



10 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The purpose of this desk aid is to help you better understand veterans and their families who might interact with your policies or services, be a customer or require support and advice. Understanding more about this community will allow you to design, adapt and evolve your work to make sure it is accessible and effective.

The desk aid contains 10 introductory facts and key points about the veteran community. We hope you find it a helpful introduction and a source for finding out further relevant information to support your work.

1. Definition and self-identification

Veterans are defined as anyone who has served for at least one day in His Majesty's Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) or Merchant Mariners who have seen duty on legally defined military operations. The 2021 Census shows that there are 1.85m veterans in England and Wales (3.8% of the over 16 population), with around 2 million estimated across the whole of the UK.

You could be talking to a 16 year old who did a week of basic training and was discharged due to injury, or someone in their 50s who served for 20+ years.

Not everyone will define themselves as a veteran. The term "service leaver or ex-armed forces" can often be used instead - for the purpose of this document we will use veterans throughout.

Key takeaway - A veteran can be of any gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality, with an age of 16 or above. They come with a wide range of different experiences. If you provide a service or work with veterans, you should consider asking about previous military service alongside other demographic data that you capture.

2. Experience of Service

Each veteran's experience of service is unique. Some will have seen combat and travelled to multiple countries. While others may have spent their entire career without being on an operation. Most will have a positive experience, but some do not which can have implications during transition and post-service.

Key takeaway - Experience of service will be different from veteran to veteran.

3. Identifying as a veteran

Some veterans are less likely to identify themselves as such. This is particularly true for those who may have had a negative experience of service.

Female veterans may have had differing experiences during service and transition, so may be less likely to identify themselves. Veterans from the LGBTQ+ community may also find engaging with services a challenge due to the historic ban around serving in the armed forces and its implications.

Key takeaway - Policy-makers and service providers should consider capturing data on previous military experience alongside other demographic data. Consider the potentially differing experiences of female and LGBTQ+ veterans, and ensure services are prepared to meet any arising needs.

4. Families

Veterans' families may have had to move house many times in support of a military career, with long periods of time without a serving member being present. This could result in a disjointed CV for spouses, mixed schooling for children and complex family dynamics. It is also important to consider the needs of separated families and widows and widowers of veterans.

Key takeaway - It is important to ensure veterans' families are supported when seeking employment or accessing education or healthcare. Changes in family situations should not act as a barrier to accessing essential services.

5. Armed Forces Covenant

The Covenant ensures that members of the Armed Forces community are not disadvantaged as a result of their service when accessing government and commercial services. Special consideration is also appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most, such as the injured and bereaved.

If your organisation has signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant or up to the Employer Recognition Scheme you may have agreed to provide additional benefits to the Armed Forces Community.

Key takeaway - Organisations that have signed the Covenant, or have a legal duty to consider the Covenant, should ensure that veterans and their families are treated fairly.

6. What is transition from service?

Leaving the service can happen very quickly for some veterans, and the adjustment to civilian life can be difficult. Part of the transition process is resettlement, which involves the support, advice and guidance provided to military personnel during their service and employment or vocational support in the run up to them leaving the armed forces before moving to civilian life.

Key takeaway - If you are interacting with someone that is struggling with adapting to civilian life, helpful resources and advice can be found at the Veterans Gateway. Those who have just left service may have access to additional training and funding to support re-training from the MOD.

7. Asking for help and military culture

For many veterans their service in the military is much more than just another period of employment; it can be defining of their character and values. Many veterans and their families will take pride in being resourceful and self reliant, and may downplay their need for help.

Most veterans will have been trained to put others before themselves, so they may be more likely to talk about “we” rather than “I”.

Key takeaway - If you provide a service, design services or policies, or work with veterans, consider whether an appropriate space has been created for the veteran/veterans to articulate their needs honestly.

8. Telling their story

Many veterans will be delighted to tell you about their experiences and share details about their fascinating and varied careers. However, some parts of these details may be traumatic and difficult. They may also be frustrated by having to tell their story repeatedly. You may have a good reason to ask a sensitive question (e.g. if you're a medical professional), but be mindful that veterans are likely to find the same things distressing as you. Experiences of death, loss, injury or illness are not things you would ask a colleague about casually, it is the same for a veteran.

Key takeaway - Think carefully about why you are asking a question that you or anyone else might find difficult to talk about or that could be traumatic. Avoid, where possible, asking veterans to repeat their story multiple times.

9. Accessing services and expectations

Military service can leave veterans with limited experience of accessing statutory services. They might not know what is available, how to access it or where to go.

Whilst in the armed forces they can often rely on quick access to services, in particular healthcare and can have high expectations for these and other services when they leave the armed forces. Being clear about what to expect, when, and how to access it, is important.

Key takeaway - How can you design your policy or service to make it easily accessible to veterans, with clarity on timelines and requirements to access?

10. Challenges, barriers and opportunities

There could be a range of challenges or barriers that veterans' will face when accessing your service or engaging with your policy. These could include: undervaluing their skills and their transferability to civilian employment; adjusting to civilian life and identifying a new purpose in life; public perceptions of veterans which can be mixed, based on incorrect portrayals in films or by the media; or a lack of understanding about support available or information overload. Veterans will also have a range of skills and experiences that would make them attractive to employers.

Key takeaway - It should be recognised that as with all life changing events, there will be a period of adjustment to be experienced not just by the veteran, but also by the families.

This guide has been produced by the Office for Veterans' Affairs in conjunction with a range of partners. We hope you find it useful - any feedback can be sent through to veterans@cabinetoffice.gov.uk.

This guidance will be the first in a range of products designed to help you support the veteran community.