

Volunteer mentoring addresses a gap in provision for ex-service men and women

Tuesday 18 October, 2016

EMBARGO: 1600 Tuesday October 18, 2016

Shoulder to Shoulder, a unique volunteer mentoring project which supports ex-service men and women who are struggling to adjust to civilian life, is meeting a need and addressing a gap in service provision, says an external evaluation from research consultancy The Lines Between.

Speaking at the launch of the report at Westminster today (October 18), Helen Walker, Chief Executive of TimeBank, the volunteering charity which runs the project, said: "Many service veterans are in a state of crisis in their lives, with complex problems including financial hardship, homelessness, alcohol dependency and health issues. The struggle for them is to move on from the military and settle into civilian life, so support from both military and civilian charities, working in partnership, is vital to address their range of needs. We need to ensure we work together so that each veteran gets the support they need, whoever is delivering it."

Shoulder to Shoulder Erskine is a two-year volunteer mentoring programme for ex-service men and women and their families in Glasgow and Edinburgh, delivered by TimeBank in partnership with the Scottish veterans' charity Erskine. It is funded by The Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) and the Henry Smith Charity and draws on TimeBank's extensive experience of delivering volunteer mentoring projects that support vulnerable people through difficult transitions in their lives.

Shoulder to Shoulder Erskine recruits and trains volunteers to provide one to one mentoring support to veterans who are recovering from mental health issues or struggling to adjust to life after the military. They actively encourage the veterans to manage their finances, use public transport, take exercise and write CVs. They help them access local support services and sort out their housing issues. Volunteers also support veteran's family members, who often face unique challenges in understanding and dealing with the issues their partners, sons and daughters are going through.

The external evaluation highlights the success of the Shoulder to Shoulder Erskine project and its positive impacts for both veterans and volunteers. It says the unique nature of the service is clearly providing a valued and useful addition to services that support veterans and points to increases in confidence, self-esteem and social networks resulting from mentoring. It concludes that the voluntary nature of the mentors' contribution is a particular motivator, creating a social bond that encourages engagement in the project and complements professional services. Volunteers on the project felt they had learnt more about mental health issues and veterans' support needs and gained a feeling of self-worth that came from doing something valuable.

The Armed Forces community in Scotland numbers half a million - 10% of the population - of whom 230,000 suffer from long-term illness or disability. In addition; adult members of the ex-service community are (41%) more likely to live alone than other adults (24%) in Scotland; 15% are affected by social isolation; 10% have long-term mental health problems and 20% have employment-related problems*.

Ray Lock, Chief Executive of the Forces in Mind Trust said: "Mental health is one of the key challenges that ex-Service personnel can face when coming out of the Armed Forces. A better understanding of these challenges, and how best they can be overcome is invaluable to helping ex-Service personnel and their families have successful transitions into civilian life. The Trust welcomes the findings of the evaluation of this pilot project and we look forward to seeing how this work develops in the future."

* www.poppyscotland.org.uk

18 October 2016

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