LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC
PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE LEAVERS AND VETERANS

- 2,001 adults were interviewed online between 23 and 27 June 2017. Data have been weighted to be representative of all adults in the UK.

- Eight focus groups were conducted between 15 and 22 June 2017 in Nottingham, Edinburgh, Bristol and London. Participants were from a range of ages and social backgrounds, and none had close connections with current Armed Forces personnel, Service Leavers or veterans.

1. What do people associate with Service Leavers?

In the focus groups we asked for the first words and phrases that came to mind when they thought of someone who had been in the Armed Forces. Very often these were positive: "heroes", "discipline", "loyalty", "comradeship", "gratitude". In every group, however, some said their immediate associations were more negative: "convalescing", "mental illness", "scarred for life", "damaged goods", "PTSD", "undersupported", "underappreciated", "you hear a lot that they're homeless, that they've now turned to alcohol or drugs because of traumatic stress disorder. You hear that they don't really know where to go, they've not had the right support."

We asked a similar question in our 2,000-sample online survey:

Thinking about people who have been in the Armed Forces and have recently left, but are still of working age, what is the first word or phrase that comes to mind?		
Able (12%)	Disadvantaged (5%)	Bravery (4%)
Adjustment (7%)	Veteran (5%)	Abandoned (4%)
Admirable (6%)	Unemployed (4%)	Assistance/Help/Support (4%)
Heroes (5%)	Dedicated (4%)	Mentally damaged (3%)

The focus groups were asked to imagine an individual who had left the Armed Forces in their thirties. Again, the groups thought they would probably have many positive attributes ("skills", "teamwork", "communication", "leadership", "physically fit", "well-drilled"). Beyond this, most of their immediate observations fell into one of two categories. The first was that such people would be facing a huge and difficult adjustment: "It must be tough, chaotic, really hard"; "They get institutionalised. They get told when to get up, what to eat…"; "They don't know what route to take. They've been told what to do for ten years, now they're a bit lost"; "They've got a lot to re-learn. It must be shocking for them" "They don't get deprogrammed. It's a horrible word to use but that's what it is. They go from being a weapon of the state straight back into society."

The second category was that the Service Leaver may be dealing with some kind of problem brought on by their time in the Armed Forces: "Aggression, temper issues"; "gambling problems, drink drugs"; "I've heard one in ten homeless people is ex-Forces"; "It sounds awful, but I think of someone hurt or wounded or who had some life-changing event out there"; "I think they'd be quite troubled, AWOL, a bit messed up"; "If you think about a young person who went in straight from school, a 16 year-old entering the Army, coming out at 30, they might not be an emotionally stable person having seen the

things they might have seen having been at war"; "If you've been to war and seen horrible things, there are all sorts of illnesses you've got to overcome."

For a few, the fact that the individual was leaving mid-career must itself be an indicator that something was wrong: "Unless you really have no other option [when you join], you must have a vocation to go into it, so to leave it they must have a really good reason."

2. The perceived impact of military experience in civilian life

In our survey, we asked people which they thought would play the bigger part in shaping a Service Leaver's future civilian life – their positive experiences from being in the military, or their negative ones. Just over one third (34%) thought the positive experiences would be more influential, while exactly half thought negative experiences would play as big a part as positive ones. One in ten thought negative experiences would be more important, and 6 per cent said they didn't know. Women tended to ascribe a bigger role to negative experiences than men.

Thinking about people leaving the Armed Forces, which do you think is most likely to play the biggest part in shaping their life as a civilian?									
%	ALL	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
The positive experiences from their time in the military	34	39	28	23	25	33	30	42	43
The negative experiences from their time in the military	10	9	12	28	15	11	8	5	3
Both equally	50	46	54	44	54	50	53	47	50

The proportion thinking that positive experiences from the military would play the biggest part in shaping a Service Leaver's civilian life increased with age. Nearly one in three (28%) of those aged 18 to 24 thought negative experiences from the military would be the more important influence, compared to just one in twenty of those aged 65 or over. Those with AF personnel or recent Service Leavers among their close friends or family were slightly more likely to say positive experiences would be more important (38%) than those who did not (32%).

