



OUTCOMES study: Investigating the benefits of military Service

**Summary report: Findings from a narrative literature
review and focus groups with ex-Service personnel**

September 2025

Background and relevance



Each year, 15,000 personnel leave the United Kingdom (UK) Armed Forces (AF) regular Service. Most Service leavers adjust well to civilian life and will join the civilian workforce. Research, however, tends to focus on the negative consequences of Service, combat, and the challenges ex-Service personnel may have with their physical health, mental health, and wellbeing [1, 2, 3]. There is some evidence about the positive outcomes of Service [4,5], however, these are often not a primary focus of research, and there is a gap in evidence about the potential benefits and value of military Service.

Additionally, existing evidence indicates that the public perceive ex-Service personnel as having poorer mental health, and increased levels of homelessness and unemployment [6, 7], particularly compared to the civilian population [7]. These misconceptions may impact successful return to civilian communities for ex-Service personnel and their families and potentially cause employers

to overlook the value of Service. The recent UK Government Strategic Defence Review [8] calls for a whole-of-society approach to defence, to build society's understanding of what the AF do, and increase their visibility. Evidence about the benefits and value of Service, may help balance the narrative about Service, support transition into civilian communities, and AF recruitment.

The Centre for Evidence for the Armed Forces Community, funded by FiMT, developed the **OUTCOMES study**, which took place between 2024-2025 to address this gap in evidence. The aim of the research was to explore the **perceived benefits of military Service** as reported by ex-Service personnel. Two research questions were asked;

1. **What are the benefits of Serving in the UK AF?**
2. **How do UK ex-Service personnel perceive the value of their Service on their post-Service life?**

Project outline and methods



To address the research questions, two studies were developed and undertaken.

Study one: Review of existing evidence

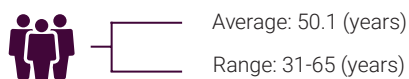
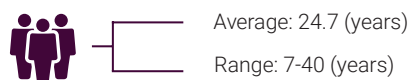
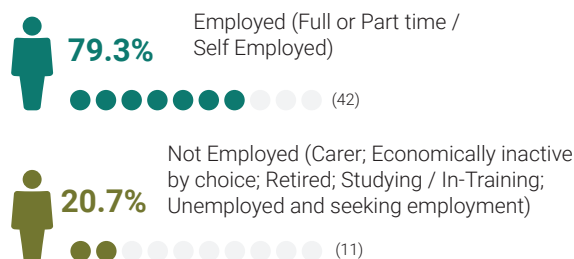
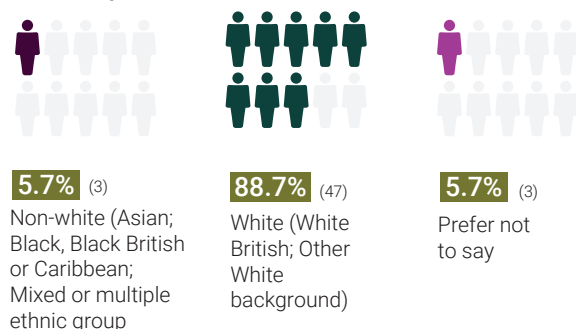
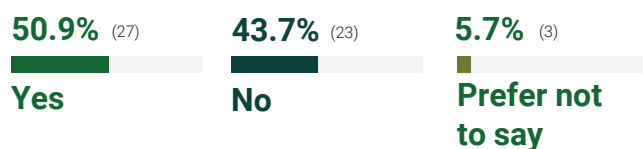
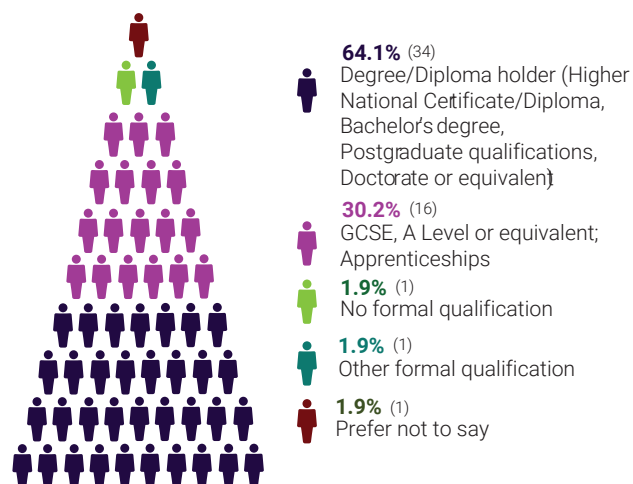
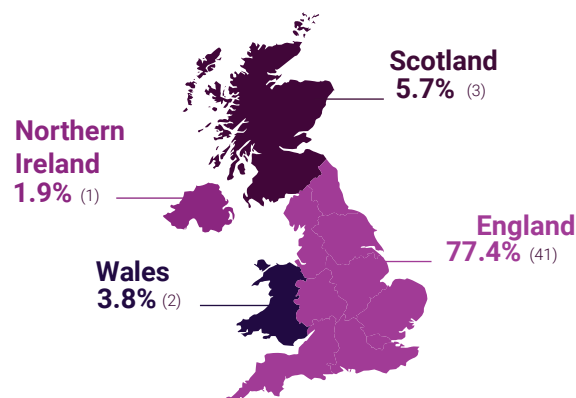
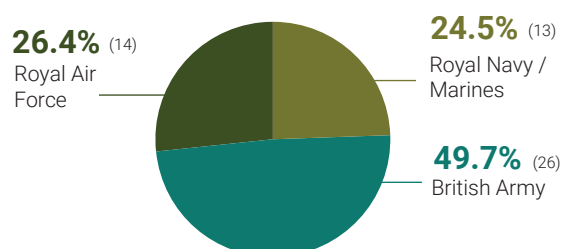
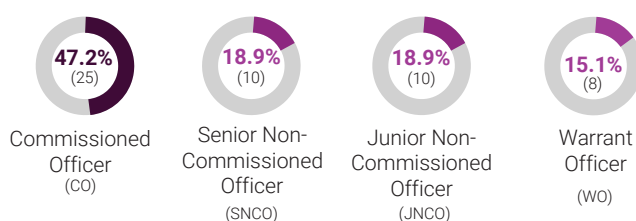
- A narrative literature review was conducted to understand what existing international research evidence tells us about the benefits of Service as perceived by ex-Service personnel.
- Multiple online databases, registers, and search engines were searched in September 2024 and again in April 2025. UK and international papers about the benefits of Service published between January 1963 and April 2025, using a search strategy of key words (relating to ex-Service personnel and benefits of Service) were sought.
- 17,114 papers were screened to check for relevance and assessed for quality, resulting in 36 papers being included in the review.
- The data and key findings from the included papers were analysed using a method called Reflexive Thematic Analysis which aims to develop themes of shared meaning and patterns of experience from the reported evidence.

