

# Forces veterans support each other in an online learning community

This veteran rehabilitation programme has substantially boosted the confidence and prospects of former armed service personnel. Some of these participants previously found it difficult even to leave their homes let alone take an active part in community and society.

## Background

Community Health International (CHI) seeks to support people living with long-term conditions to find self-help solutions in their community often leading to social enterprise opportunities.

The focus for this project has been on rehabilitating past and recent veterans who continue to suffer from the effects of armed combat and who have found assimilation in civilian life extremely difficult.

While everyone in this target group is an individual with different circumstances, many veterans have similar life stories including diagnosis with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often combined with low self-esteem and often complete withdrawal from society.

Central to the programme is the concept that when people are given the appropriate 'tools' they can be more in control of their own health and wellbeing. The primary tool in this respect is a special web-based program called 'Selfawellness'. In the course of the project, the Selfawellness tool was developed to engage veterans who, with support, customised the program for use as the basis for veteran-led support, signposting, self-assessment and self-management.

The project was led by Sally Hill of CHI and involved close co-operation with veteran support welfare officers. It has attracted considerable interest from academic, NHS, DWP, military and justice organisations among a range of authorities and agencies. The project culminated in a conference to showcase the work and achievements of the veteran cohorts involved.

## What we wanted to achieve

The main aim was to establish a development and training approach that would help formerly active men and women back into play. The programme would offer them a means of self-directed support, a platform for re-engagement in their community and new roles as veterans guiding and helping other veterans. The plan was to enable each participant to rediscover self-worth and enjoy new experiences and skills which might also lead to fulfilling employment.

“Veterans are now helping other veterans and we are setting up an outreach service which I will help them run using the Selfawellness tool.”

John Pattison, NHS Welfare Officer

By adopting a ‘train the trainer’ approach and by bringing veterans together in cohorts, the aim was also to provide them with a mutually supportive structure. This would enable the trainer-trained veterans in the programme to become ‘comrade enablers’ supporting other veterans to realise their potential.

Sally Hill said, “There are hundreds of excellent charities in the UK devoted specifically to providing support for ex-servicemen and women, but there was not, to my knowledge, a specific community model and approach which set out to offer practical and mutual support made possible by self-help while using community and military charity resources.

“The majority of the individuals in our cohorts saw active service in the early 1990s and most of these are men with PTSD-related problems. We therefore needed a development approach that would provide really positive styles of engagement and which was relevant to the participant’s experience as ex-soldiers, as people used to action, and also as family members and citizens.”

## What we did

Developmental activity involved over 30 veterans in two groups. The CHI team together with the veteran welfare officers and the veterans set out to customise an open source (freely accessible) version of the Selfawellness ICT tool. At this stage the programme involved:

- Drawing together suggestions, ideas and knowledge from military personnel and veterans, as well as image selection, classification of concepts, and links to build the variant Selfawellness tool.

- Training selected veteran personnel to assist the customisation of the tool.
- Starting the process of training personnel to carry out the role of ‘comrade enablers’ and to host the supported sessions using the Selfawellness tool.
- Reporting findings, feedback and basic outcomes for future stakeholders in and for any representative steering groups.
- Assimilating new learning for the reservist and veteran community and for use in the wider civilian community.
- Exploring steps to turn this approach into a potentially sustainable service which could generate employment and income for an appropriately ‘veteran owned’ business model which might be rolled out locally and regionally.
- Identifying new worker roles and establishing core competencies that would generate more formalised training routes and potential qualifications

The Selfawellness website is protected by allocated ‘log ins’ and this provides a forum of exchange between veterans, the welfare officers, the Selfawellness team and CHI project manager. Once the initial stage of customisation of the tool was in process this formed the basis of a train-the-trainer style of rehabilitation for individuals and their veteran peers.

Professor Paul Dieppe from Exeter & Plymouth University & Peninsula Medical School has shown great academic research interest in the project, and in the outcome of a trip that a group of veterans made to Germany, funded separately by CHI, to explore a new rehabilitation method in a therapeutic spa environment.

Finally, 63 representatives from veteran and health organisations and government commissioning departments, including the Head of Veteran Health NHS England, attended the conference held in Wellington in Devon. Veterans in each cohort made their own presentation and the Exmouth-based cohort staged a live session using the Selfawellness tool.

These activities formed the pilot of a continuing developmental project.

## What we achieved

This WDIF project has not only benefited the lives of a number of former servicemen and women and their families, but has attracted the interest, commitment and endorsement of government departments, academic institutions and third sector agencies.

There are various outcomes that could not have been anticipated at the outset of the project and which attest to its sustainability and scalability. For example:

- The Exmouth cohort of veterans asked for more frequent meetings, such was their enthusiasm for the programme, and have now set up their own service using the Selfawellness tool, launched as 'Forces Veterans 4 Veterans'. Up to 30 veterans have been attending weekly coffee sessions.
- Twelve veterans who attended the project took active part in the showcase conference delivering their own presentations – reflecting a significant boost in self-esteem, skill and confidence.
- Veterans preparing for an employability course at a Jobcentre Plus in Cornwall were enthusiastic about new opportunities, including the new Drupal Open Source Software Apprenticeships; others were interested in more basic computer skills training to improve confidence and employability.
- Experience gained at the spa in Germany will contribute to introducing the medical spa system for veteran rehabilitation in the UK and elsewhere.

- Jobcentre Plus is looking into the introduction of the Selfawellness tool in their empowerment courses for veterans which will be held in Devon and Somerset.

## What we learnt

One of the major lessons from this project is the demonstrable success of self-directed learning. The new training concept maximises opportunities for the 'locus of control' to be placed with the individuals for their longer-term wellbeing, rather than being defined or directed by a service provider.

Sally explains: "The veterans work together, teach each other as they learn and have support as necessary from CHI, welfare officers and other stakeholders."

The project's success is reflected in the serious expressions of interest and commitment shown since the conference. Sally comments: "The Royal Marines have expressed interest in linking in with training the veterans and we've also had positive involvement with the 6th Rifles Regiment in Exeter. We have a significant connection with a lead on veterans in the justice system, veterans in Wiltshire and others keen to see how this model might be applied in other parts of civilian life, including for people with learning difficulties."

“Essentially individuals become more and more in control of how to help themselves and to improve their own lives and prospects.”

Sally Hill, Project Lead

## For more information please contact

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## Skills for Care Recommends

This innovative project was a relatively new area for Skills for Care to support. Whilst we have not developed any directly related resources, you may be interested in the following;

### Assisted Living Technologies

Skills for Care has developed a learning and development framework, resource hub and an app to ensure that the workforce are capable, confident and skilled.

[www.skillsforcare.org.uk/assistedlivingtechnology](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/assistedlivingtechnology)

### Community Skills Development

We have a range of resources, which include case studies which demonstrate the learning from the programme, and practical tools to embed community skills development.

[www.skillsforcare.org.uk/communityskills](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/communityskills)

### Employing Your Own Care and Support

We have a range of products and services to help individual employers and personal assistants.

[www.skillsforcare.org.uk/individualemployers](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/individualemployers)

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