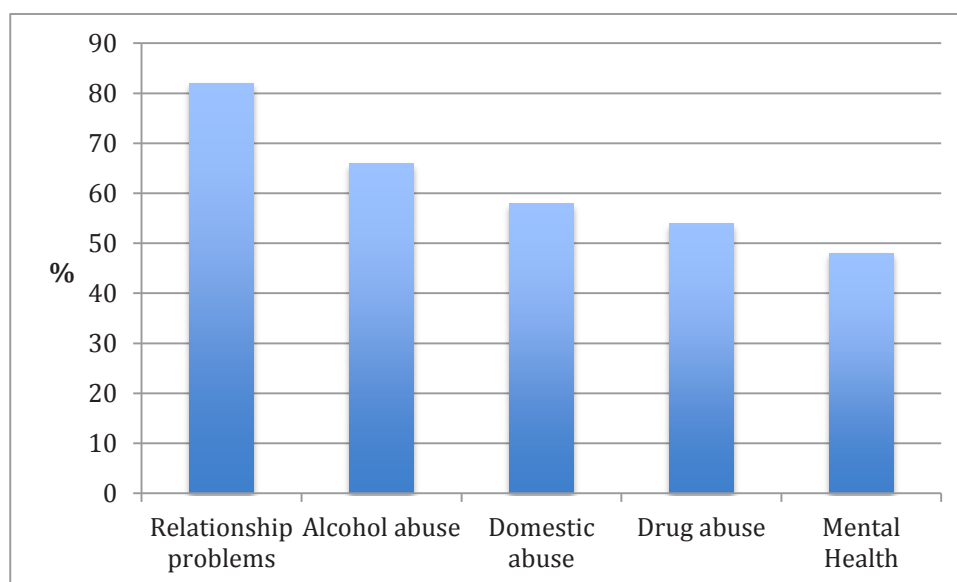
³ Phillips (2014)

Issues experienced by ex-services personnel

Ex-services personnel have come from a unique socio-professional environment with highly structured and disciplined lives where they have felt secure and valued in the work they have done. Many ex-service personnel joined the Armed Forces as young adults (40 percent of new recruits are aged between 16 and 19 years old), an important time for shaping values, beliefs and attitudes, which has been done in a highly controlled environment. This has then abruptly ended for a range of reasons including end of enlistment period, medical or disability issues or discharged for dishonorable conduct, leaving many people unable to cope with the transition into civilian life.

Typical challenges experienced by ex-offenders from the Armed Forces include substance misuse, homelessness and mental health problems. The impact of these challenges can be great for ex-service personnel as they struggle to adjust to life on *Civvy Street*⁴. When the Veterans Mentoring Project (VMP) carried out research on ex-service personnel in local prisons, they found a range of presenting issues, shown in the following figure.

Figure 1. Issues of ex-offenders from the Armed Forces



Over half of the initial group of referrals into VMP had a conviction for violence, of which nearly three quarters were for domestic violence.

⁴ The Royal British Legion (2006) Profile and Needs of the Ex-service Community 2005-2020; King's College London (2003) Improving The Delivery of Cross Departmental Support And Services For Veterans. A Joint Report of The Department of War Studies and The Institute of Psychiatry.



The Veterans Mentoring Project (VMP), originally called the veterans Employment Support project, started in September 2011 as an employability project for offenders who have worked in the Armed Forces. The project has been renamed to the Veterans Mentoring project to reflect that its focus has moved from employment to a wider mentoring project. The project helps people make the transition from prison back to life in the community and address the causes of their offending. It is delivered to prisoners leaving HMP Northumberland and HMP Durham. Between 2011 and 2014, VMP has worked with a total of 120 ex-services personnel (an average of 33 a year).

A vital ingredient of the work and its success is that the support is delivered by people (both paid and voluntary) who have served in the Armed Forces themselves. Specifically, ex-services personnel support other ex-services personnel who have offended to:

- Understand and adjust to the civilian life and address issues such as substance abuse, unsuitable accommodation, finance and debt and poor health
- Overcome any problems of behaviour, attitude or lack of confidence
- Improve literacy and numeracy skills
- Gain access to work, training or further education.

An important part of the work is to connect service users with community agencies who can offer resources or specialist services, for example: the Veterans Wellbeing Assessment and Liaison Service run by Northumbria NHS Trust who offer mental health services; and Armed Forces Community Support who have outreach workers across Tyneside⁵.

