



Supporting Military Veterans: Insights from volunteers in North East England

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RESEARCH

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to identify motivations to volunteer as caseworkers with the United Kingdom based tri-service military charity, The Soldiers', Sailors', and Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA). The research utilised a focus group and an online self-completion questionnaire administered to all active caseworkers across North East England. Respondents were almost three-quarters male, two-thirds over 65, and retired; almost all respondents reported their ethnicity as White British. Previous military service, or colleagues serving in the military, is a strong factor in attracting people to volunteer. Motivations for volunteering as caseworkers were focused on achieving emotional and altruistic goals, with many respondents identifying how they donated significant hours, and the majority wanting to use their existing knowledge and experience. The findings from the research are limited to the sample population and should be viewed as an evidence-based insight of the voluntary role. The study should inform future research and practice for the recruitment of SSAFA volunteer caseworkers.

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KEYWORDS:

Military Charity; Volunteers;
Motivations; Attractions;
Veterans; United Kingdom

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Pepper, I., & Rogers, C. (2022). Supporting Military Veterans: Insights from volunteers in North East England. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 8(3), pp. 128–139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i3.348>

Support for military veterans has become a national priority across the United Kingdom (UK), with the Government publishing a *Veterans Strategy Action Plan: 2022 to 2024* (Office for Veterans' Affairs, 2022). Included in this strategy are numerous ways in which it is said support for military veterans will be utilised, with one strong aspect being the role of volunteers.

There are approximately 2.4 million military veterans across the UK, within the region of 75% being over 55 years of age and 60% over 65 (Ministry of Defence, 2019). The transition from military service to reintegrate into civilian life can be difficult for some veterans (Angel et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2020); although support, if known about and accessed, is available from numerous initiatives and charities.

One such charity based in the UK, The Soldiers', Sailors', and Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA) focuses on identifying, addressing, and supporting the needs of Her Majesty's (HM) Forces veterans by providing effective and timely support, by people with both the right skills and time available (SSAFA, 2020a). HM Forces veterans could have been regulars and/or reserves in the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, British Army, and the Royal Air Force, with support also offered to veterans' families as well as those who completed National Service and their families. Between 1949 and 1960, National Service recruited all physically fit males aged 17–21 who had to serve in HM Forces for 18 months to 24 months (UK Parliament, 2022).

To assist SSAFA in achieving their mission, during 2020 just under 5,000 people volunteered to support clients within local communities, completing slightly under 25,000 cases and visits to clients (SSAFA, 2020c). At the centre of providing support for veterans are the SSAFA caseworkers, who need to be recruited, trained, and of course retained in order to effectively donate their time in a formal capacity. The support the caseworkers offer vary from being someone who listens to assisting clients accessing financial assistance from statutory and military benevolent funds or signposting to other charity partners for specific assistance (SSAFA, 2020a).

The aims of this research were to identify what motivates people across the North East of England to donate their time as volunteer caseworkers with the national tri-service military charity SSAFA, and from where these caseworkers first became aware of SSAFA and the role. The North East of England was chosen for this research due to its proximity to the university where ethical approval was granted, with the region continuing to face economic difficulties, high levels of poverty, and a generally ageing population it was ripe for investigation.

Although the research should be viewed as indicative rather than completely representative of the whole

caseworker population, the outcomes will inform and have impact upon the local, regional, and national policies in relation to the recruitment of volunteer caseworkers supporting military veterans.

VOLUNTEERING TO SUPPORT VETERANS

Volunteers are integral within society (Rochester, 2006) with 19.4 million people volunteering in a formal capacity across the UK during 2018/2019 (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2020). Chapman and Hunter (2018) reported 67 million hours were donated annually across Third Sector Organisations (such as charities, social enterprises, community, or voluntary organisations). The recruitment and motivations of volunteers to donate many hours in support of others is essential to the effective running and delivery of many charitable services.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2020) reported that those aged between 65–74 are most likely to regularly formally volunteer. McGarvey et al. (2019) identified the need to further engage with more diverse communities in volunteering. Often the main barriers to volunteering are cited as a lack of information as to what opportunities are available and the costs incurred (such as travel) whilst volunteering (Rochester, 2006). The perceived lack of available time, particularly within younger potential volunteers, is sometimes seen as a barrier (Bussell & Forbes, 2003). McGarvey et al. (2019), also identified one of the main barriers to individuals of volunteering for the first time is that it had just never been considered by individuals.

