

<b>Institution:</b> University of Northumbria at Newcastle		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 3 (Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Improving access to support services for military veterans and families		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2015 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Matthew Kiernan	Associate Professor	2013 - present
Gill McGill	Senior Research Assistant	2015 - present
Gemma Wilson	Senior Research Fellow	2014 - present
Alison Osborne	Research Assistant	2014 - present
Jane Greaves	Senior Lecturer	2009 - present
Mick Hill	Associate Professor	1980 - present
Michael Rodrigues	Senior Research Assistant	2017 - present
Natalie Forster	Research Fellow	2008 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> September 2017 - December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Military civilians (including veterans and families of serving personnel) make up almost 8% of the UK population. However, data on their needs, wellbeing, and their location are lacking, meaning service provision is often inadequate. The Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research at Northumbria University focusses on mapping and understanding the health and social wellbeing needs of military civilians, and the provision of support for this group. This research has had two major impacts: 1) the development of the only digital, UK-wide support service directory specifically developed for current military personnel, veterans and their families, which has attracted over 20,000 searches in the past year, has led to improved access, and better strategic planning of services; and 2) improvements in practice, including the development of bespoke service models and the production of a Good Practice Guide for the Royal British Legion (2,500+ branches in the UK), which has directly influenced the allocation of GBP5,500,000 funding to tackle social isolation in the military.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>It is estimated that there are currently 5.3 million military civilians (including veterans, their families, and the families of serving personnel) in the UK. The Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research at Northumbria University conducts investigations focussed on mapping and understanding the health and social wellbeing needs of military civilians, and the provision of support for this group.</p> <p>Whilst, historically, support to military personnel and their families has been centred around military sites, there is a lack of data about where they live and their support needs. In 2010, the Strategic Defence and Security Review advised the withdrawal of all military personnel from UK bases in Germany by 2020. 20,000 serving personnel and their families were affected by this, resulting in a significant alteration to the geospatial distribution of service families in the UK. As part of their broader 'Map of Need' programme [G1], the Northumbria team developed a novel approach to identify the location of serving personnel and veterans based on need, using geospatial methodologies and the Service Child Pupil Premium as a proxy [R1]. Findings revealed an underlying shift in the location of military families: they have become less clustered and increasingly inhabit rural areas [R1], posing new issues for service provision and accessibility.</p>		

Research from the Hub has led to a greater understanding of veterans as a marginalised and hard-to-reach group, often unable or reluctant to access the services they need [G1]. In-depth, qualitative research with 32 veterans (from across the UK and from all services of the UK Armed Forces) showed that barriers include the impact of adjusting to life outside the services [R2, R3, G2]. A history of service life means they are unfamiliar with civilian support services [R2] and thus are inclined to favour assistance provided by the military [R3]. In addition to this, a prevailing attitude of stoicism often means individuals are reluctant to seek help [R2]. One area where third-sector service provision is extremely important is in helping veterans to stay socially connected to tackle social isolation [R3].

The Armed Forces Covenant is designed to ensure that all past and present military personnel and their families are not disadvantaged in provision of services or medical treatment. Research by the Northumbria team shows that the principles of the Covenant are inconsistently applied at different levels in the NHS, leading to a lack of consideration for veteran specific needs in commissioning and delivery processes [R4]. Further qualitative research into the barriers that veterans face when seeking help – particularly for substance misuse [G3] – highlighted the extent to which health and social care professionals struggle to understand the unique needs of this group, compounding veterans' negative experiences around accessibility and support [R5]. Findings indicated that a series of interrelated factors explain their specific needs, including the normalisation of excessive alcohol consumption, a culture which highlights the virtue of resilience, and the belief that injury and illness are a form of weakness [R5]. Delays in meaningful engagement with substance misuse services were pervasive among participants, resulting in a clustering of problems around mental and physical health, housing, and unemployment [R5]. Peer-support models appeared to mitigate against disengagement [R5]. Feelings of social isolation and loneliness are significant problems among veterans, compounded by poor or inadequate information on available services [R6]. To address these issues, the research team undertook a Delphi study (an iterative consensus seeking process involving experts in the field), which outlined that veterans would benefit from integrating into services within the wider community, and the potential of social prescribing services as a vehicle to link veterans to relevant services [R6].

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

**R1. Michael Rodrigues, Alison Osborne, Johnson, D.\***, and **Matthew D Kiernan (2020)** 'The exploration of the dispersal of British military families in England following the Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010' *PLOS ONE* **16**(9): e0238508 [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0238508](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0238508)

**R2. Gemma Wilson, Gill McGill, Alison Osborne, and Matthew D Kiernan (2020)** 'Housing Needs of Ageing Veterans Who Have Experienced Limb Loss' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* **17**(5): 1791 [doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051791](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051791)

**R3. Gill McGill, Gemma Wilson, Caddick, N.\*\***, **Natalie Forster**, and **Matthew D Kiernan (2020)** 'Rehabilitation and transition in military veterans after limb-loss' *Disability and Rehabilitation* [doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2020.1734875](https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2020.1734875)

