



venturetrust

**Positive Futures: Health and Wellbeing Impacts
for veterans struggling with civilian life
2019-2022**

Final Report: Executive Summary

March 2022
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Executive Summary

Overarching conclusion: the semi-individualised Positive Futures programme is successful in driving health and wellness impacts, particularly mental health and wellness impacts, in veterans who have struggled with the transition to a civilian life.

Improved, and sustained, mental wellbeing continues to be the main impact seen by participants. Regardless of Cohort or experience, the majority of participants (99.5%) reported improved or sustained mental wellbeing following taking part in Positive Futures.

Improved mental wellbeing drives all other health and wellbeing impacts.

"If your head's in a good place, the rest follows."

ESL, Army

Positive Futures is a programme which helps former military personnel struggling in civilian life.

For a minority of veterans, the change from the regimented environment of the armed forces where food, clothing and accommodation are provided to having to cope with the disorganised environment of civilian life is an immense struggle. It is these veterans Positive Futures targets.

The **Positive Futures Model** is a combination of cognitive behavioural approaches, holistic interventions, experiential learning, skilled facilitation, relationship building, coaching, mentoring and aftercare.

Positive Futures creates a therapeutic environment where those participants with mental health issues (frequently part of a complex presenting set) can identify behaviour triggers and develop, and practice, coping strategies. It is delivered through a phased programme (Phases 0 – III).

This work built on the 2018 Evaluation of Venture Trust's Positive Futures Programme¹ which helps former military personnel struggling in civilian life. That Evaluation highlighted Positive Futures as:

“A successful, cost-effective, high value for money programme, delivering positive outcomes for veterans who have struggled in civilian life thereby helping to achieve cross-cutting policy objectives.”

This work investigated and evaluate the ‘**particular catalysts for change**’ in the Positive Futures Programme based on the Health and Wellness outcomes seen in the 2018 Evaluation. 2018 Evaluation participants (Cohort 1) had described themselves as being ‘reset’ as humans and this evaluation was to ascertain what drove this ‘re-setting of the person’ and, to determine as far as was possible, the ‘Factors for Reset’ and their relative strengths.

In the relevant period, 141 veterans were referred to Positive Futures. Of these 141 veterans, 49 went on to successfully complete a wilderness journey. Participant numbers were depressed by Covid.

Service data was recorded for 107 individuals (76% of referrals): 96 (90.0%) served in the Army, 6 (6.0%) served in the Royal Navy and 5 (4.0%) served in the Royal Air Force.

At referral, every participant in Positive Futures has “presenting issues” – aspects of life where they face challenges. 96.2% of participants had 2 or more presenting issues. 40.0% of participants had 5 or more presenting issues. The average number of presenting issues was 5, with the highest number of presenting issues for a single individual being 8.

Key presenting issues at referral were Mental Health Issues (98.0.0%, 129 individuals) and Unemployment (76.5%, 101 individuals). **Mental Health Issues includes poor mental wellbeing as well as diagnosed and undiagnosed mental ill-health.** Against the 2018 Evaluation (where 73% of all referrals presented with Mental Health Issues), there was a significant uplift in the numbers presenting with Mental Health Issues.

It is thought three factors are at play in the increased number of referrals with mental health issues:

1. Less stigma about mental health issues caused by Service: wider publicity about veterans, and Serving personnel, who have spoken out about their mental health issues is contributing to breaking down barriers.
2. Better screening of individuals at Phase 0, and
3. The impacts of Covid-19 on mental health.

As with wider society, the Positive Futures model adapted to cope with Covid.

Venture Trust pivoted to digital delivery very swiftly when Covid struck and continued to offer services across its full spectrum of programmes. Unlike many other services, Venture Trust remained open throughout the lockdowns and continued to provide services to clients.

Due to the pivots made by Venture Trust, there are differences in participant experiences between those who had been on a wilderness journey before the pandemic struck and those who went after the pandemic. Like is not being compared with like across the evaluation. Circumstances leading to these different participant experiences were utterly beyond Venture Trust's control.