Bussell and Forbes (2003) proposed a three-stage life cycle for volunteers. The first stage of the volunteering life cycle, “determinants” involves an organisation promoting themselves widely, raising awareness and gaining interest from potential volunteers, with volunteers also understanding their motivations for volunteering. In the second “decision” stage the volunteer is recruited by an organisation by promoting and linking the benefits of volunteering with them to the needs of the volunteer, who in the competitive marketplace, decides this opportunity is a good fit. Nichols et al. (2019) also discussed how promoting the benefits to the potential volunteer has positive impacts on recruiting, rather than selling the benefits to others in an altruistic fashion. The final stage of the life cycle for volunteers is “commitment,” where the volunteer is enabled and supported by the organisation to develop and grow from initial needs to ongoing development, recognising that the volunteer's personal circumstances and commitments can change over time (Bussell & Forbes, 2003).

Research conducted in the Netherlands identified that new charity volunteers were particularly attracted

to organisations that promoted that they invested in volunteers and demonstrated that they cared for their volunteers (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008).

McGarvey et al. (2019) suggested that organisations raise awareness of volunteering opportunities, linking such opportunities to volunteers' lives, needs, and aspirations, to potentially enhance the likelihood of individuals becoming involved and donating their time. However, other scholars have noted that reading success stories of an organisation suggests to potential new volunteers that there was little need for additional support (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008).

Leahy et al. (2020) described how volunteers are made aware of voluntary opportunities through numerous methods such as word of mouth, local events, leaflet drops, social media, and websites. Throughout, the importance of personal recommendations promoting volunteering opportunities is highlighted by Bussell and Forbes (2003). Whilst Sellon (2014) detailed how a personal invitation, either from the organisation or trusted individual already volunteering, is an important way to attract potential new volunteers. Jiang et al. (2018) suggested that when appealing to older generations, making links to their emotional goals (such as supporting others less fortunate) engenders more volunteering over both short and longer periods of time.

Warren and Garthwaite (2015) found that many volunteers within community health services in North East England were motivated to volunteer due to their own significant life events, whilst others volunteered to gain transferrable skills and experience whilst enhancing their employability. Warren and Garthwaite identified that the concept of involvement in their local community was valued by volunteers.

Kranke et al. (2017) identified the importance to veterans volunteering during disaster relief; with Malmedal et al. (2020) adding from their Norwegian research how making a difference in someone else's life is an important motivator for volunteering. Tabassum et al. (2016) found little evidence to support a positive impact from volunteering on the mental health of young adults, but positive impacts become apparent around the age of 40; with volunteering in later life assisting the general health and wellbeing of those volunteering (Jiang et al., 2018; Sellon, 2014; Tabassum et al., 2016).

Malmedal et al. (2020) found participant volunteers in their research experienced significant personal benefits through volunteering. The benefits to volunteers of sharing both purpose and identity are highlighted by Fraser et al. (2009). Wilson et al. (2018) identified the importance of peer support across the population of veterans, who specifically value meeting others who have shared similar experiences. In their study in Maine, USA, Gugliucci et al.

(2021), also identified how previous military experience provides common ground for developing relationships, with the value of such shared experiences amongst UK veterans highlighted by Gordon et al. (2020). The need for both a sense of purpose and self-worth, along with shared community experiences are important to military veterans (Angel et al., 2018; Kranke et al., 2017); as such, it could be suggested that volunteer organisations that offer such benefits will be attractive to veteran volunteers.

Kranke et al. (2017) discussed one such volunteer organisation, Team Rubicon (a nonprofit organisation of predominantly volunteer US military veterans), which offers disaster relief support across the USA and internationally. Another US nonprofit organisation Team Red, White, and Blue, also identify the importance of using their volunteer military veterans to assist veterans themselves reintegrate into society (Angel et al., 2018).

