Office for Veterans' Affairs

DATA AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

2022-28

CONTENTS PAGE

MINISTERIAL FOREWORD – THE MINISTER FOR VETERANS' AFFAIRS

This framework sets out how the Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA) will contribute to and make use of evidence to help make decisions affecting the 2 million veterans and their families living in the UK. It sets out how the OVA will prioritise collaboration and partnerships in order to make the very best out of an already established and vibrant research community.

Aligned with the principles and timelines set out in the **Strategy for our Veterans**, and in keeping with the frameworks established in the government's **Transformation Strategy** and the **UK Research and Development Roadmap**, this work will support our commitment to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2028.

This is a significant undertaking. By 2028, the OVA will have:

- collaborated with experts across the sector to help **identify priorities** for further research and analysis – by working with partners and academia, the OVA will make clear the government-specific research priorities in order to further improve policy and service delivery

- be a **centre of excellence for government data on veterans**, and will work with partners across the sector to support the use of better data in decision-making affecting veterans' services – this will include work to make data sharing between government and researchers more straightforward

- be able to synthesise data and research more quickly to provide **high-quality evidence** and recommendations to policy makers and those who deliver services – this will require early input and engagement with researchers to better inform recommendations, and will require alignment and awareness of others in the sector to avoid duplication and to maximise impact

To achieve these outcomes the OVA will continue to deliver on **better data, targeted research and innovation**, but will also introduce **three new guiding principles** to shape their work:

1. Building **strategic partnerships** to create a community of trust in order to improve information sharing, to learn from existing best practice and maximise our potential for research to have impact.

2. Supporting efforts to **align and co-ordinate the data and research agenda** across a variety of government, funding, charity and research institutions to make sure we get the very best data and research, and use resources effectively.

3. **Turning knowledge into action** through a dedicated and deliberate process of knowledge mobilisation so we can deliver change more quickly than ever before.

By organising our data and research workstreams in line with these principles, the OVA will ensure government's resources are being invested in a way that will have the greatest possible impact for veterans and their families. We'll help create an environment where knowledge can be shared and challenged, where critical work can be prioritised and where funding can be channelled most effectively. Through cross-sector collaboration and early information sharing, we will shorten the gap between gaining knowledge and putting it to good use to help make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran.

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs, The Rt Hon Johnny Mercer MP

WHY DO WE NEED A DATA AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK?

The government is committed to using the best quality data and research in all parts of policy-making and evaluation. Veterans' data and research cuts across almost every discipline and therefore harnessing this information effectively requires both a breadth of knowledge and a deep understanding of the whole community and its needs.

There is no single audience for this document. It is intended to inform government data holders, researchers, charities, policy makers and indeed veterans and their families about how the OVA will approach data and research activities in the coming years. It is equally important as an internal guide; to structure the OVA's long term approach in order to ensure consistency and predictability in the sector.

There is already a great deal of high-quality research in the veterans field in the UK and abroad. In particular, the last decade has seen a significant increase in investments for veterans and families related research in the UK. This is positive news for veterans and their families, and reflects a step change in the status of veterans in our society.

It also demonstrates a vibrant and capable research community supported by willing funders. This does however, create a challenge for policy makers to find the best evidence and to judge it against other work; this framework aims to address that issue.

In this framework we will refer to:

- data – by which we mean data collection and analysis

- research – which can include data as a product

- evidence – the output of data and research analysis

"Data is a critical resource for enabling more efficient, effective government and public services that respond to citizens' needs. Data acts as the foundation upon which everything else rests."

Government Digital Service, 2017[1]

"Research is used in governments throughout the cycle of policy formation: in defining issues, understanding situations, developing and assessing policy options, assessing risks and uncertainties, formulating policy, and – following implementation and monitoring – evaluation and adaptation. Research is used to inform decision-making as well as in the development of draft legislation."