Experience of dangerous or traumatic situations

We also asked what proportion of Service Leavers people thought had experienced dangerous or traumatic situations during their time in the Armed Forces. The mean estimate was that 61% of those leaving the Forces had experienced such situations, though women offered a higher mean estimate (68%) than men (55%), and younger people made higher estimates than older people.

What proportion of those leaving the Armed Forces do you think have experienced dangerous or traumatic situations during their time in the military? That is, for every 100 people who leave the Armed Forces, how many do you think have been in such situations?									
	ALL	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Mean % estimated	61	55	68	64	65	64	60	58	56

Nearly one in ten (8%) thought that 91 to 100% of those leaving the Armed Forces would have experienced a dangerous or traumatic situation. Women (12%) were more likely to say this than men (5%).

Most common problems believed to be faced by Service Leavers

Asked which of a range of problems they thought Service Leavers were most likely to face in civilian life, our poll respondents selected mental health more often than any other. More than eight in ten believed "mental health problems" to be one of the three most common on the list, with two thirds mentioning "problems adjusting to a civilian environment". More respondents thought "physical injuries or physical health problems" were common than "problems finding a new job".

Which of the following do you think are the most common problems faced by people leaving the Armed Forces? *Please tick what you think are the three most common.*

% choosing in top three	ALL	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Mental health problems	82	79	86	93	89	84	82	79	72
Problems adjusting to a civilian environment	65	66	64	54	54	60	64	76	76
Physical injuries or physical health problems	61	58	65	68	72	63	56	55	56
Problems finding a good new job	41	44	37	28	35	34	42	46	53
Homelessness	23	22	24	30	22	27	26	17	16
Family problems	15	17	13	15	11	16	15	15	16
Alcohol or substance abuse	12	15	10	12	16	14	14	11	9

Those aged 65 or over were the only group not to mention mental health problems more than any other potential problem. Women and younger people were more likely than men and older people to mention both mental and physical health problems; older people were more likely to mention problems adjusting to a civilian environment or finding a good new job. All groups were more likely to mention homelessness as a potential problem for Service Leavers than family problems, or alcohol or substance abuse.

In our survey, more than three quarters (78%) thought mental health problems were more prevalent among former members of the Armed Forces than among the population as a whole. Small majorities said the same of suicide, divorce and alcohol addiction.

Overall, 27% (including 40% of 18 to 24 year-olds) thought mental health problems were "much more likely" to happen to former AF personnel, while 51% thought they were "somewhat more likely". This was the highest ratio for "much" compared to "somewhat" of any of the potential problems we asked about.

Do you think each of the following are more likely to happen to someone who has been in the Armed Forces compared to people in general, or less likely?
Much more likely to happen to someone who has been in the AF / Somewhat more likely / No more or less likely / Somewhat less likely / Much less likely to happen to someone who has been in the AF

% saying 'somewhat' or 'much' more likely if been in AF	ALL	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Mental health problems	**78**	75	83	80	82	79	74	78	78
Suicide	**54**	50	58	67	66	55	51	46	47
Divorce	**52**	54	50	48	51	52	57	52	51
Alcohol addiction	**51**	51	50	55	56	54	48	47	46
Unemployment	**47**	47	47	48	53	48	40	46	47
Homelessness	**47**	46	47	53	50	50	45	40	43
Drug addiction	**37**	35	38	48	47	38	31	31	29
Prison	**17**	21	15	21	20	20	22	14	12

Perceived prevalence of physical, emotional and mental health problems

In our survey we also asked people to estimate what proportion of former Service personnel had some kind of physical, emotional or mental health problem as a result of their time in the military. The mean estimate was that this was true of just over half (54%) of former members of the Armed Forces – though, again, the estimate offered by women (61%) was higher than that made by men (47%), and the younger the participants, the higher their estimate.

What percentage of former members of the Armed Forces do you think have some kind of physical, emotional or mental health problem? That is, for every 100 people who leave the Armed Forces, how many do you think go on to have a problem like this as a result of their time in the military?

	ALL	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Mean % estimated	**54**	47	61	61	60	57	52	49	46

A majority (58%) estimated that more than half of former AF personnel had some kind of physical, emotional or mental health problem. One in four thought the proportion with such problems was above 70%; women (32%) were nearly twice as likely to think this as men (17%).