In the UK, veterans are often considered to be solely those members of HM Forces with long military service. Frondigoun et al. (2020) found in their Scottish research with veterans over 65 years of age, that even veterans themselves are often not sure of their status, with a number reporting only those who have experienced active military conflict can call themselves veterans. However, a UK veteran is defined as any person who has served at least one day, either as a regular or reserve, in HM Forces and includes Merchant Mariners who have served in military operations (The Office for Veterans' Affairs, 2020). Of the 2.4 million military veterans in the UK, in the region of 124,000 are residents in the North East of England (Ministry of Defence, 2019). Although it is worthy to note that a significant number of veterans do not class themselves as such (Burdett et al., 2012). In the 2021 census, for the first time, data was specifically gathered about veterans across the UK in order to provide Government with a better understanding of veterans and their needs (Office for Veterans' Affairs, 2022).

Gordon et al. (2020) described how some veterans experience a feeling of separation as they leave the protection of the Armed Forces "family." Wilson et al. (2018) also highlighted the issue of loneliness and social isolation of veterans across the UK, connecting the impact of loneliness to their mental health, with such risks of loneliness and social isolation increasing with age. Gugliucci et al. (2021) highlighted the impact of social isolation and loneliness on both the individual and US society as a whole. McGarvey et al. (2019) and Malmedal et al. (2020) discussed the positive impacts of volunteering on the volunteer's own mental health and wellbeing. The expansion of social networks, perhaps through volunteering, can assist the mental health of veterans by mitigating against the effects of social isolation and loneliness (Angel et al., 2018). Kranke

et al. (2017) also described how US volunteer veterans continued to communicate via social media post-disaster response deployments, perhaps also resulting in a positive effect on their mental health.

The need to address social isolation across UK veterans is recognised by SSAFA (2020c), who have sought funding and approaches, such as mentoring services and the local delivery of hot food, to assist in tackling such isolation. During 2018, in the region of 150,000 volunteers across all Third Sector Organisations in North East England donated 11 million hours (Chapman & Hunter, 2018). In 2020, the charity SSAFA (2020c) itself reported how volunteers donated 900,000 hours supporting veterans and their families from 89 branches spread around the world. This was, however, a reduction from the 1.5 million hours donated during 2019 (SSAFA, 2020b). Such a reduction can probably be attributed to the impact of the Covid-19 national lockdowns; although demand for services remained, SSAFA (2020c) detailed how much of the support became available remotely or online in order to ensure the safety of all involved. However, the attraction and recruitment of volunteers continues at times be difficult, with SSAFA themselves identifying a small reduction in volunteer numbers with an increased number of requests for support (SSAFA, 2020b).

METHODS

All volunteer caseworkers across the SSAFA branches in the geographical region of England were selected for this research. The four branches, which between them had 76 volunteer caseworkers, provide services to the 124,000 veterans (Ministry of Defence, 2019) across a population of over 2.3 million inhabitants spread over 1,300 square miles. The North East region has a mix of affluent locations and areas with high levels of poverty, including some of the most deprived parts of the country with a blend of highly urbanised and rural locations, along with some coastal communities. There are several local military establishments and strong traditional links to the British Army.

The researchers decided to carry out this study using self-completion questionnaires and a small focus group to help provide deeper understanding of some of the points raised in the questionnaire. Self-completion questionnaires (sometimes called self-administered questionnaires) as a research method involves respondents answering questions on their own. The questionnaires can be administered by various means, but on this occasion, they were administered through email addresses provided by the SSAFA organisation. This method was chosen for several reasons including the approach being much cheaper to

administer, quicker to obtain results, and allowed for freedom from researcher effects. It was also convenient for responders as they could complete the questionnaire in their own time, which is important in this case given that they are volunteers and give up their own time for such requests.

Despite the fact that the number of questions on the questionnaire needs to be limited, this helped focus the questionnaire on the main purpose of this research. The questionnaire was designed with the aim of the research in mind and piloted amongst non-volunteers in order to test the layout and understanding of the questions themselves. Following some minor adjustment for style, the completed questionnaire were distributed by email.