Study two: Focus groups with UK ex-Service personnel

- A qualitative study involving online focus groups with UK ex-Service personnel was conducted.
- Focus groups were selected as the most

appropriate method to collect data to enable engaging, interactive, and rich conversation between participants and sharing of experiences about the benefits of Service.

- UK ex-Service personnel who left regular Service in the UK AF between two and 10 years prior, had Served in any tri-Service branch (Royal Navy/ Marine, British Army, Royal Air Force), in any rank, and were residing across the devolved nations, were sought to take part. Personnel were excluded from participation if they were currently Serving, reservists, early Service leavers, or medically discharged.
- Participants were recruited through a wide range of civilian employers, third sector organisations, the King's Centre for Military Health Research's Cohort study, social media, and word of mouth.
- The final sample of participants included 53 ex-Service personnel who took part in one of nine focus groups between September 2024 and November 2024 (see figure 1 for information about the sample).
- Examples of questions asked were, 'What experiences from your Service have had the most impact on your post-Service life?' and 'What do you think your life would have been like had you not Served?'
- The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Figure 1: Focus group participant sample characteristics (N=53)**Gender****Age (at time of study)****Length of Service****Employment status****Ethnicity****Sustained an injury (physical or mental health) during Service****Educational attainment****Devolved nation representation****Branch of Service****Rank**

Findings



Overall, the combined findings from the review of existing evidence and the focus group study, indicate that military Service provides the **opportunity to develop many high level and unique skills**, as well as **exposure to distinct and challenging experiences**. Such skills development and experiences can lead to **social, emotional, and psychological growth**, likely instilling **strong values**, including a **strong work ethic, giving back and going above and beyond**, with many leaving with **meaningful perspectives** about life, **gratitude, and pride**. Through these potential gains, Service may also afford **upward social mobility**. These positive outcomes are beneficial not only at the individual level, but also societally, such as in the civilian workforce and for local communities.

However, to benefit from these opportunities requires **individual agency and effort**, and **flexibility to embrace both military and civilian identities**. **Good quality leadership** and **support both during Service and through transition**, that recognises and supports **varied Service experiences** (based on gender, age, branch, rank, discharge type), is also vital.

