



Loneliness and Social Isolation in the Armed Forces Community

Briefing for local authorities

Summary

Loneliness and social isolation are public health hazards. Recent research for The Royal British Legion revealed that members of the Armed Forces community are exposed to events and challenges that make them more vulnerable to loneliness and isolation. The frequent house moves, long periods of separation from family and friends, and the challenge of transitioning out of the Forces are just a few of the factors that raise the risks.

The Legion is calling on local authorities to recognise the specific hazards of loneliness and social isolation among the Armed Forces community by including consideration of this group in their Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNA) and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies (JHWS).

Background

In 2014, the Legion published *A UK household survey of the ex-service community*¹, which at that time was the largest survey conducted of the UK ex-Service community. The survey found that one in six members of the ex-Service community reported experiencing some relationship or isolation difficulty, equivalent to around 770,000 people.

The Legion embarked on a cross-organisation project exploring loneliness and social isolation in the Armed Forces community in greater depth and published our findings in 2018. Our subsequent report, *Loneliness and Social Isolation in the Armed Forces Community*², was, to our knowledge, the first piece of research carried out on this topic specifically concerning the Armed Forces community. This research, which included interviews, focus groups and an online survey, revealed that elements of a military lifestyle can increase vulnerability to loneliness and social isolation.

In response to the increasing awareness of loneliness as a public health problem, the UK Government launched its loneliness strategy³ in October 2018. This strategy acknowledges veterans as being at increased risk of experiencing loneliness. The UK Veterans Strategy published in 2018⁴ also identifies loneliness as one of six key themes to be addressed over the next ten years.

Local authorities play a key role in helping to reduce loneliness and social isolation in communities. They are ideally placed to understand the levels of loneliness in their areas, identify who is at risk, and act. The Government's loneliness strategy acknowledges the work already being done and calls on local authorities to consider how loneliness can be embedded in their strategic planning and decision making.⁵ The Local Government Association (LGA) have encouraged councils to take action to tackle loneliness by raising

¹ The Royal British Legion, [A UK household survey of the ex-service community](#), 2014

² The Royal British Legion, [Loneliness and Social Isolation in the Armed Forces Community](#), 2018

³ HM Government, [A Connected Society: A Strategy for tackling loneliness](#), 2018

⁴ HM Government, [The Strategy for our Veterans](#), 2018

⁵ Ibid. p.16

awareness, finding those who are experiencing loneliness, and providing interventions and services that can alleviate the problem; while taking a strategic approach by including loneliness in Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) and setting tackling loneliness as an objective in Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies (JHWS).

The wider impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown specifically are still being analysed but early indications from the Mental Health Foundation indicate a significant increase in feelings of loneliness in the UK. In March 2020, 10% of UK adults said they felt lonely, increasing to 24% by the beginning of April 2020. It is therefore incredibly timely to consider additional measures to alleviate loneliness and social isolation and acknowledge this as a public health priority. The Legion's nationwide network of branches and members sprung into action during the pandemic, supporting their community to stay connected with a range of activities from online fitness and baking classes to telephone buddying and virtual gardening clubs.

Key Findings

Key findings from the Legion's Loneliness and Social Isolation report include:

- One in four survey respondents from the ex-service community indicated that they feel lonely and socially isolated 'always' or 'often'.
- Moving to a new area was the most common cause of social isolation.
- Bereavement was the most common cause of loneliness.
- Exiting the Armed Forces was the most common cause of both loneliness and social isolation. 51% of survey respondents said exiting the Armed Forces caused them to feel lonely or social isolated in the past. When responses were filtered for veteran respondents only, this figure rose to 65%.
- The self-reliant culture of the Armed Forces can limit people's willingness to seek help or speak out when they feel lonely or isolated.
- The need for Service personnel to be deployed away from their families and friends for long periods can lead to relationship difficulties.
- Military accommodation can be viewed in two ways. Some people find life on 'patch' gives them a ready-built community to live in, while others find it small and inward looking.

Research identified six particular triggers for loneliness and social isolation in the Armed Forces community. These are:

1. Increased volume of transitions in the Armed Forces due to a highly mobile lifestyle.
2. Armed Forces culture: A culture of self-reliance, and a perceived lack of understanding from the civilian community.
3. Relationship issues: Long periods of separation from family, difficulties upon a partner or parent's return, and relationship breakdown due to pressures of Service life.
4. Accommodation issues: Some issues integrating into new communities, a lack of support or information for those renting/living privately.
5. Exiting the Forces: Concerns over life on 'civvy street', a lack of social networks post-exit, struggle with sudden discharge due to health or other issues.
6. Health and injury: Impact of ageing and health issues on mobility and social networks, impact of injury on career and family, difficulties adjusting to new roles and responsibilities.