The email explained the questionnaire, the support for the research from SSAFA locally and nationally, along with the university ethical approval. It also contained information for the respondent including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and that they were not obliged to take part in the study. The questionnaire was distributed to all 76 SSAFA volunteer caseworkers across all four branches.

As a result of the survey responses, several important themes were established, including becoming aware of the caseworker role, the importance of military experience and existing knowledge, the number of hours donated, and the commitment required as volunteers. These themes then formed the central core for further exploration during the focus group.

The small focus group was facilitated by the researchers via an online discussion platform. A focus group is a method of group discussion whereby several participants engage in a highly defined topic and where interviewees are known to have been involved in particular situations (Merton et al., 1956). Discussions within the focus groups can lead to consensus or differences, which assist the researcher in understanding what participants think and why (Denscombe, 2014).

This focus group was conducted online in order to explore initial responses in more depth whilst gathering opinions, attitudes, and experiences in a relatively quick and economical way. Generally, the consensus for composition of focus groups appears to be at least four members, with others suggesting that the typical focus group size should be between six and nine or 10 members (Denscombe, 2014; Morgan, 1998). Morgan (1998) further recommended smaller groups if the issue is one that involves participants who are very involved in, or are emotionally preoccupied, with the topic. The number of participants in focus groups vary depending on the goal of the researchers and participants involved, noting that larger groups can lead to participants feeling uncomfortable and not sharing

experiences, opinions, and beliefs, whilst smaller groups may not represent the range of responses of the wider population (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

The focus group established for the current research followed the ideas of Morgan (1998), as the caseworkers are highly invested in supporting veterans; as such the researcher recruited a small number of participants ($n=6$) who had agreed to take part by stating so on the initial questionnaire. They represented all branches in the region and both sexes, with the participants having volunteered between three and 14 years with SSAFA.

Respondents within the focus group were allocated a letter from the alphabet as identification to ensure anonymity and the members consented to a recording of the discussions. As Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) described, analysing data from a recorded focus group enables the researcher to create a shorter transcript by focusing on responses to the research questions, which as a result provides a better understanding of the issue in question, whilst also providing the researcher the ability to verify quotations.

The type of open questions asked during the 45-minute focus group included exploring: (a) how participants first

became aware of the volunteer casework role, (b) the benefits of volunteering, (c) where they developed the skills they use in their voluntary role, (d) how many hours they volunteer, and (e) is the experience what they expected?

Acknowledging the benefits of focus group methodologies, other consideration that influenced the research methodology chosen was the fact that at the time of the research Covid-19 national lockdowns and social distancing guidelines were in England and limited the choice of methods. The study was approved by the ethics committee at the University of Sunderland, UK with a reference number of 007515 20/10/20.

RESULTS

Of the 76 self-completion questionnaires distributed, 21 completed responses were received, a response rate of 27.6%. Whilst not definitive, this provides an indication of caseworker perceptions. It is important to firstly understand the demographic or face data of the individuals engaged in this activity. The result can be seen in Table 1.

RESPONDENTS	NUMBER	%
Questionnaires distributed	76	(100%)
Questionnaires returned	21	(27.6%)
Focus group membership offered	76	(100%)
Focus group members	6	(7.8%)
Sex of questionnaire respondents ($n = 21$)		
Male	15	(71.4%)
Female	5	(23.8%)
Prefer not to say	1	(4.7%)
Ethnicity of questionnaire respondents ($n = 21$)		
White – English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	20	(95.2%)
Prefer not to say	1	(4.7%)
Age range of questionnaire respondents ($n = 21$)		
45–54 years	2	(9.5%)
55–64 years	5	(23.8%)
Over 65	14	(66.7%)
Employment of questionnaire respondents ($n = 21$)		
Full-time employment	3	(14.3%)
Part-time employment	3	(14.3%)
Not currently employed	1	(4.7%)
Retired	14	(66.7%)

Table 1 Background Demographics of SSAFA Caseworker Respondents.

Almost three quarters (71.4%) of respondent volunteer caseworkers were male and just under a quarter female (23.8%). For the focus group ($n = 6$), all but one were male.