The benefits of Service

The key findings suggest that Service:

Provides empowering opportunities:

- including trade training, education, travel with global exposure to diverse cultures, and adventure. These opportunities result in social, emotional, and psychological growth (such as social and cultural awareness, and resilience). Service also creates a platform for women to engage in what they may perceive as stereotypically men's roles.

Offers a structured framework and military toolbox of skills:

- encompassing discipline, order, and structure. Service allows for the development of a toolbox of hard skills (such as niche technical abilities) and soft skills (such as problem solving, risk appraisal, attention to detail, and direct communication). Strong leadership capabilities are developed by many.

Creates belonging, camaraderie and working toward a higher purpose:

- by emphasising the values of working collectively and prioritising the needs and goals of the group. This collectivist mindset can be beneficial post-Service for building social connection and to achieve shared goals; however, this requires ex-Service personnel and civilians to navigate cultural differences of collectivist vs individualist approaches, to work collaboratively in their efforts to achieve these goals.

Instils values of giving back and going above and beyond, accompanied by a strong work ethic:

- Service creates altruism and pro-social behaviours in some ex-Service personnel who pay it forward by giving back to civilian communities and go above and beyond in their work and volunteering endeavours. A strong work ethic (as often compared to civilian counterparts) is engrained in many.

Develops meaningful post-Service perspectives, gratitude, and pride:

- for some ex-Service personnel who express gratitude for their experiences and demonstrate pride and honour in Serving. Making meaning of their in-Service experiences can help ex-Service personnel prioritise what is important to them and develop a different perspective of life, which can enhance post-Service fulfilment and levels of wellbeing.

Offers upward social mobility:

- through beyond the 'norm' experiences, military Service affords some ex-Service personnel, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to experience financial, social, educational and career advancement, they may otherwise not have had the opportunity to.

Barriers to benefitting

The findings also suggest recognition of:

Engrained military identity:

- where barriers to benefiting from the benefits of Service occur for those who find it hard to adopt multiple identities (military, ex-Service, and civilian) or see the value in their own abilities (for example, recognising their own skillset). This may be due to an engrained military identity and training in military culture and ways, shaping the way some personnel think, behave, and speak, which continues post-Service.

Post-Service culture clash:

- where there is a difference between ex-Service personnel and civilians' ways of doing things. The military-civilian divide grows if some of the values of ex-Service personnel (such as working collectively and prioritising the needs and goals of the group) do not align with civilian ideals (which some ex-Service personnel report as focusing more on individual needs). Some ex-Service personnel however, can draw on their agency and flexibility to embrace both military and civilian ways of doing things, balance their expectations of civilian life, and assimilate more smoothly into post-Service life.

Acknowledging different Service experiences:

- where differences in gender, branch, rank, Service era, and type of Service discharge should be considered. This will allow the benefits of Service to be accessible for all ex-Service personnel and transition to be tailored to their personal circumstances. Ex-Service personnel report that military personnel should be encouraged to prepare for post-Service life during Service; consider resettling from day one, choosing their trade, hobbies, and interests; and receive appropriate time and support to transition that will allow them to successfully draw on the benefits post-Service.



Strengths and Limitations



The OUTCOMES study was the **first to explore the perceived benefits of military Service** (specifically for UK ex-Service personnel in the focus group study), providing emerging evidence about the value of Service in a balanced narrative that was previously lacking.

A **wide and in-depth strategy** (of key search terms and databases) in the narrative literature review was used to search the available evidence, enhancing the reliability of the findings.

Participant recruitment in the focus group study sought ex-Service personnel through a **wide recruitment strategy**, avoiding reliance solely on support organisations. A sample of individuals reflective of a varied range of military experiences provided evidence about the benefits of Service.

Ex-Service personnel were involved in the study design and analysis of findings, supporting the robustness and reliability of the research.

The terms '**value**' and '**benefit**' are **complex** and may not represent all the ways to describe the benefits of Service. This may result in other identifiers of the benefits of Service to potentially be overlooked and limit the evidence presented.

Participants were mostly **White, male, and mid-older age having held a senior rank, and served for a long period of time**, which may not reflect the variety of Service experiences. Information about socioeconomic status prior to Service (particularly from UK samples) are limited so it is unclear if benefits such as upward social mobility can be explained by military Service.

Perspectives about the benefits of Service were sought only from **participants who left regular Service and not reservist personnel**, who may have different experiences.