“The service that VMP provides is totally invaluable. Roger [a VMP volunteer] has identified three prisoners with PTSD which we otherwise would not have, and they have now been referred to Mental Health services and are now accessing further help and support that they needed.”

Durham HMP Education and Training

The project approach

VMP uses an innovative ‘Rear Echelon’ model when working with service users. Within the Armed Forces, the Rear Echelon is the unit concerned with planning, administrative and supply duties. VMP workers describe themselves as the Rear Echelon to the ex-services personnel with whom they work which creates a strong point of reference for offenders and something which they can understand. The fact that the support is provided by ex-services personnel who use military terminology and references such as Rear Echelon, gives the VMP workers credibility and enables the creation of a solid relationship between worker and offender. There are three broad stages to the work:

Stage one: contact and engagement in prison

Ex-service personnel are identified whilst in prison by the Offender Supervisor (since 2014, prisons record if offenders have served in the Armed Forces on the reception form as part of their diversity recording) and a referral is made to VMP. The veteran is contacted and visited by a VMP worker, usually on the prison wing, where the project and support is explained to them. This personal visit and explanation is important as a key engagement opportunity, where the support worker can introduce themselves as an

⁵ www.gateshead.gov.uk/People%20and%20Living/Armed-Forces-Community-Support.aspx

ex-serviceman. At this stage and after discussion with the service user's Offender Supervisor, a good picture of the support needs can be built up.

Stage two: assessment and plans in the community

A VMP worker meets the service user in the community and a needs assessment is carried out, with a focus on employability. A plan is then made to deal with both immediate and longer term needs, with aspirations and objectives to be achieved. If a prison visit has not been possible, then this can be the first visit.

Stage three: ongoing support

VMP workers visit the service user once a week at first and are supported to navigate unfamiliar civilian systems and develop their skills using the 'Rear Echelon' model. Through this support, service users are helped to:

- Understand, appreciate and come to terms with expectations of employers in civilian life
- Revise and adapt their language, social behaviour and communication skills
- Explore expectations, limitations, thinking skills and anger management
- Increase their self esteem and confidence.

Through the emotional support, information, advice and guidance provided by a VMP worker, service users are helped to access vocational and functional skills training with the objectives of finding work or self-employment. Ongoing support is provided to ensure that service users maintain their employment and have easy access to staff who are able to support them in relation to relapse or difficulties.

"The Rear Echelon mentoring training model used within the project is unique, innovative and could potentially be replicated successfully for the same client group across other areas of the country if additional resources were able to be found and put in place. It has been uniquely designed and piloted successfully within this project."

Mentoring & Befriending Foundation Verification Assessor



The project has achieved a number of important outcomes, evidenced by such tools as the Ministry of Justice Case Management and Assessment Tracking System (CATS) and the Outcomes Star. VMP has also been the focus of external assessments and a Social Return on Investment (SROI)⁶. These outcomes include:

Reduction in reoffending

The SROI exercise found that in a cohort of 54 service users, only seven percent of service users reoffended over a 12 month period. CATS records found a similar figure in the cohort they followed.

Increased employment

Between 2011 and 2014, two thirds of all VESP service users (n=80) gained qualifications and 23% (n=28) secured employment. The CATS records showed in a cohort of 50 individuals, 76% showed an improvement in the area of employability and 56% in education and training.

⁶ Foundation for Social Improvement (2014) The Economic and Social Value of Northern Learning Trust's Mentoring Services: Evaluation and SROI Analysis

Improved thinking and behaviour

Assessments⁷ have shown service users have improved coping strategies and are able to change negative patterns of behaviour, ultimately reducing reoffending and other negative behaviours. CATS records show motivation improved for 68% and attitude for 72% of service users.

Increased use of community services

As a result of referrals and signposting, service users are able to access external support they may have not otherwise accessed more appropriately and efficiently. Previous to contact with the project, service users had no knowledge of these services. These resources and support contributes to improved skills, employability and increased confidence.

“I was a recluse. I was in a place where I was terrified to go out, I would have palpitations when the post came. I went back to drugs and felt suicidal. My [VMP worker] helped me to get out of the house, get to my appointments. I’ve learned how to fight off my demons better.”