Almost all (slightly over 95%) of the respondents reported their ethnicity as White British, with one respondent preferring not to self-define their ethnicity. In terms of age, over two thirds of respondents (66.7%) were over the age of 65 and retired. With a significant number of respondents (76.1%) reporting previous military experience.

When asked how many hours a week (on average) each caseworker donated, a small number (14%) reported donating less than an hour a week. However, three quarters

of respondents (76%) reported donating three hours or more a week, with a third of respondents (33%) reporting that they donated over seven hours a week.

Well over half of respondents (57%) first became aware of the SSAFA volunteer caseworker role during their own previous military service or from colleagues still serving in the military. Other forms of awareness are reported in the figure below (see [Figure 1](#)).

Participants' reported motivations for volunteering as SSAFA caseworkers included helping former military personnel (80.9%), supporting veterans (80.9%), giving something back (76.1%), and supporting those less fortunate (71.4%) ([Table 2](#)).

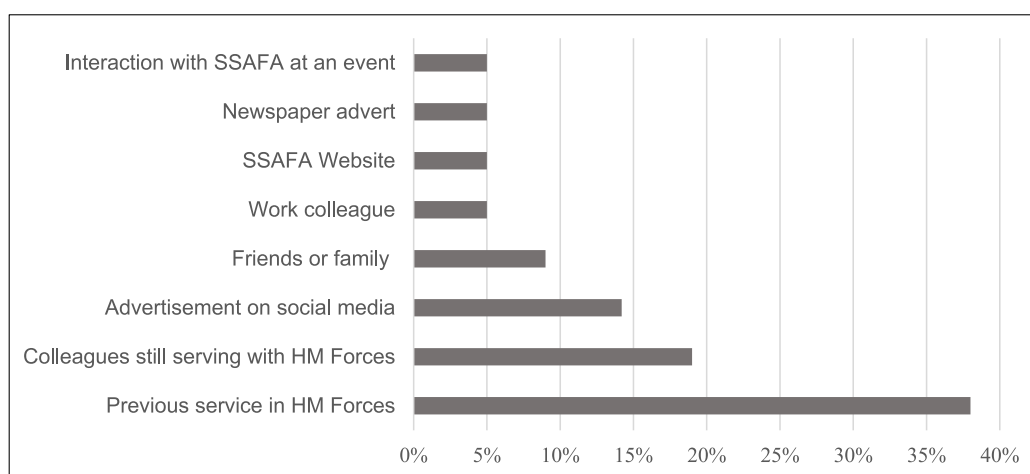


Figure 1 How SSAFA Volunteer Caseworkers First Become Aware of the Role.

RESPONDENTS ($n = 21$)	NUMBER	%
Motivation		
Wanting to put existing knowledge and experience to good use	19	(90.4%)
Wanting to help former military personnel	17	(80.9%)
Supporting veterans in their community	17	(80.9%)
As former military giving something back	16	(76.1%)
Supporting those less fortunate	15	(71.4%)
Developing confidence and experience of caring for people	8	(38%)
Exploring own strengths and developmental needs	6	(28.6%)
Increasing self-esteem	5	(23.8%)
A relative in the military	5	(23.8%)
A friend/relative volunteers with SSAFA	4	(19%)
I wanted to make new friends and/or for social aspects	4	(19%)
Good on my Curriculum Vitae and/or job applications	1	(4.7%)

Table 2 Respondents' Motivations for Volunteering as a Caseworker.

DISCUSSION

Following the distribution of the questionnaire to all 76 SSAFA volunteer caseworkers, a response rate of 27.6% ($n = 21$) was received. This is not surprising as self-completion questionnaires usually result in lower response rates than comparable interview response rates (Muhlbock et al., 2017). However, this suggests that the results from this research need to be considered as indicative rather than completely representative of the sample or wider population of caseworkers.

Analysis of the data revealed that of the responses received, nearly three quarters (71.4%) of the respondents were male. This is contrary to the findings from the national research conducted by McGarvey et al. (2019) who described how females are slightly more likely to volunteer than males; whilst Klug et al. (2018) also found that in the provision of one-to-one support, females were more likely to volunteer than males. Such a difference could be due in part to the historical under representation of females in HM Forces (involvement in which may naturally lead to volunteering for a military charity), with females representing only 8.6% of leavers in 2020 (Ministry of Defence, 2020).