UK Parliament, 2021[2]

1   UK Government – Transformation Strategy **www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-transformation-strategy-2017-to-2020/government-transformation-strategy**

2   UK Government – Research impact on policy paper **www.parliament.uk/globalassets/assets/teams/post/research_impact_on_policy_briefing_document_june21.pdf**

ENDURING PRINCIPLE (2019-22): BETTER DATA, TARGETED RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Since 2019, the OVA has worked hard to make systemic changes and to put evidence at the core of its decision-making. Working right across government, with devolved administrations and with local authorities too, the OVA has made significant achievements in key areas that will help improve services for veterans. A summary of that work is included here:

Infrastructure development for better veteran data

The government has made an important step forwards in improving veteran data by including a veteran question in the England and Wales 2021 Census, followed by Scotland's 2022 Census. While taking a slightly different approach, Northern Ireland is currently working to link its Census 2021 data with that of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to create a similar baseline. This **UK-wide census data** will provide a detailed demographic dataset for analysis and interpretation for the first time.

In 2022, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was commissioned to undertake a 10 year retrospective study looking into the number of **veteran suicides** each year between 2011 and 2021. This study will create new insights into veteran suicide, as well as identifying trends and comparisons with the non-veteran population. This will complement existing and ongoing research on veteran suicide funded by the MOD, the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust and NHS England.

In 2022, the OVA and MOD agreed a **harmonised standard veteran question**. We will continue to ensure and encourage that this standardised question is used across any relevant surveys undertaken by government, local authorities, charities and researchers.

A new channel for the veterans' community to share their opinions

In November 2022, the OVA and ONS launched the first **UK-wide veterans' Survey**. This survey serves as a valuable opportunity for veterans and their families to share their views with the government on the topics that impact them most. The analysis will be shared across government and with the veteran community to inform policy making and service delivery.

Understanding how opinions are formed

In 2022, the OVA commissioned YouGov to undertake a project to look at **public and employer perceptions of veterans**, including what factors influence these perceptions. The results of this project will inform our communications approach, as well as identify why, and where, negative perceptions can exist and how positive perceptions could be amplified. This work will be a powerful tool in helping us deliver policies that recognise veterans' contribution to the UK.

Delivering for veterans

New guiding principles

Partnerships ↔ **Alignment and co-ordination** ↔ **Knowledge mobilisation**

Enduring principle

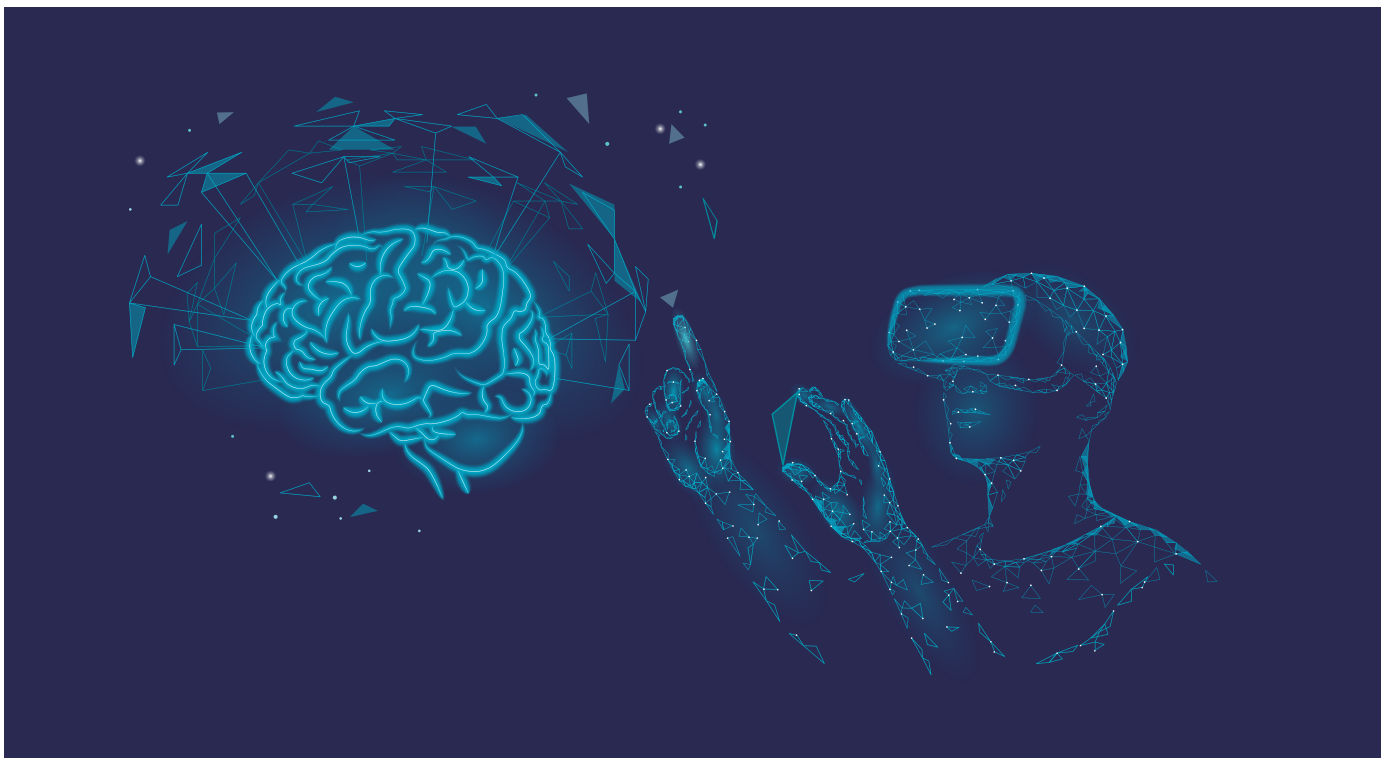**Better data, targeted research and innovation**

