Written evidence submitted by The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

As way of background, BACP is the leading and largest professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, with a membership of over 44,000 practitioners, drawn from across the various professional disciplines in the field of counselling and psychotherapy and based in a range of settings.

All BACP members are bound by the Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions and within this, the Professional Conduct Procedure.

Executive Summary

- BACP recommends that there be more targeted research and data collection into this topic, to ensure that there is a strong knowledge base to work from, and to understand best the issues affecting our armed forces personnel, and how best to support them.
- BACP recommends that mental health screening forms part of routine fitness and medical assessments undertaken by serving armed forces personnel.
- BACP recommends that upon leaving services, personnel are offered the option to attend counselling or coaching sessions to help them with the transition to civilian life.
- BACP recommends that veterans have access to regular mental health screening programmes, and that they should be provided with lists of support groups, charities and mental health services local to them.

1. To what extent do current statistics accurately reflect the level of mental health issues in serving armed forces personnel and veterans, including PTSD?

Whilst the current level of data collection relating to the armed forces is extensive, more could still be done to improve our knowledge and understanding of mental health issues within these groups. For instance, there is no information on how many veterans or serving personnel have access to counselling or psychotherapy, or whether they have accessed these services.

We also do not know whether increased reporting of mental health issues is due to an increased number of mental health conditions arising, or if it is a successful product of the many anti-stigma and awareness raising campaigns that have been run over previous years.

Furthermore, whilst the Increased Access to Psychological Therapies programme (IAPT) grants priority access to veterans, there is no data available on how many individuals are accessing these services and completing treatment.

BACP recommends that there be more targeted research and data collection into this topic, to ensure that there is a strong knowledge base to work from, and to understand best the issues affecting our armed forces personnel, and how best to support them.
2. What are the challenges to accurately assessing the extent of mental health issues in serving armed forces personnel and veterans and how could government improve its understanding of those issues?

When we think about the barriers people face when seeking treatment for mental health conditions or even accepting that they themselves may have a mental health problem, the word that immediately comes to mind is stigma. Even though great progress has been made in tackling stigma and persuading people to be more open about their mental health, it is still a huge obstacle for many individuals.

There has been a rise in the number of armed forces personnel assessed with a mental health condition since 2007/08, from 1.8% to 3.2% in 2016/17. This increase could be attributed to the work of various campaigns aiming to decrease stigma and raise awareness of mental health. This increase in reporting, if it is down to increased understanding, can only be viewed as a positive. However, statistics from the charity Combat Stress show us that on average veterans have waited 12 years after leaving service before seeking help from them. This means that despite the increase in reporting, a large proportion of veterans and armed forces personnel are not coming forward with their concerns and are left to deal with it themselves. This lack of help and support provides greater stress for both the individual, and their family, friends or carers. Clearly, more needs to be done to help armed forces personnel and veterans to understand if they are experiencing a mental health problem, where they can go to for help, and that having a mental health condition is nothing to be ashamed of.

BACP recommends that mental health screening forms part of routine fitness and medical assessments undertaken by serving armed forces personnel. Furthermore, we recommend that upon leaving services, personnel are offered the option to attend counselling sessions to help them with the transition to civilian life. Our responsibility should not stop there, however, and we also recommend that veterans have access to regular mental health screening programmes, and that they should be provided with lists of support groups, charities and mental health services local to them.

3. How does the level of mental health issues, services and outcomes in serving armed forces personnel and veterans:
   - compare both to the actual level in the general population and to public perceptions of mental health issues in armed forces personnel and veterans?
   - vary between different groups of serving and former personnel, including reservists, those who have been deployed on operations and early leavers?
   - vary regionally across the UK and across the devolved administrations?

N/A

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4. What proportion of mental health issues in veterans is attributable to service in the Armed Forces and how well is that measured and understood?

N/A

5. To what extent does the military environment for serving armed forces personnel mitigate against the development of mental health issues?

N/A

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