The slightly over two thirds of respondents aged over 65 and retired should not be surprising, as the Ministry of Defence (2019) report that 60% of veterans are over 65 (with 47% of veterans being over 75). This also supports the age range reported by The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2020) as regularly volunteering. Wilson (2013) suggested that older volunteers are a valuable resource because of their life experiences, availability, and flexibility of volunteering. This was supported by focus group members, with participant A commenting, “Once you have a case you are committed to helping ... it can be every day involved or if things go smoothly, it can be once a week.”

It is worthy to note that Jiang et al. (2018) found during their longitudinal study that prolonged participation by older volunteers could be associated with increased life satisfaction. None of the respondents in the current research were under 45 years of age, with Tabassum et al. (2016) suggesting benefits to recruiting volunteers from middle age onwards, such as increased social interactions and an associated improvement in health and wellbeing for the volunteers themselves, similar benefits from volunteering are also reported by others such as McGarvey et al. (2019) and Malmedal et al. (2020). A respondent from the current research wrote in their questionnaire free text how being a caseworker “certainly does ‘add’ something to the life of an individual.” Focus group participant B commented, “You get a lot of pride and satisfaction for a

job well done.” This sentiment was supported by several focus group participants.

Over 90% of respondents in the current research were over 55 years of age, this seems to be contrary to those findings of McGarvey et al. (2019), who reported that it can be difficult to encourage the over 55's, who have either never previously volunteered or not volunteered in the last few years, to donate their time. Findings from the focus group supported an ethos to support veterans because of previous military involvement and family connections. Similar to the findings of Kranke et al. (2017) in the USA, McGarvey et al. (2019) identified in their survey across the United Kingdom, how volunteering opportunities related to the volunteer's own life experiences are likely to attract individuals. This suggests a link between age, previous military service, or identification with the military through service knowledge via family or friends, to volunteering as a SSAFA caseworker.

Adopting Bussell and Forbes' (2003) three-stage life cycle for volunteers, promoting the benefits of volunteering with SSAFA to younger service leavers aged 54 or under, which make up 25% of veterans (Ministry of Defence, 2019), may go some way towards stretching the age profile of caseworker volunteers.

In the geographical region of England under consideration, slightly over 93% of the population are White British, the highest percentage in England and Wales (Gov.UK, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that almost all of the respondents reported their ethnicity as White British. Such underrepresentation reported in this research could also be linked to historical HM Forces membership from underrepresented groups. In 1998 HM Forces employed 220,000 regular personnel (Office for National Statistics, 2021) with the House of Commons Defence Select Committee reporting only 1% of these personnel came from Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic backgrounds (Dodd & Oakes, 1998). Over 20 years later in 2020, the number of regular personnel has reduced to 154,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2021), with slightly over 9% regular HM Forces personnel reporting their ethnic origin as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (Ministry of Defence, 2020); a welcome increase.

Linking both the historical underrepresentation within HM Forces along with regional population differences may go some way to reflecting the underrepresentation within this research study. Focus group members described attending specific events held by underrepresented groups in order to raise awareness of volunteering with SSAFA, although focus group participant C commented how interest was shown but “none of those have come to fruition.” Moving forward, both policy and research should explore the barriers that may exist preventing those

from under-represented groups applying to be volunteer caseworkers and how under-represented groups within SSAFA in the North East of England could be expanded in order to be more representative of the local and military population.

AWARENESS OF THE VOLUNTEER ROLE

Over half of respondents reported previous service or colleagues still serving, suggesting that SSAFA appears to be visible within the military. However, the focus group highlighted how SSAFA is more visible in some military bases and geographical areas than others, being particularly visible in Germany and Cyprus, but not as visible in UK military establishments or external to the military. One respondent wrote in the questionnaire free text how “SSAFA could be more visible in the charity sector.” Focus group participant B commented how externally “people have no idea what SSAFA is or what it stands for,” with participant C continuing to describe how leaflets on SSAFA are within military personnel leavers’ packs. Although this is commendable, it is unclear if these leaflets describe the support SSAFA can offer to veterans and/or the volunteering opportunities, such as caseworkers, available with SSAFA. Wider opportunities to promote SSAFA and raise awareness should be considered and embraced. Bussell and Forbes (2003) suggested that the best results for active recruiting campaigns are achieved by targeting locations where people spend their leisure time, such as sports centres or churches; of course, this should now also include potential volunteers spending leisure time online.