Ensuring innovation and technology is at the heart of veterans' health research

In 2022, the government launched the **Veterans' Health Innovation Fund**. Administered by the OVA, the fund will identify new innovative thinking and investment in cutting-edge technology to ensure veterans have access to the best health and wellbeing support. The fund will ensure we 'pump-prime' existing innovation and build capacity for new approaches. One project from the Veterans' Health Innovation Fund will be for the OVA to work with the James Lind Alliance (part of the University of Southampton) to identify and propose research questions which would improve quality of life for veterans and their families.

Shining a light on equality and diversity issues that require additional attention

In 2022, the OVA commissioned targeted **research into the experiences of non-UK veterans, veterans from ethnic minority backgrounds and female veterans**. This research will be used to inform the next iteration of the Veterans' Strategy Action Plan, and will assist service providers to adapt their approach to meet the needs of veterans.

In 2022, the government announced the **LGBT Veterans Independent Review**, to examine the effect that the pre-2000 ban on homosexuality in the UK Armed Forces has had on LGBT veterans. The evidence gathering as part of this review is the first of its kind in the UK and will lead to an independent report and recommendations.
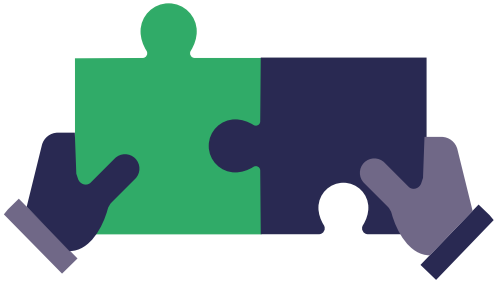
Unlocking the power of partnerships

In 2022, the OVA established a dedicated **Academic Advisory Board**. The board is made up of academics from across the UK, who bring together a wider range of specialist experience, networks and expertise. The Academic Advisory Board will help shape the UK's approach to veterans' data and research by providing guidance, challenge and advice.

In 2022, the OVA held its first **Veteran Research Summit**. It brought together the research community after the COVID-19 pandemic to present, discuss and shape future data and research ideas.

We have continued to build partnerships within government, especially between the **ONS, MOD and the OVA**, where we work collaboratively and frequently share expertise. The OVA is well placed to convene teams and departments across government and to explore new opportunities for analysis.

> "Co-ordinating the research efforts of the community is a sensitive, complex and difficult task. There are many potential benefits to be had from increasing the wider community's awareness of the existing, developing and ongoing research. At the Forces in Mind Trust's Research Centre, we're delighted to be working with the OVA to make co-ordination and collaboration of research easier, and more effective."

Ruth Harris and Professor Nicola T Fear, Directors of the Forces in Mind Trust's Research Centre

NEW GUIDING PRINCIPLES 2022-28

Going forwards, the OVA will continue to align work to the existing principle of better data, targeted research and innovation but will now add three new guiding principles.

Nothing in these guiding principles will be, or could be delivered by the OVA in isolation. Work will instead be delivered through engagement, discussion and refinement with the sector, veterans and across government. We will put partnerships at the heart of everything we do and will only achieve success through the collective will and cooperation of the sector and critical stakeholders. We will 'play our part' rather than 'play centre stage' in creating an ecosystem to make evidence central when making decisions on veterans' policy.

