

# Making life better for our war veterans, young and old

**U**NIL recently, the typical image of war veterans in the UK was of late middle-aged to elderly men, medals on their chest, Earl Haig Fund poppies, and ceremonies at the Cenotaph. Most of us would probably have felt pride in a generation that saved Britain in two world wars.

The image is being changed, by TV pictures, press articles, research reports and blogs, into one of young to early middle-aged men and women leaving the military after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and encountering public opinion at best indifferent and at worst hostile.

The services train personnel in occupationally specific and highly transferable skills and, as a result, most new veterans re-settle into civilian life, find a job and

## PLATFORM

**NORMA HURLEY**

Director of Blake Stevenson, social and economic research and consultancy company



adjust to a new lifestyle. There has always been a minority who have suffered a disability or are vulnerable in some way and in need of support to help them re-settle and to find employment.

However, military people have self-sufficiency and survival instilled into them during training and the culture does not encourage admission of what might be perceived as "weakness". Even if adjustment does take time, difficulties have tended to be handled at home or with help from

army mates or their old regiment – not spoken about openly.

The world is changing. More Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are joining a growing band of ex-service people from the Northern Ireland, Falklands and Gulf conflicts beginning to speak openly about the difficulties they face readjusting to life outside the forces – relationship breakdown, homelessness, substance abuse, unemployment.

When we talk about the socially excluded and the long-

term unemployed in Scotland, there is rarely mention made of ex-service people. Yet this is a growing and important issue, with significant numbers of people in involved. Research by Poppyscotland (the Earl Haig Fund Scotland) estimates there are about 189,000 veterans of employment age in Scotland. Of these, there are an estimated 26,000 unemployed or on worklessness benefits.

A National Audit Office survey in 2007 found early service leavers (those who serve less than four years in the military) are particularly vulnerable to unemployment and homelessness. Early leavers are entitled to very little resettlement support. The Scottish unemployment rate is less than 3 per cent, yet 16 per cent of early service leavers

in the survey were unemployed. A Royal British Legion report in 2006 found there was an unemployment rate twice the national average among 18 to 49 year-olds in the ex-service community.

The extent of mental health problems among younger ex-service personnel is much higher than that of their peers. In the 16-44 age group, the number of mental health disorders among ex-forces people is three times that of the UK population of the same age. And the prevalence of mental disorders for ex-service people is 94 per 1,000 compared with 28 per 1,000 in the general population.

The Royal British Legion research showed among all 16- to 44-year-old women not in work, 45 per cent of ex-service women suffered from ill health, com-

pared with 27 per cent of women in the general population.

Poppyscotland and other veterans groups have commissioned us to research the kind of employment support needed by disabled veterans or those suffering from trauma or other barriers to finding and sustaining employment. We will talk to veterans, organisations and employment support agencies, then identify gaps in services and see how they might best be filled and by whom. We would welcome hearing from any veterans about their experience in finding work – good and bad.

● *Blake Stevenson is working with The Scotsman to organise a debate on the future of the military at 7pm next Wednesday in the Victoria Halls, Helensburgh. Contact [norrna@blakestevenson.co.uk](mailto:norrna@blakestevenson.co.uk).*