In the focus groups people estimated the proportion leaving with physical, mental health or emotional problems at between 10% and 90%, with most saying more than half – though "there is probably a spectrum. Many people come out with some level of issue, but relatively few with really strong issues." Some also suspected that the Armed Forces themselves might want to keep the true number under wraps, not least to avoid damaging recruitment: "They're not going to highlight it, 'you're going to come out with this'." Also, "it might be quite hidden. There might be a culture among those that have served that you don't talk about it."

The "front line"

In the focus groups, several people argued that such problems were likely to be more prevalent among those who had been on the "front line" and, by extension, more common among those who had been in the Army than in the Royal Navy or the RAF: "If you're in the Navy you're less likely to have seen things on the front line. In my mind, we don't have sea battles in the same way"; "I don't see the Navy or the RAF as losing limbs or having stress, I see the Army boys being on the front line. The Navy and the RAF, you don't hear much – well, I don't pay as much attention, but I never hear, oh, he's been in the Navy, he's lost a limb"; "If you've been to Afghanistan and seen your mates having their legs blown off you will have a different time from someone who was servicing planes in Lincolnshire".

People readily admitted that when thinking of people in the Armed Forces, infantry soldiers were the first to come to mind, and that their perceptions might have been distorted as a result: "All the stories you tend to hear about tend be from those who have been in the front line. So the first thing that comes to mind is people with PTSD, but that's not really the case, is it?" "There are a variety of roles in the Army and a lot of people who join them don't have to see, like, all the action. I think Army life is much more textured. I think we're looking at people in a very sort of Hollywood blockbuster way, when there are lots of roles in the Army and a lot of different experiences"; I would be interested to know what proportion of the Armed Forces have been in combat in the last ten years. It's probably quite small."

However, some argued that "front line" troops were not necessarily the only ones who might suffer longer term effects from their time in the Armed Forces. Those in supporting roles could also be affected: "Even the people flying the drones. When you're in the thick of it it's a bit more justified, but when you're sitting with an X-Box controller, you're more likely to have depression but less likely to have PTS;" "Nurses might have seen horrific injuries"; "I reckon it affects every person that leaves, if they've gone to war"; "If you're not out there but you're still hearing what's going on, on the radios or whatever. Or medics, they're seeing just as much"; "Even if you're a chef, you're in close quarters. Even if there are people on the front line and you're just a chef, you still know these people because you're in a small group. You get the aftermath. You see the effects of it. It might not have been particularly close to you but it doesn't matter that I've just been cooking, I would be upset that I've just lost my friend"; "There have been so many wars that they will all have experienced something awful. They try to put it behind them but it will be there under the surface, bubbling away, and it might be years later when it comes out."

Employing Service Leavers

Asked how they would react to the idea of employing someone who had been in the Armed Forces, many were enthusiastic, reiterating the positive traits mentioned above and adding more: "Good person to deal with a bad situation", "specialist skills", "get the job done", "dealing with pressure", "commitment to public service – we've seen it recently, people running towards danger rather than running away. I think the Army breeds that into them"; "They would get on with life. There won't be anything worse than what they've already seen or done."

However, some said they would have doubts about the Service Leaver's ability to adapt to a civilian working environment. People also said they would have concerns about the applicant's mental health, even if no such problems had yet emerged: "Would an employer consider them a risk? Anger issues, war syndromes and all that type of thing. I think a lot of employers think along that line"; "They might think any of them could blow up any time now"; "It wouldn't be outward. There could just be voices in their had and then they'd snap"; "They've got good timekeeping and things, but it's what they've seen. That door could slam and bring something back"; "You'd worry that there would be a trigger factor, that something would just trigger anger"; "I'd be worried about PTSD and things like that. You can't go asking them about their mental history, 'sorry, have you got any issues?'"; "They might not want to sit

near the window, or something." (For my more detailed research on employers' attitudes to Service Leavers, see *The Armed Forces & Society*, 2012).

Availability of care and support

People in our focus groups were very unsure what help was available for serving and former Armed Forces personnel. Though they often said they "would like to think" that support was available inside the services, they usually assumed that provision for Service Leavers and veterans was insufficient. There were three main reasons for this. First, as one participant put it "the fact that charities have been set up means that whoever is supposed to have been doing it has not been doing it." There was an impression that if a Service Leaver was diagnosed with a mental health problem after discharge "they'd say 'it's not our problem' and pass them on to charities like Help For Heroes."