ALIGNMENT AND CO-ORDINATION OF THE RESEARCH AGENDA

By 2028 we will work with partners to help align and co-ordinate data and research activities across a variety of government, charity and research institutions. This will help ensure we get the best data and research on the topics that are a priority for veterans and those organisations who support them. We will play a central and supportive role to those organisations who seek to work across the sector to reduce duplication, to streamline effort and to share insights of complementary research.

However, we are clear that ultimately the priorities, interests and outputs of our vibrant and respected research community are ultimately a matter for the academics, researchers and charities of which it is composed. Independence from government is essential for a reputable research community.
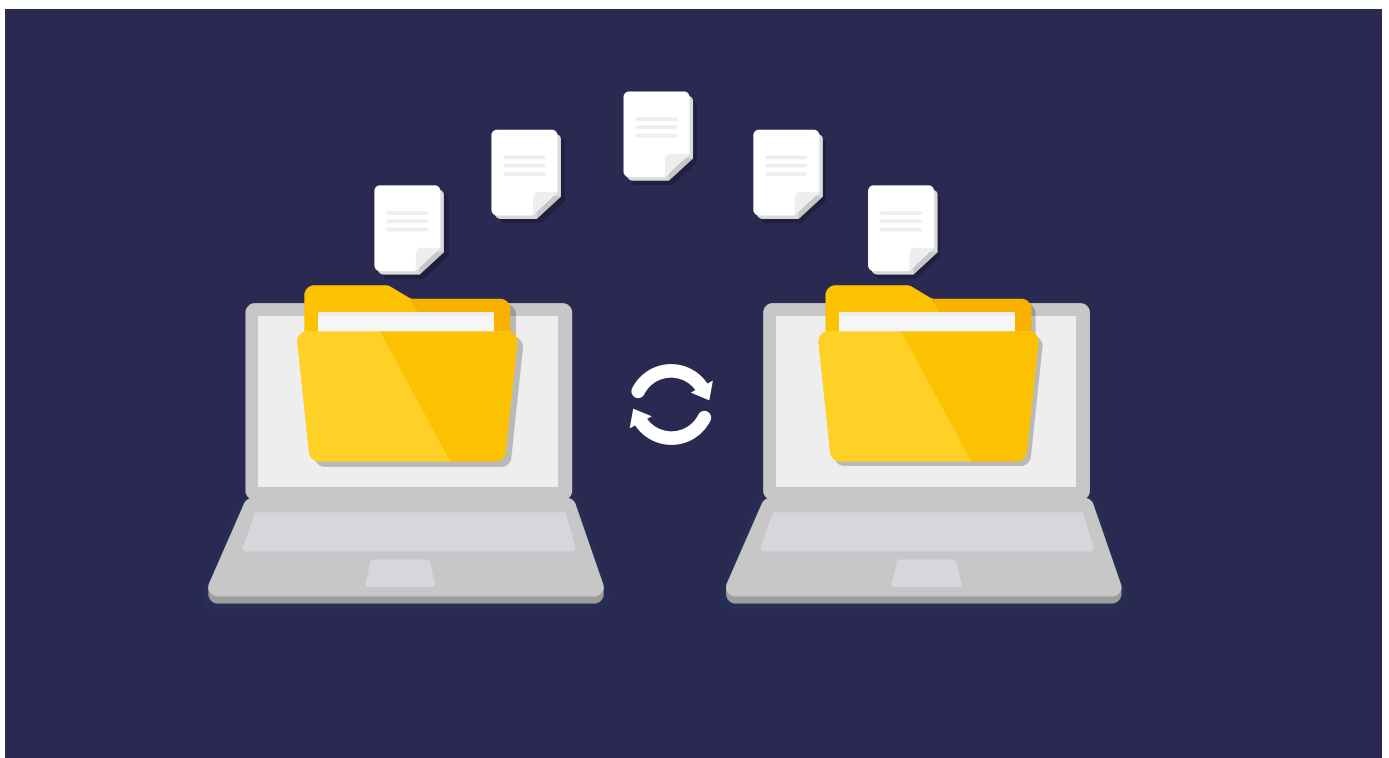
Feedback from across the veteran community, particularly from those that challenge government, has identified a number of opportunities where greater alignment and co-ordination would deliver significant impact.