Supporting the ideas of Gugliucci et al. (2021) and Gordon et al. (2020) on the value to military veterans of common shared experiences, comments by focus group participant D initially suggest that being ex-military “provides a certain rapport with the client,” however interestingly they continued to report that “I don’t think it is a necessary requirement.” This is an area worthy of further research.

Slightly under a fifth (19%) of volunteers first became aware of the caseworker role through social media or via SSAFA’s website. This suggests perhaps that the SSAFA volunteer caseworker role is not prominent on social media; those who are considering volunteering did not routinely engage with social media, or as a focus group participant E described, “At the point of leaving the military if you don’t have a need to have any intervention, then you just forget [about SSAFA].” Kranke et al. (2017) highlighted how veterans who volunteered for disaster relief activities turned to the use of social media post event. The tri-service charity has also recently expanded their in-house digital platform to assist serving military and veterans (SSAFA, 2020b). As such, the pro-active use of social media is an aspect worthy of further exploration; perhaps adapting the

ideas of Sellon (2014), SSAFA could consider providing a personal invitation via a social network to potential future volunteers. As one respondent wrote in the questionnaire free text “Volunteering with SSAFA is very rewarding but more volunteers in every role are urgently needed.”

Motivations that featured significantly as reasons participants in the research volunteered as SSAFA caseworkers included helping former military personnel, supporting veterans, giving something back, and supporting those less fortunate. When describing reasons for volunteering one respondent wrote in the questionnaire free text how “on retirement, it gave me an opportunity to give something back for the wonderful years spent in the RAF,” with a second respondent writing how “being a SSAFA caseworker certainly does ‘add’ something to the life of an individual who wants to put something back or generally just help out.”

The findings in this research align to those of Jiang et al. (2018) who highlighted the importance of the emotional goals, specifically when appealing to older potential volunteers. Similarly, numerous researchers (Kranke et al., 2017; Malmedal et al., 2020; McGarvey et al., 2019) identified how the will to improve things and help others are important motivations for volunteering. Fraser et al. (2009) added how volunteers benefit from having a shared sense of purpose; such themes are notable within the findings of the current research.

However, most respondents in this research (90.4%) also identified that they wanted to put their existing knowledge and experience to good use. This transferability of existing interpersonal skills to support veterans was also highlighted by several members of the focus group. This is a far higher percentage than just over half of UK volunteers reported by McGarvey et al. (2019) who reported that they were interested in opportunities making use of their existing skills. In their US study, Kranke et al. (2017) reported the wish of veterans to utilise their existing skills set; whilst a study of volunteer peer supporters for carers in Norway identified how volunteers value the ability to use existing knowledge, skills, and experiences to help connect with people, shape discussions, and talk with people by phone or face to face (Halvorsrud et al., 2020). In the context of SSAFA caseworkers, such themes of making use of existing knowledge, skills, and experiences would be worthy of further exploration.

The self-development motivations for volunteering in order to gain transferrable skills and experience, as highlighted by Warren and Garthwaite (2015) and present in North East England community health services volunteers, featured far less prominently as motivations for volunteering amongst participants in this current research. This may be attributed to the employment

status and higher age profile of respondents. It is however worthy of note that just under a fifth of respondents (19%) reported their motivations for volunteering included making new friends and for the social aspects. This supports the findings of Dawson et al. (2019), who suggested that volunteering is a means for developing social networks and improving general wellbeing. This supports the broader benefits of volunteering on personal wellbeing as an important aspect to promote across potential volunteers.