**R4. Gill McGill, Gemma Wilson, Mick Hill, and Matthew D Kiernan (2019)** 'Utilisation of the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant in NHS Trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups across England: a freedom of information investigation' *BMJ open* **9**(1): e022053 [doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-022053](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-022053)

**R5. Matthew D Kiernan, Alison Osbourne, Gill McGill, Jane Greaves, Gemma Wilson, and Mick Hill (2018)** 'Are veterans different? Understanding veterans' help seeking behaviour for alcohol problems' *Health and Social Care in the Community* **26**(5): 725 – 733 [doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12585](https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12585)

**R6.** Leslie, C. \*, **Gill McGill**, **Matthew D Kiernan**, and **Gemma Wilson (2020)** 'Social Isolation and Loneliness of UK Veterans: A Delphi Study' *Occupational Medicine* **70**(6): 407-414  
[doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqaa105](https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqaa105)

**Research funding** 2016-2020 totalled GBP1,953,115 including but not limited to:

**G1.** Matthew Kiernan PI, Ministry of Defence Armed Forces Covenant Funding Programme, GBP1,386,431 (Grant nos. CF-SG001 and 3590)

**G2.** Matthew Kiernan PI, Royal British Legion Aged Veterans Fund Healthy Living Programme, GBP199,978 (Grant no. AVF-TRBL04)

**G3.** Matthew Kiernan PI, Royal British Legion External Grant Programme, GBP146,322 (Grant nos. 1516/84 and TRBL11-NUN)

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\*\*External collaborators: N. Caddick – Angela Ruskin University

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Research by The Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families has led to better resource allocation and service delivery for UK military civilians. In addition, specific substance abuse and social isolation provision has been enhanced across the UK, resulting in more effective and appropriate interventions.

##### 4.1 Improving service access, strategy, and delivery through the Map of Need

In response to the failures in service provision and the barriers to accessing services found within the research [R2-R5], Northumbria created the only digital, UK-wide directory of services through collaboration with the devolved governments, NHS, and other key national bodies - known as the *Veterans Gateway Mobile Application and Local Support website* (VG; <https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk/local-support/>). The VG enables veterans and their families to identify appropriate service provision in their local area, from a database of 16,800 quality-assured service delivery points in the UK. The impact arising from this database is twofold: 1) it helps the Armed Forces community to access the support required, and 2) it gives service providers the information necessary to ensure demand is met and supports the adequate allocation of resources. These data-driven improvements to service provision are part of an overarching project referred to as the 'Map of Need' (MoN). The Ministry of Defence (MoD) commissioned the Northumbria team (G1: GBP1,386,431) to create the national MoN for the sector, based on secondary data analysis from the VG and the innovative methodology developed by the team [R1].

In terms of services for the community, the MoN project delivers a ground-breaking, international software solution to connect veterans with services, accessible through a UK Government website and mobile app hosted by the Royal British Legion (RBL) [E1]. The VG comprises a 24-7 staffed contact centre, an informative website, and many channels of access – including email, postal mail, UK freephone, social media and live chat [E1]. The geolocation capability of the software is the first of its kind specific to mapping veteran services online at a national, rather than local, level, as is attested to by Mark Collins, CEO of Poppyscotland:

*'[Northumbria University's work on the VG] has delivered a military charity sector 'first' in terms of the UK-wide App, available for free ...that is gaining usage and providing users from within the Armed Forces community with swift access to the services they seek via a simple to use mapping engine [... Without the VG] it would have been very difficult to clearly identify who required what support in what geographical area... as time has passed Northumbria University have developed an evidence based data set [...that] informs statutory and charity organisations of where need really is' [E2].*

As Collins states, the number of searches on the VG has risen consistently since it was established in November 2018. During 2020, there were a total of 20,523 individual searches for

services, up from 12,332 the previous year, of which ~5% were from users located overseas (or with a null location) [E3, p4]. 'Mental Wellbeing', 'Housing', and 'Employment' were the most searched of the 11 social service topics [E3, p6]. Helen Helliwell, Chair of the Board of Trustees at the Armed Forces Covenant Fund (AFCFT) praises the VG directory for greatly improving access to the support required by veterans and their families [E4]. The VG also received recognition from the media, with ITV News covering the release of the app to the public (aired May 2020) [E5]. Within this, Sgt Tom Ripley, Welfare Officer at Catterick Garrison praised the app for providing support '*in the comfort and security of your own home [...and giving] anonymity*', as he recognises that having to seek support face-to-face can act as a barrier, as individuals, particularly men, '*can find that embarrassing*' [E5].

MoN findings are being used to inform funding strategies and service providers comprehension of UK veterans service use [E4]. Monthly usage reports, highlighting hotspots and resource need, are sent to funders and key stakeholders including the MoD, Office of Veteran's Affairs, and the RBL [E4]. In this way, the MoN project has led to the first, large-scale data-sharing effort among armed service charities [E4]. Helliwell, Chair of the Board of Trustees at AFCFT, an organisation tasked with dispersing GBP10,000,000 per year to support health and wellbeing among armed forces families and veterans, acknowledges the value of Northumbria's work, stating:

*'[By using data from the MoN] services are able to more effectively develop their policies towards enhanced support, targeted delivery to improve operational practices on the front-lines and make cost-saving decisions on resource-planning which in turn enables the allocation of more funds to be directed at essential care services'* [E4].