These opportunities include:

- improving performance and evaluation data to aid delivery of the Strategy for our Veterans and other related policy and delivery work

- making evidence more accessible, including improving visibility and awareness, improved sharing, the creation of repositories and addressing data protection concerns

- the creation of shared data and research requirements that are prioritised across the veteran community

- improving the analytical support that the government can offer the veteran community, through the publication of analytical products

Improving performance and evaluation data to aid delivery of the Strategy for our Veterans and other related policy and delivery work

The government will publish a performance and evaluation framework to provide updates on the progress of the Strategy for our Veterans. This will build on the current mechanism in place for monitoring progress of the Veterans' Strategy Action Plan commitments and ensure that good quality data and research along with value for money and impact are at the centre of policy development and operational delivery. Data and research from across the veteran community will be required to supplement government insights. This data will be used to inform future strategy planning and spending reviews.

Making evidence more accessible, including improving visibility and awareness, improved sharing, the creation of repositories and addressing data protection concerns

Feedback has consistently suggested that the research and data available would benefit from alignment and as such a number of organisations have brought government, charities and academics together and combined disparate datasets to meet this need. The Contact Group for military mental health, FiMT Research Centre[3], the Veterans and Families Institute, the Centre for Military Women's Research, Forces in Mind Trust, King's Centre for Military Health Research, the Scottish Veterans Health Research Group, the Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research, are just some of many examples.

The OVA looks forward to an environment in which all of these organisations and others work together, in the interests of veterans and families, to:

- identify opportunities for collaboration and remove potential duplication of effort – exploiting success, minimising friction, and maximising the use of limited finding

- make evidence available to all – to create an open by default approach to data and research and look to share evidence and findings

- build capacity and capability to maintain a pipeline of talent – upskilling the community, investing in key enabling technologies and exploiting digital technology

- address legitimate data protection or GDPR concerns and explore effective and secure ways for data sharing

We are committed to work with any and all of those organisations who share this ambition.

The creation of shared data and research needs that are prioritised across the veteran community

The government's aim is to contribute to a shared sense of priorities from across the community that will be used to inform those collecting data or conducting research with veterans.

This shared requirement will ensure value for money, that veteran cohorts are not asked to share potentially traumatic experiences more than necessary[4] and to confirm that there is a clear need for the evidence. We recognise this is a similar mission to the FiMT Research Centre and look forwards to close collaboration and synergy in this work.

---

3   The Forces in Mind Trust Research Centre was first established in 2017 through a £2.5 million investment to deliver upon a specific recommendation in Lord Ashcroft's Veteran Transition Review (commissioned by the UK Government). Today, the **Research Centre** (https://www.fimt-rc.org/) is delivered by a RAND/KCL consortium funded by FiMT.

4   We acknowledge that this issue is addressed by ethics committees when assessing research proposals, but the issue is frequently raised by veterans in consultation.

The Veteran Data Champions across the government, devolved administrations and collaborative research partners will be critical in this endeavour, as will the OVA Academic Advisory Board.

Improving the analytical support that the government can offer the veteran community, through the publication of analytical products.

This offer could include:

- details on the research already conducted on veterans' issues, and the amount of money invested into this research

- summary reports on research or thematic topics of importance

- measurement of research outputs against policy change and impact

- data dashboards

- summary reports on impacts of the Strategy for our Veterans

- publication of key data findings based on government, charity and academic research

"The OVA's Academic Advisory Board (AAB) brings together a diverse group of experts which will help to shape and inform the research agenda in the coming years. By having AAB representation on the Veterans Advisory Board too, we can ensure that new and evolving research is shared at all levels of decision-making."

Professor Beverly Bergman OBE, University of Glasgow, member of the OVA's Academic Advisory Board and Veterans Advisory Board

"The Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo) fully supports the move to align the research community's outputs across the government / third sector divide, in order to maximise the output from the discrete funds available.

We are therefore really excited to see the OVA's initiative to develop a Data and Research Framework, working with stakeholders across government and Cobseo members in order to provide greater alignment for crucial veteran-focused research."

Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope KCB CBE, Chair of Cobseo

KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION

We will mobilise knowledge about our veteran community in a way that enables us to harness, synthesise, communicate and validate evidence in a more structured and effective way. We will implement processes that resist the temptation to use 'packaged and pushed' single high-profile studies and instead will integrate multiple types of data and research into timely, well-evidenced products to be used by policy makers and ministers for robust and informed decision-making. It is necessary that for government use this is delivered by the OVA staff, however, it will be informed and refined using expertise in the academic sector. This will not be a single change but a continual process of incremental improvement in the way we use evidence to serve veterans.

We will do this by:

- applying a disciplined approach to knowledge mobilisation and evidence collation

- learning from our partners, and helping them deliver excellence

- accelerating our data and metrics to measure progress

- embed research excellence frameworks and impact assessments into our work

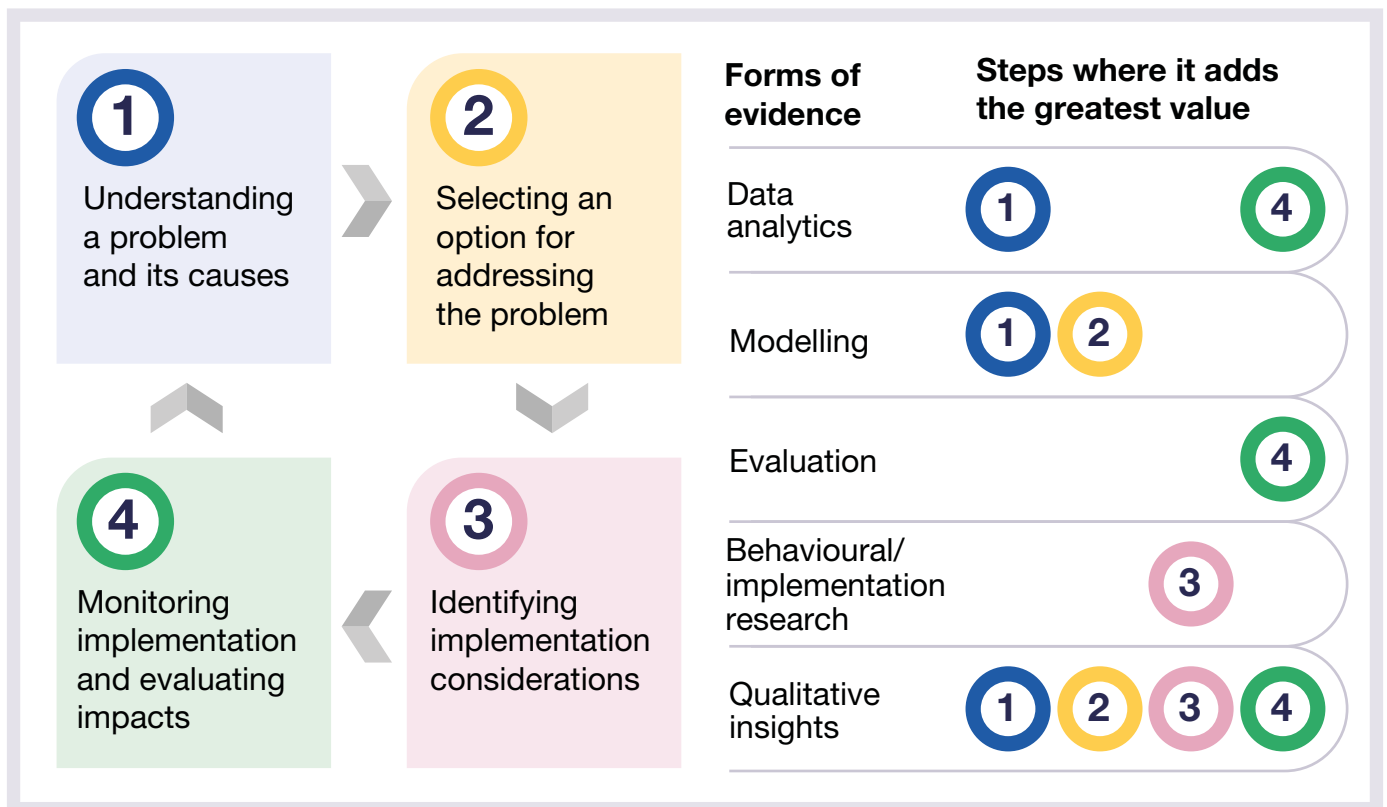## Knowledge mobilisation and products

Knowledge mobilisation is a key tool that aims to close the gap between what we know and what we do. Effective policy depends on a combination of effective innovation and implementation in an enabling context.