VOLUNTEER COMMITMENT

Significant hours are reported as being donated by the SSAFA caseworkers, with three quarters reporting donating over three hours a week, which far exceeds the average eight hours a month reported as being donated by volunteers nationally in the UK (McGarvey et al., 2019). Although, when discussing the flexibility of hours donated, focus group participant A commented “The [number] of hours depends on the needs of that individual,” and one respondent believed “The amount of time spent on SSAFA tasks depends solely on my workload.”

The donated hours also exceed the 10 hours a month suggested by Warren and Garthwaite (2015) as being enough to provide mental health benefits for volunteers.

Respondents also commented in the questionnaire free text how “the complexity of cases has increased dramatically, and it personally takes its toll,” and “the increase in the technological demands placed upon us as volunteers is becoming quite a chore.” Individuals often volunteer for causes that they passionately support; however, their commitment to the cause can lead to overstretch and exhaustion, as such, the time donated by volunteers requires careful support and line management (Talbot, 2015).

Acknowledging that there was a focus group comment by participant C regarding several younger volunteers going through their induction “the biggest problem [to them] is giving the time.” It would be advantageous to identify other groups of potential volunteers who may have the time available to donate. This could include college and university students who may also wish to volunteer in order to gain transferrable skills and experience to aid future employment (Warren & Garthwaite, 2015). In addition, The Office for Veterans’ Affairs (2020) report there are approximately 15,000 service leavers annually. The inclusion of such other groups of volunteers from wider communities would likely increase the social networks and subsequent wellbeing of the veterans themselves, whilst also supporting a deeper understanding of veterans within the wider community (Angel et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

This research identified that almost three quarters of respondents were male, two thirds over 65 years of age, with almost all reporting their ethnicity as White British. Moving forward, volunteers should be sought from younger age groups, including recent veterans who are 54 or under, who make up 25% of service leavers, both sexes, and across other under-represented groups. This is important, not only to provide ongoing resilience for the caseworker role, but as Halvorsrud et al. (2020) reported, a sense of shared and unique experiences is important to those being supported, along with benefits of matching the characteristics of peer supporters with those they are supporting.

Previous military service or colleagues and family still serving in the military seems to be very influential in raising awareness of SSAFA and the caseworker role; this should be extended and reinforced, perhaps through a range of varied communication styles and methods, including enhancing the use of social media to promote the SSAFA role of volunteer caseworker. Supporting findings from other research, the motivations for volunteering as caseworkers were heavily focused towards emotional and altruistic reasons. Clary et al. (1998) suggested that adverts for volunteers are most effective when they are matched with their motivations. However, notably, the majority of respondents in this current research also identified that they wanted to put their existing knowledge and experience to good use.

Although SSAFA per se is visible in both physical and online promotional products, communication strategies locally and nationally could be further enhanced to make more of this strong motivation for volunteering as a caseworker. In particular, emphasising how as volunteers they will share a sense of common purpose assisting others. Whilst Bussell and Forbes (2003) suggested that some of the best results for volunteer recruitment can be achieved by promoting opportunities in the places where individuals spend their leisure time.

Almost 20 years later, promoting such volunteering roles through social media, where so many people spend their time, may well be effective for recruitment. Promoting such SSAFA volunteering opportunities linked to both the benefits to society and the individual should result in enhancing recruitment; this should be augmented by promoting the ability to use existing knowledge and skills whilst targeting recruitment towards certain groups in order to be more representative of local communities.

There is no doubt that SSAFA volunteers donate many hours providing significant support to veterans and their families. Clarity should be provided as to the time

commitments expected of such volunteers. As a result, it would be beneficial to develop an enhanced understanding of the number of hours donated by volunteer caseworkers in order to avoid overburden.

Acknowledging the limitations and indicative nature of this current research. Future research should survey a wider sample population of caseworkers. This would provide the tri-service charity with an enhanced evidence-base of how to best engage across HM Forces, veterans, and wider non-veteran communities, promoting their valuable services to military veterans and potentially recruit future volunteers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Pepper, I., & Rogers, C. (2022). Supporting Military Veterans: Insights from volunteers in North East England. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 8(3), pp. 128–139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i3.348>

Submitted: 05 April 2022 **Accepted:** 28 July 2022 **Published:** 10 October 2022

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