Lockdown challenged mental health across the entire UK population. For the Positive Futures participants, with their pre-existing mental health issues, lockdown was an even bigger challenge. Participants used their learning and the ongoing support from Venture Trust to help them cope.

Even with the impact of Covid, where participants reported them, health and wellbeing impacts are strong and are lasting.

Table 1 (below) highlights the summary health and wellbeing impacts across both Cohorts.

¹ The full report can be downloaded from <http://www.venturetrust.org.uk/programmes/positive-futures-programme/>

Table 1: Health and Wellness Impacts ranked by frequency of reporting

1	Improved Mental Wellbeing
2	Slower to Rise/Less Impulsive
3 =	Better Anger Management
3 =	Using Personal Development Techniques
5 =	Increased Calmness
5 =	Reduced Self-Isolation

Through creating a semi-individualised open and supportive environment which facilitates change, Positive Futures delivered a broad range of health and wellbeing impacts for veterans who are struggling with civilian life. The wilderness journey remains the 'hook' which attracts veterans to the Programme.

The key drivers (Drivers for Change) for participant change seen in the 2018 Evaluation continued on in the extended Programme. They are:

- Semi-individualised, open and supportive environment created throughout the complete Positive Futures Programme and, in particular, during the wilderness journey
 - 'Resetting me as a person'
- Peer group support opportunities
- Formation of Friendships
- Learning, using and continuing to use personal development techniques
- Support, in particular:
 - the strong relationships developed between a participant and their Outreach Worker
 - appropriate and timely support from Field Team members on the Wilderness Journey
- The wilderness

Ten key factors, called 'Factors for Reset' were identified by participants as making up the Drivers for Change. The Factors (in rank order) are:

1	Time to Think
2	Peer Group Support
3	Easy to speak in the open
4	Open & Supportive Environment
5	Skill of 1-1 Worker*
6	Time away from other pressures
7	Learning through 'play' (Fun & Games)
8	The chance to open up over a long period
9	No demands made by my Outreach or 1-1 Worker
10	Someone interested in me for an extended period

These Factors help to drive the impacts seen in participants. Impacts are, for some participants, truly life changing. Impacts are very broad, ranging from small steps towards healthier living to complete lifestyle changes. Impacts recorded for both Cohorts include:

- Increased short-term and long-term Mental Wellbeing
- Reducing or stopping drug and alcohol consumption
 - Maintenance of abstinence from drugs and alcohol
- Reducing or stopping medication (under medical supervision) for depression and other illnesses
 - Managing their own self-medicating better
- Starting to use prescription medication
- Cooking at home rather than eating take-away
- Eating more healthily and eating a wider variety of foods
- Increasing personal care levels
- Increasing fitness levels by taking more exercise whether through simply going out or using a local gym

- Re-starting sports or fitness activities

A range of 'Additional Impacts' were seen, some of which are 'opposite pairs'. Key Additional Impacts are:

- Telling services (GP's, JobCentre, Council, etc.) 'I have Served' or 'I am a veteran'
- Fewer visits to GP's and other health and wellbeing services
- Increased willingness to seek treatment
- Fewer emergency medical or mental health interventions
- Reduced social isolation
- Weight loss
- Weight gain
- Taking action on drug, alcohol and tobacco usage
- Acknowledging Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Positive Futures is currently delivered only in Scotland and only to armed forces veterans. The 2018 Evaluation concluded the Programme was replicable not only to veterans but also to other groups of individuals with a shared common experience. Therefore, in theory, any individuals with a shared common experience which may create problems or issues for those experiencing it **may** be able to benefit from a similar programme.

Groups of individuals who might benefit could include:

- Domestic violence survivors
- Former prisoners
- Older individuals in the Criminal Justice system
- Drug and alcohol abusers who want to change their lifestyle
- Individuals who have experienced particular traumas
- Particular groups of workers in highly stressful workplaces: For example:
 - NHS workers (particularly those at the front line of the Covid-19 pandemic), the emergency services, serving members of the armed forces.

An opportunity to trial replication outside Scotland was taken. A Scottish-born veteran, who had joined up and served in Scotland but now lived in Wales, self-referred to Positive Futures; was accepted onto the course and successfully completed it.

Further replication trials are recommended.