Part of the implementation process will be finding ways to make analytical or research findings **accessible and understandable** to our stakeholders such as veterans, policy makers and service delivery professionals. We will work with partners in the UK and overseas to identify the most suitable tools and techniques to mobilise knowledge in the UK.

We want these discussions with our data and research partners to lead to the use of **'knowledge products'** that clearly articulate a need for action or present analysis of existing evidence in a usable fashion. Data modelling and visualisation will be critical in this endeavour.

In order for these products to be most impactful, we will refine them in collaboration with stakeholders, ensuring each one is of practical use, and that there is clarity as to which area the product will provide most value. We must consider qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research equally. Quantitative data helps identify trends, associations and predict trajectories, whereas qualitative research provides rich insights to help understand the human experience.

An example of this process is in the diagram below.[5]

Forms of evidence	Steps where it adds the greatest value			
Data analytics	1			4
Modelling	1	2		
Evaluation				4
Behavioural/ implementation research			3	
Qualitative insights	1	2	3	4

Closer working with our research and data partners

The OVA aims to assist researchers to make their recommendations even more impactful. This might include facilitating more powerful expert reference groups (for example by facilitating representatives from difficult-to-reach corners of government), by helping diversify calls for evidence, and by enabling earlier engagement between researchers, policy makers and those delivering interventions. Our intent is to create a partnership of equals, working together to best serve the needs of the veteran community.

Improved data literacy for understanding veterans' needs

As set out in the Strategy for our Veterans we will enhance 'collection, use and analysis of data across the public, private and charitable sectors to build an evidence base to effectively identify and address the needs of veterans'. Improved data will be key to evidence mobilisation and improved evidence products.

---

5   A knowledge mobilisation model used by McMaster University, one of many organisations we will work with to refine our processes.

By 2028, we aim to:

- improve the quality of government data on veterans accessing government services and support

- create a robust and updated baseline dataset to help understand veterans' demographics and their needs

- deliver a consistent approach for identifying and recording veteran service use in key areas

Research excellence embedded into decision-making

We want to be the central champions of **high-quality research** across the research community. We aim to deliver this by working closely with the major charity funders and research councils, as well as with individual research teams. High-quality research allows us to provide better evidence products in order to enable effective decision-making. It also allows us to represent the UK's research institutions overseas. We will champion the best in data collation, analysis and sharing too, with ever closer partnerships between the government, ONS, MOD and the devolved administrations.

	Innovation	Advance core disciplines and bring new ideas, insights and methods to benefit veterans
	International perspective	Where possible, research to be relevant and significant at a global level
	Collaboration and partnership	Engage and influence in order to affect policy and practice
	Impact	Mobilise robust research and data to benefit and influence policy, society, culture and practice in our veteran community

> **"FiMT has a track record of focusing on the impact of research and trying to ensure it leads to meaningful change for the veteran community, be that in terms of new policy or improved delivery of support. We're delighted that the OVA is playing an important part in this space – collectively that represents huge progress for veterans. Shortening the gap between research outputs being available and change being delivered is incredibly important."**
>
> Tom McBarnet, CEO,
> Forces in Mind Trust

> **"International engagement and collaboration with well-aligned partners are critical to advance collective understanding of chronic pain in veterans. We are pleased to work with the OVA to share information on best practices in care and on knowledge mobilisation of research findings into practice and policy."**
>
> The Chronic Pain Centre of Excellence for Canadian Veterans (one of OVA's strategic partners)

PARTNERSHIPS

By 2028 we will have built even stronger strategic partnerships to improve information sharing, learn from existing best practice and shape the output of influential organisations. These partnerships will enable the OVA to have greater reach into the sector, to maximise our access to new ideas, and to communicate clearly with veterans.