Second, "from what you see on the news, it's no help, out of the door, go to your GP, good luck." This impression sometimes seemed to be confirmed by more direct experience: "I know a guy who lives in the bushes [near Bristol]. In his head he's still in the Army. He's full-on nuts. He's scary to be around sometimes. It makes you wonder how many others there are like that."

Third, many assumed that any support offered by the government or the Forces themselves must have fallen victim to austerity: "With the cuts to the military, that's an obvious thing to cut. You see it in schools – the people we have lost are counsellors, support workers. You lose the fluffiness." Moreover, "the mental health system in England isn't that great for civilians, so it must be worse for them with all the trauma they've had;" "There is no government department that deals with it – no Minister for Ex-Servicemen or anything like that."

Whether help was available or not, there were doubts as to how readily it would be taken up by those who needed it: "In my mind, you've got rufty-tufty Army lads who think asking for help is a sign of weakness. Women are more likely to ask for help. Men won't go to the doctor's, we'll go to the doctor's for anything."

Asked to name charities that specialised in helping Service Leavers and veterans, our eight groups between them could think of only three: Help For Heroes, the Royal British Legion – often referred to as "the poppy people" – and in the Edinburgh groups, Erskine. We put the same question to our poll respondents. Again, Help For Heroes and the RBL were mentioned more often, and recall was highest among older people.

Can you name any charities that specialise in helping people who have been in the Armed Forces? *Unprompted*									

% naming	ALL	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Help For Heroes	49	51	47	32	41	42	55	60	60
Royal British Legion	19	23	15	6	7	15	22	28	30
SAAFA	8	9	7	1	4	4	9	12	14
Poppy Appeal	5	6	5	3	4	6	6	5	6

Smaller numbers mentioned the British Red Cross (3%), the Salvation Army (3%), Invictus Games (2%), Combat Stress (1%) and Veterans Aid (1%). 38% could not name any.

The Armed Forces Covenant

All our focus group participants claimed never to have heard of the Armed Forces Covenant. Some made guesses as to its purpose: "it means a promise, doesn't it – is it some sort of legislation we don't know about, a sort of promise to soldiers?" "Is it to get them back into work?" "Is it like a Rotary Club type thing?" "A pot of money to help? A committee of people?" "Is it a kind of pledge?" "An agreement that the Army gives you back something for giving up your time?"

There was also puzzlement when it was explained that the purpose of the Covenant was to ensure that current and former Armed Forces personnel were not disadvantaged as a result of their service. Some wondered why this was needed: "Why would they have a disadvantage once they were back in civvy street? I don't understand it"; "Sounds like they were treated worse, but how?" (Equal treatment in the provision of public services did not sound much of a prize to some: "Does it mean a veteran has to wait six months for an operation like everyone else?")

People were also sceptical that such a written commitment from the government resulted in much positive action: "Sounds like the government saying it just so they can say they're doing something"; "Sounds like politicians' lip service"; "How do they make sure it happens? Is there a veterans' badge?" "They need a body to action it. One thing Trump has done is pour a lot of money into the Department of Veterans' Affairs. We don't have anything like that."

3. Information sources

We asked our poll respondents where they had picked up their impressions of Service Leavers and veterans. Television documentaries and TV news were mentioned most often (though more by older people than younger; films and TV dramas were more likely to be mentioned by younger people were older, as were the Armed Forces themselves). Events like the Invictus Games, fundraising or awareness campaigns and charities had also been important in helping to shape their understanding.

Which of the following would you say have been the most important in giving you your impressions of people who have been in the Armed Forces? *Please tick the three most important.*

% naming in top three	ALL	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
TV documentaries	51	51	51	44	52	50	52	55	53
TV news	45	45	46	40	38	45	51	43	52
Events like the Paralympics / Invictus Games	36	36	37	17	24	30	38	47	54
The Armed Forces	35	35	35	41	43	37	34	33	25
Newspapers	27	29	25	25	21	28	27	26	33
Fundraising / awareness campaigns / celebrities	27	25	29	33	24	23	23	30	31
Charities	23	24	23	28	23	23	23	24	21
My friends / family	22	21	22	24	27	27	19	17	16
Films	13	14	12	21	22	17	10	10	2
TV dramas	12	11	12	18	16	12	14	7	6
Government / politicians	8	9	7	10	9	9	8	8	6