Consequences

Loneliness and social isolation are recognised as a national priority and a national health hazard. Loneliness is linked to high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, Alzheimer's disease, and an increase in the risk of premature death by 30%.⁶ People experiencing loneliness are more likely to visit GPs and hospitals, and more likely to enter local authority care.⁷ Three-quarters of GPs say that up to five of their patients each day attend because they are lonely.⁸ Tackling loneliness and social isolation not only alleviates suffering of local residents but is an important part of preventative public health work.

Recommendation

The Legion is calling on local authorities to improve the measures they take to help members of the Armed Forces who are feeling lonely or socially isolated by including loneliness and social isolation in their JSNAs and JHWS.

Please see Appendix 1 for further information on available support.

⁶ LGA, [Combating Loneliness: A guide for local authorities](#), 2016, p.7

⁷ HM Government, , [A Connected Society: A Strategy for tackling loneliness](#), p. 19

⁸ LGA, [Loneliness: How do you know your council is actively tackling loneliness](#), 2018, p.4

APPENDIX 1

Available Support

The Royal British Legion provides a wide range of support for the Armed Forces community, including services which help build connections. The following is a snapshot of some of our activity in this area, although some services are currently more limited as a result of Covid-19:

1. Community Support

We have an established network of Branches in England, Wales & Ireland involved in Community Support. This volunteer facet is a substantial force within the community, providing a sense of comradeship and creating openings for wider engagement. Recognising the sheer scale of those experiencing social isolation or loneliness in the Armed Forces community, this scheme offers services to support those identified as lonely or isolated, and provides a sense of belonging. Key provision focusses on the delivery of:

2. Telephone Buddies

Over 230 Branches are able to provide support on the phone through our Telephone Buddy Service. This gives people who are feeling isolated the opportunity to reach out, talk to someone about what they're going through, and find out about ways they can get involved in events and feel part of their local community. Between April and June 2020, we supported over 7,000 people through this service, making over 19,000 calls.

3. Home and Hospital Visits

Many of our Branches also reach out to people who have difficulty getting out and about to meet others, or who have no one to visit them during a stay in hospital. Branches are able to offer home and hospital visits to those who may be feeling isolated in some way. It gives them a chance to talk with someone who may understand what they're going through. Nearly 1,000 people were supported in this way between April and June 2020.

4. Care Homes

Our six Care Homes offer a number of ways to help frail older people (and their carers) feel more connected with the communities around them. These include dementia cafés or clubs, which give people living with dementia in the community a chance to socialise, participate in activities and build their confidence. We also offer social groups to support carers and organise events so that residents are able to make links with the local community.

5. Pop In Centres

At 15 locations across the UK, we offer a walk-in service for people who want to chat or find out about services and support in their local community. We work closely with other organisations such as Combat Stress, Walking with the Wounded and Age UK to help people make links with others in their area and get involved with events and other activities. Each centre offers a welcoming space for serving and ex-serving personnel, and their families, to get practical help and advice.

6. Financial Guidance and Hardship Support

Sometimes, social isolation can be exacerbated by financial problems, including getting into debt. We offer benefits, debt and financial guidance on a range of issues to help reduce stress and anxiety and aid a smooth transition to civilian life. We also run an online money management tool and offer grants, including crisis grants, to pay for essentials such as mobility items or hearing equipment, to give people the confidence to get out into their community and communicate better with the people around them.

7. Support for carers

We can provide specialist mental health nurses to support carers of people living with dementia. Admiral Nurses provide practical, emotional and psychological help to give the family unit healthy ways to cope as the illness progress. As a result, carers will feel less isolated and more connected to those who can give them help, as well as more able to provide a positive, caring environment for their loved one.

6. Help Living at Home

Our Help Living at Home service specialises in supporting people with disabilities or long term conditions to enable them to live independent, healthy and happy lives. This includes providing advice on local transport, events, social groups, fitness activities and support services, so people feel encouraged to go out.

8. Research and Campaigning

The Royal British Legion in 2018 released research into loneliness and isolation within the Armed Forces community. This research explored the unique or aggravated triggers for loneliness that serving and ex-serving personnel and their families face. The report also contained a number of recommendations for policy makers, which the Legion is pursuing.

Further details on the services provided, how you can refer for assistance or look to become involved with volunteering for TRBL can be found by visiting our website at www.rbl.org.uk or by calling our contact centre on **0808 802 8080**.

For residents outside the UK please call **+44 (0)20 3376 8080**. For residents in the Republic of Ireland please call **1800 992 294**.

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