

South Yorkshire Employer Insights on the Employability landscape for Veterans and Service Leavers Provider Response

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Contents

Transition from service	i
Moving into employment	ii
Training and retaining service leavers	iii
Future Outlook	iv

Veterans/Service Leavers Provider Response

According to Government estimates in 2021 there were 42,500 people in South Yorkshire who had previously served in the UK regular armed forces, reserve armed forces or both, before transitioning to civilian life. This transition is a critical phase for veterans and service leavers, requiring careful planning and support to ensure a smooth and successful return to the civilian world. Providers and employers have been working together to review the employability landscape for service leavers in South Yorkshire, dissecting the journey into employment, the support systems on offer and the training infrastructure in place once a role has been secured. This report reflects those conversations and aims to inform the next Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP).

Transition from service

What are we doing now?

Veterans and service leavers bring a wealth of expertise and skills, particularly softer skills including leadership, reliability, organisation and punctuality. These cross-sector attributes are highly valued by employers (86% feel veterans have the skills for high performance management positions), and it is therefore crucial to ensure the smooth transition of these skills from a military context into the civilian workforce. Employers also cited altruistic motivations for engaging with ex-service personnel including a sense of moral duty and responsibility to support the cohort.

There is evidence of good practice in South Yorkshire. Some employers have dedicated tools and resources showcasing case studies from service leavers who have transitioned out of the forces successfully. Other businesses have been recognised for their support for veteran transition and employability through the Armed Forces Covenant or through associated employer recognition schemes such as Build Force connecting military leavers to opportunities in the built environment. There are also organisations providing veteran support and advocacy, these organisations work closely councils (veteran co-ordinators), charities including the British Legion and The Association of Service Drop-In Centres (ASDIC) and representative organisations (Regional Employer Engagement Director at the MoD).

Recently the new 'Move to Grid' support service for veterans in South Yorkshire was launched by MCVC, the Military Community Veterans Centre. The service aims to improve the ease in which veterans and their families can access support, providing details of organisations, local services, events and community groups that can help veterans with welfare support, health, housing, employment, education, and new social opportunities.

Whilst consultees had no difficulty in highlighting the range of benefits associated with the employment of veterans and service leavers, it was noted that many employers still hold an unconscious bias, and difficulties remain in the translation of skills to civilian roles.

What more could policy makers and providers do?

Awareness of the Government's Career Transition Partnership (CTP) varied and for those who knew of it, attitudes were mixed. Veterans typically found the service less helpful than employers who generally liked the events but agreed there is more to be done to make these impactful. For those leaving service CTP often is seen as quite generic and not tailored to individual aspirations with a lack of diverse pathways into work and careers. Employers also discussed the need for more signposting between services to enhance continuity including greater collaboration between employers and training providers to better support service leavers, this could take the form of supported learning opportunities and placements.

In addition to working in closer partnership with employers providers highlighted that the challenges associated with transition are equally as significant for families and dependants. Programmes such as Pathways to Work and the development of training provision for dependants and partners is key to ensure employability and skills offers are available to these individuals as well as the service leavers themselves.

Moving into employment

What are we doing now?

Whilst the array of skills and attributes held by service leavers enables them to transition into most sectors, logistics, manufacturing and construction are some of the most common transition routes in South Yorkshire. This is for the most part indicative of the strong parallels between managing supply chains in the forces and the private/public sector.

The support offered by employers and providers to support employment routes varies. Some employers have built structured transition programmes, combining CV support, mock interviews and work experience. These approaches are seen as far more effective than traditional processes. The importance of adapting interview to allow individuals to showcase their skills in different ways was highlighted by both employers and providers. This could be guaranteed interview or task-based exercises Others suggested more creative ways of giving candidates the chance to demonstrate their skills, such as presentation tasks, video submissions or micro-teaching exercises. These approaches were seen as better reflections of character, confidence and ability than standard CVs or set-piece interviews.