The media

This balance was reflected in our focus groups. Asked what they thought they had formed their impressions, many participants mentioned news and, particularly, documentaries: "I read an article about an ex-soldier sleeping in his car"; "In papers like the *Guardian* it's a regular theme, disregard for the human cost of the military"; "I read about a man who had PTSD and was going out in his garden – it was in the *Sun* – and he still thought he was in the war. He was even holding a pretend rifle. His family were begging for help but there wasn't any"; "There was a documentary – you can end up drinking too much, being abusive to your partner, their life is a disaster and so is everyone's around them"; "Those Ross Kemp programmes. When he's in a war zone, Helmand. You think, I'm going to be scarred just watching this"; "There was a thing on BBC3 about a guy who had been a decorated soldier, loved by his fellow soldiers, he got in a fight outside a pub and ended up really hurting someone, and went to prison for six years. He didn't have the tools to deal with things. He was a weapon of the state, and then…".

Asked if they could recall any specific positive stories about current or former members of the Armed Forces, most of the groups mentioned the Invictus Games ("Prince Harry's thing… bloody impressive"). One mentioned "that MP who helped the cop outside parliament – he was ex-Army."

Some said films and TV dramas had also helped shape their views. Participants mentioned *Born On The Fourth Of July, Lone Survivor, Saving Private Ryan, Forrest Gump, Jar Head, Birdsong, Soldier, Soldier*, and "that one with Stacey from *EastEnders*. They're all depressing, they all look at the darker side." The fact that many of these featured the US military made little difference: "I think of *American Sniper*. Quite a scarred character, wouldn't come away from his role. I felt sorry for him. He didn't have a life like everyone else. I wouldn't want my child being put in that predicament. I know it's not the British Army, but it's still the Army."

A few also mentioned war poetry, school history lessons and the Imperial War Museum as having played a part in shaping their perceptions.

Charities and good causes

Publicity for charities and good causes had also had a powerful role in shaping many people's perceptions of the challenges facing Service Leavers and veterans: "You always think of the adverts of, like, Erskine or whoever it is that helps them. I would say that advert's more in your mind than just a normal Army recruitment advert. You would take note more, something like that, if a guy's standing there with his leg blown off saying 'help our soldiers'." Such publicity also tended to reinforce the idea, mentioned above, that charities are filling a gap left by the government or the Forces themselves: "I saw a programme about Help For Heroes. There was a guy who had had his legs blown off and they were in a mansion house getting him back on his feet, and fitting prosthetic limbs. I don't think the Army help them at all to be honest, I think it's down to them and the Legion."

People readily accepted that charities would inevitably "want to pull on your heartstrings because they want you to open your wallet." Even so, they tended to think this was a legitimate way of raising awareness of the issues they dealt with, and raising the funds needed to continue their work: "Charities are doing wonderful things supporting soldiers and so on, and to do that they've got to show the problems they're facing."

Balance

Most people in the groups felt that the overall message from the media and other sources was probably skewed on the negative side. There was no "neutral source where you can get information of this type", and newspapers and broadcasters "are never going to talk about the positive stuff." Though many or

most of those leaving the Forces would do well, "you don't hear that so much. You hear about the guy living in a tent outside the dole office who's got PTSD from blowing things up."

However, people did not necessarily see this as misrepresenting the experience of Service Leavers and veterans "because the problems are there. But we don't know what percentage." Indeed, not only was it inevitable that charities and the media would focus on problems rather than everyday successes, this helped to provide an important balance to the picture from official sources, especially that portrayed in recruitment campaigns: "There was that ad on the TV about a lad who worked in a pub. It said 'I was born in so-and-so but made in the Navy'. But it's just giving one side"; "The ads showing the training, saying you can leave and get a good job. I don't believe it. They don't show the bad side. It's false. They need to show the balance, what might happen – not 'Green Berets, loads of money, see the world'"; "I think it's a fairer representation now. War movies used to be made by governments"; "The public can be very sceptical towards continued positive stories about what someone in the military has done. As a nation, we're pretty sceptical of wars and politicians and all that kind of stuff."