Recommendations



For ex-Service personnel:



To be **supported to learn how to recognise the widespread and unique abilities and skills** they have developed, enabling them to communicate and transfer these well post-Service.



Those who struggle post-Service because of **continued military identity**, would benefit from learning to **understand the differences in culture and expectations**, to enable them to find flexibility and assimilation into civilian life.



Ex-Service personnel should **prepare early on during their Service** for post-Service life, considering their trade, skillset, and what kind of work and career they may want post-Service, whilst identifying their interests and hobbies outside of military Service. This will also **support identity flexibility** offering additional opportunities for connection, purpose, and culture.

For senior leadership in the Armed Forces:



To **support Serving personnel with military and civilian role balance and segmentation**, for example through flexible leave, family integration and encouragement of hobbies, enabling both the success of military operations and assimilation into civilian life. This can allow them to **prepare for the realities of post-Service life, manage their expectations** and help them **balance their military and civilian identities**.



To encourage all serving personnel to **make the most of the opportunities afforded by Service** (such as training), so that they can develop the skills and abilities which may benefit their post-Service life.

For the Ministry of Defence (MoD):



To **move beyond transition support that focuses predominantly on post-Service employment** and to include other factors important for transition such as identity. This may take the form of a **tailored culture and identity module** as part of the **Career Transition Partnership** programme that aims to assist ex-Service personnel to understand differences in military and civilian culture, prepare and equip them with the skills to make adjustments, and have the flexibility required to assimilate to civilian society. For ex-Service personnel that find it a challenge to assimilate their identity post-Service, or manage their expectations of civilian life, this can help **minimise the military-civilian divide** and allow them to find new ways to think, behave and speak while navigating their civilian roles.



Carry out assessments for all those preparing to leave, that can **identify the level of 'readiness'** for transition across key domains that are practical (such as financial) and/or psychosocial (such as beliefs about civilians and agency in their transition planning). These could identify the need for and provision of tailored support to enable preparedness for transition and post-Service life.

For the Office for Veterans' Affairs:



Focus on the **benefits of Service** (as discussed in this report) as a specific **priority in the Veterans' Strategy Action Plan**, to promote a balanced public perception and understanding of ex-Service personnel and their contributions to society. This will support the **Strategic Defence Review recommendations for a whole-of-society approach to defence**, building society's understanding of what the AF do and increasing their visibility.

For third sector organisations:



To **support ex-Service personnel in recognising the benefits of Service** that can be drawn on post-Service

and for **third sector organisations to communicate the benefits more widely to Serving and ex-Service personnel, and society**. This can **balance narratives about the value of Service**, which can **address existing misconceptions** about ex-Service personnel.

For civilian employers:



Raising awareness that allows **employers to recognise and value the varied hard skills** (niche technical) **and soft skills** (problem solving, risk appraisal, attention to detail, direct communication, leadership) ex-Service personnel develop, and the transferability of these in the civilian workplace. Employers with AF champions in the workplace can also strengthen discussions about these skills, which can help align them with civilian roles, and educate ex-Service personnel about civilian jobs and workplace culture. **Civilian employers should also be encouraged to sign the AF covenant** where they have not.

For wider society:



To **understand the benefits of Service**, thus creating balanced views of the AF, recognising their contributions to society, and **balancing any misconceptions** about ex-Service personnel and the Armed Forces community. This can help decrease the military-civilian divide.



Specifically, **society should be educated about military culture** and its important role in operational readiness and how this might impact transition to civilian life for ex-Service personnel. This could cultivate a societal culture of acceptance, patience and understanding as Service leavers navigate their assimilation to post-Service life.



For Armed Forces recruitment:

Current AF recruitment careers services (Royal Navy/Marines, British Army, Royal Air Force) and future combined Tri-Service Armed Forces Recruitment Service (AFRS establishing in 2027, offered by Serco) should **strengthen their top line messaging about the various benefits of Service** for those who join. This includes empowering, life changing opportunities, and upward social mobility; with development of varied skills, strong values, and work ethic; belonging, camaraderie and working collectively towards a higher purpose; and potential for in- and post-Service fulfilment

For research and research funders:



Investment in more UK specific research to explore the varied experiences of Service (for example within and across branch, and rank and for reservist personnel) on a more individual level. This should focus on understanding the nuanced benefits of Service for different groups of ex-Service personnel such as women, early Service leavers, or those medically or administratively discharged, and for those from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Further research should also explore the benefits of UK military Service for families.



Research should use **robust methods** and be **informed by psychological theory** to explain identity processes that may impact the benefits of Service..

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