Similarly, Sailors Soldiers Air Force Association (SSAFA) – a military charity with 5,000 volunteers who provide physical and emotional care to 85,000 individuals – has used the MoN '*to target resources, recruitment and training strategy, ensuring that we have been able to respond to the growing need in key areas and focus our volunteer network on how they need to respond*', which benefits members of the armed forces community UK-wide [E6].

#### 4.2 Improving practice to support veterans

Northumbria's research has enhanced understanding of veteran specific support needs and experiences, which has directly influenced the improvement of support services. For example, Sunderland City Council (SCC) commissioned a new, co-produced veteran specific model of care, which is set within the health and social care pathway [E7]. Since its implementation in 2018, this new service has benefitted the local veteran population by improving accessibility and inclusivity of services and their care pathways [E7]. Ben Seale, Public Health Lead at SCC attests to this, stating '*We have seen the degree and manner with which veterans engage with our services become much more effective, and the collaborative method developed by Northumbria research has greatly improved the practices of our service providers*' [E7]. This success was such that the model has been shared across regional services beyond veteran support to '*enhance service delivery across multi-disciplinary service networks regionally*' [E7].

Northumbria's research also highlighted a lack of understanding among NHS staff regarding the unique needs of veterans, insight which has since been used to make improvements to services through two prominent trusts based in the North of England: the Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear (CNTW) NHS Foundation Trust, and the Tees, Esk, and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust. In addition to supporting the development of a veteran-delivered education programme attended by 200 members of clinical staff, which improved awareness and understanding of the '*unique care and support needs of veterans*' [E8], collaboration between CNTW Foundation Trust, Northumbria and veterans resulted in the development of a new model of veteran care, entitled 'Hub and Spoke' [E8]. Simon Douglas, Director of Research, Innovation and Clinical Effectiveness for the Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust states that there are clear care and finance related benefits of this programme:

*[Cost savings made through Hub and Spoke] can be re-purposed to deliver improved and more sustained care to veterans [...and] giving them a voice in their care plans and delivery results in fewer veterans leaving care and becoming more vulnerable to alcohol and substance misuse, and other potential dangers to their mental health and wellbeing' [E8].*

Further to this, findings from Northumbria's research, most notably the unique circumstances of social isolation and loneliness among veterans, inspired the development of a Good Practice Guide for the RBL (a key financial, social, and emotional support service for veterans) - a document now used across all RBL branches in the UK (2,500+) [E9]. The guide, authored by Northumbria, covers three key areas, vital to supporting the Branch Community Support (BCS) programme, relating to embedding principles into the wider community, knowing your customers, and information sharing. Jane Britton, Area Manager RBL, notes that this document is *'fundamental in building a national understanding, across all Royal British Legion branches, of the role BCS activities play in alleviating social isolation and loneliness'* [E9]. To ensure successful implementation and management of the BCS, RBL have employed a dedicated BCS Lead worker [E9]. This research has also influenced the practice of the AFCFT, the leading Armed Forces Grant provider, who have used Northumbria's research to inform funding decisions, including the allocation of GBP5,500,000 to the *Reducing Isolation in the Veterans and Armed Forces Community* grant programme, which is now benefitting veterans and military families across the UK [E10].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Ref.	Source of corroboration	Link to claimed impact
E1	Veterans Gateway Mobile Application and Local Support website (available by searching for 'Veterans Gateway' in App store) <a href="https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk/">https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk/</a>	Showing use of Northumbria research to create database resource
E2	Testimonial – Mark Collins, CEO Poppyscotland	Provides insight on the VG website and app – outlining Northumbria's role and contribution in its creation
E3	Veterans Gateway Usage reports	Demonstrates usage of the veterans and Families Directory of Services
E4	Testimonial - Helen Helliwell, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (and Director of Armed Forces People Policy at MoD UK)	Showing value of MoN to delivering support for veterans
E5	ITV News coverage – <i>Mobile phone app launched to help support veterans</i> (aired: 01/05/2020)	Covers use of app by veterans during pandemic
E6	Testimonial - Lisa Shattock, Director of Marketing and Communications, SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity	Confirming SSAFA use of research in targeting resources, training, and recruitment
E7	Testimonial - Ben Seale, Public Health Lead, Sunderland County Council (SCC)	Evidence of research influencing service delivery
E8	Testimonial - Simon Douglas, Director of Research, Innovation and Clinical Effectiveness, NHS Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear	Evidence of research influencing service delivery and training
E9	Testimonial - Jane Britton, Area Manager, The Royal British Legion/Gail Walters Assistant Director of Operations & Good Practice Guide PDF	Showing how research has influenced development of good practice guide
E10	Testimonial - Melloney Poole, CEO, The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust	Demonstrating value of MoN to resource planning and funding allocation