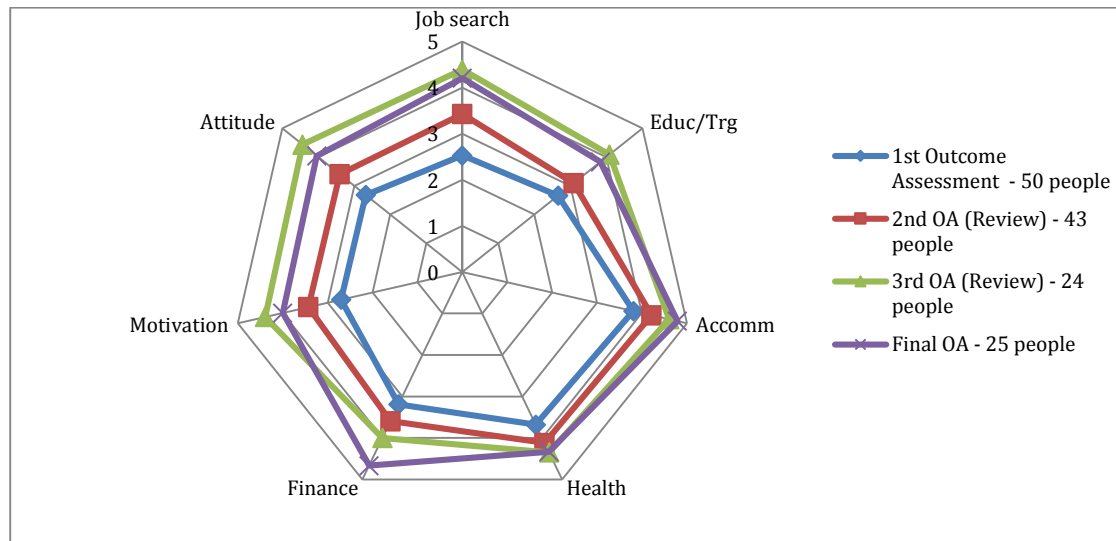
Service user, VMP

Outcomes Star summary

Figure 2 shows average change experienced by a cohort of 50 service users in a number of key areas. As can be seen, there have been improvements across a range of important indicators.

⁷ Foundation for Social Improvement, 2014; NLT project assessments.

Figure 2. Outcomes Star demonstrated outcomes



Conclusion

The results of the SROI analysis indicate that for every £1 invested into mentoring services delivered by Northern Learning Trust, at least £13 is realised in social value. The SROI reported that VMP delivers significant value for money and delivers high value outcomes experienced by a range of stakeholders, including service users, volunteers, the criminal justice system as well as the economy and society as a whole.

It would also appear that the outcomes are sustainable. Although NLT does not currently collect data on long term outcomes, the experiences of stakeholders has been that the impact of the programme and the development of new coping strategies, continues to be felt long after the period of support has ended. This may explain the low re-offending rates.

NLT's model and impact has been recognised as an example of best practice and in November 2012 VMP was awarded the European Social Fund Equal Opportunities Leader National Champion Award for Specialist Projects. In 2013, they were awarded the Approved Provider Standard by the Mentoring Befriending Association.

Case study: Andrew, ex-army

Andrew is 38 years old and served in the Army from 1996 to 2011. His career was ended due to a conviction. After prison, he found the transition to civilian life difficult as he was unprepared for it. He was also struggling with his mental health and was suffering from depression. Andrew asked the project for support and was supported by Peter, who was a veteran himself and who could therefore empathise with and relate to some of Andrew's issues. The VESP worker quickly identified that Andrew was suffering from low self-esteem and encouraged him to consider any training opportunities available. The aim was to boost his employment chances, restore his self-esteem, and to occupy his mind. At the same time, he encouraged Andrew to see his GP and accompanied him on his first visit to seek support for his depression.

With some gentle persuasion, Andrew attended forklift truck training which he enjoyed and did well at and this inspired him to attend further courses such as a reusable energy course. Peter also identified a telecommunications course delivered through Gateshead College and Cable Com. Whilst in the Army, Andrew had trained as an advanced signaller so the telecommunications course suited his skills and interests. This course led to a BTEC and a City and Guilds qualification. With the support of the Discretionary Access Fund, VESP were able to provide Andrew with a trade specific tool kit and Personal Protective Equipment which allowed him to register with employment agencies seeking telecommunications staff. Initially the work was only an odd day here and there but over time Andrew gained a reputation in the field as a hard working, proficient professional and he is now working regularly.

When the VESP worker contacted Andrew earlier this year to find out how things were, Andrews's response was very positive: *"Things are looking up, even thinking about getting married this year so things are moving forward. Haven't felt like this for years thanks to you"*.

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