We will do this by:

- strengthening existing partnerships across government, devolved administrations, local authorities, academia and charities to support the co-creation of policy and problem solving as a community

- setting out what the government can offer core partners and in exchange what support the government requires from partners

- expanding our international reach to learn and work with like-minded and/or culturally-aligned countries

- exploring secondment arrangements across government and with partners to better share experiences, knowledge and expertise across the community

- leading from the front by creating new networking opportunities and collaborating with existing forums

Strengthening existing partnerships across government, devolved administrations local authorities, academia and charities to support the co-creation of policy and problem solving as a community

Strong partnerships are essential for good policy and operational delivery, with evidence through data and research being an essential underpinning enabler. The most effective partnerships are those that come together to tackle shared problems and test, build and evaluate interventions together.

Existing forums and posts across government that look to collect, share and analyse data will be expanded and aligned against the Strategy for our Veterans' outcomes. Where possible, the work of these groups will be shared externally across the veterans' community.

We will continue to work across government to ensure veterans data is shared between departments in order to improve services for veterans and to better support governmental functions. We will aim to strengthen the commitment to data sharing by developing measures within government to support systematic collection and reporting.

The government also aims to roll out a standard veteran marker across government departments and their key databases in the next three years. This will enable consistent data to be provided on what government services or support are being accessed, with a demographic breakdown.

Setting out what the government can offer core partners and in exchange what support the government requires from partners

The government will explore the best means of base-lining sources of evidence and share its findings with partners, allowing all parties to share a common understanding. Government will also provide signposting to resources and where appropriate create repositories accessible to all within the veteran community. We acknowledge the excellent work already conducted in this area by the Veterans and Families Institute and others, and look forward to working closely with the FiMT Research Centre (partnered with RAND Europe and the King's Centre for Military Health Research) as it develops further.

Whilst making sure data protection and security remain paramount, the government will work to facilitate easier data sharing between departments, devolved administrations and researchers to allow research to be undertaken more efficiently. For those departments that do this frequently, the OVA will work collaboratively to create a standardised process to ensure data sharing can be more straightforward.

Local authorities are key to delivering better veteran services. The government will continue to work with local authorities across the UK to understand their evidence requirements and help them to build capability to capture and analyse data on veterans.

Expanding our international reach to learn and work with like-minded and/or culturally-aligned countries

Like-minded and/or culturally-aligned countries face similar problems or challenges with delivering services and interventions to support their veterans. The UK will learn from these countries, bearing in mind the differing contexts, and where it makes sense will collaborate to overcome shared challenges.

We will utilise the convening power of government to accelerate this effort and will aim to work in partnership (for mutual benefit) with academics and organisations within the sector who share this ambition for international co-operation.

Exploring secondment arrangements across government and with partners, to better share experiences, knowledge and expertise across the community

Across government, we will identify opportunities, both short and long-term, for secondment opportunities in critical partner organisations to access valuable data, knowledge or to create a valuable network across organisations.
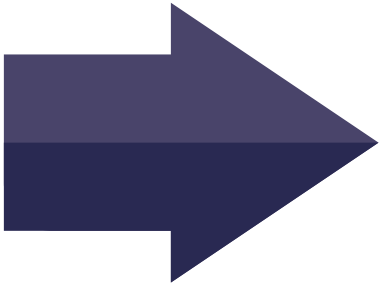
We recognise the value that post-graduate and doctoral students can deliver in the veteran research community. The government will explore internship opportunities and how best to match researchers with the most pressing priorities across the veteran community.

Leading from the front by creating new networking opportunities and collaborating with existing forums

The OVA Academic Advisory Board will play a significant role in improving communication into and out of government on research and data requirements. Furthermore, the board will play key advocacy and 'critical friend' roles, with it also facilitating the identification of opportunities for networking and collaboration.

Alongside academic partners, the government will continue to use charity forums to hear directly from those providing front line services and interventions. We focus on growing a two-way exchange of information and providing a gateway into wider government initiatives, consultations and policy development.

We will build on the success of our inaugural Veteran Research Summit held in 2022 and look forward to hosting similar events regularly. These conferences will provide an opportunity for the community to come together with government officials and policy makers to share their research, insights and priorities.

NEXT STEPS

This is an ambitious framework that makes clear the OVA's priorities for research and data. Priorities and principles will begin to shape workloads immediately and we welcome constructive contributions from the outset.

Our goal is to help create partnerships, and then work with those willing partners to put high-quality evidence at the heart of decision-making. Our ethos is to ensure there is always space for engagement and cooperation with those working to improve the lives of veterans and their families.

Only by working together and making the most of the sector's collective skills, knowledge and networks will we make the biggest possible impact.