Embedding mentoring or "buddy systems" into onboarding was noted by providers as helping service leavers navigate the cultural shift, articulate ambitions, and connect to roles that fit their capabilities. Some employers (notably those who are ex-forces themselves) currently do this well but that is by virtue of their own experience.

What more could policy makers and providers do?

While some employers offer strong support on an individual basis, this is more reactive than systemic. The structures designed to support service leavers move into employment are often led by contractors or resettlement officers who may lack knowledge of specific industries, limiting their ability to connect service leavers with meaningful careers. The consensus is that service leavers' skills and ambitions are not always well matched with employer opportunities, largely due to limited visibility and weak promotion. While there is a

significant pool of skilled individuals leaving the forces every year, many are unaware of the full range of industries they could enter.

From the perspective of actions providers and employers could take, there is value in giving leavers visibility of organisations and recruitment support before they apply. Open days and insight events were seen as essential for helping individuals understand workplace culture and expectations. Providers could support the facilitation of these events and the connecting of prospective employees with providers from a skills perspective and employers. Providers acknowledged there is a need to be proactive rather than reactive in this regard and considering potential policy interventions the 6500 jobs created by Gateway East stands out as an opportunity to bring people together and encourage policy makers to consider the alignment service leavers skill sets hold with these roles. Providers also referenced the potential to leverage social value and its weighting in procurement to increase opportunities for service leavers.

Equally employers cited through consultations that they are rarely given the chance to directly shape the training and preparation of leavers in line with workforce needs. This disconnect contributes to the sense that ambitions are not being fully met, even when opportunities exist. Greater collaboration and engagement with local providers can mitigate this risk.

It is also prevalent to acknowledge the dual role played by academic bodies. Colleges are anchor institutions and are in themselves large employers. Education and training were identified as areas where service leavers could make a significant impact. Colleges in South Yorkshire face tutor shortages and military experience provides strong capabilities in leadership, teamwork, and communication. They would be able to mentor and relate to students of different ages. Academic institutions signing up to the armed forces covenant and approaching this challenge from both a provider solution and an employer solution is key to supporting this cohort into well aligned roles.

Training and retaining service leavers

What are we doing now?

Employers in the sub-region have broad experience engaging with support organisations to upskill and retain service leavers. Most commonly, employers and service leavers highlighted work with military charities such as Help for Heroes or the Forces Employment charity. Consultees saw value in their extensive reach and the wide range of support offered by military employment support charities, and (where it worked) CTP was acknowledged to help bridge the gap between military and civilian life.

The provider base is also working to improve the offer for service leavers in South Yorkshire. Current work is ongoing to introduce serving soldiers to civilian qualifications and align ASF provision with serving soldiers. There is also the prospect of providers supporting the running of the Royal Artillery Professional Centre and developing a driver training hub to better match transferable skills and qualifications acquired in service to the civilian world. Providers are also looking into acquiring native postcodes for serving soldiers to leverage funding sources to use non-devolved budgets to fund learners who may be currently classified as out of the area.

What more could policy makers and providers do?

The current understanding held by employers on armed forces skills and qualifications is mixed. Some felt that it was the role of the armed forces to prepare service leavers in terms of 'work readiness'. Others felt this should be done by DWP or other intermediary organisations. The large number and variety of military charities can be confusing and difficult to navigate for both service leavers and employers and varies between local authorities.

The three main areas of qualification support to be considered by providers include (a) the translation of skills and experience gained, (b) recognition there could be misalignment between qualifications and experience, and (c) an awareness of needing to adapt and support a variety of training routes, offering flexibility in meeting service users' needs in different contexts and with different preferences for learning environments. The need to provide flexible learning approaches to the specific training and qualification needs of service leavers was also intertwined with the need to provide pastoral support for the cultural shift to civilian life. Some interviewees even went so far as to suggest key life skills qualifications.

Further support is also required on life skills and cultural transitions to help service leavers employment prospects and retention. Peer support networks allow the sharing of experiences, and more needs to be done to facilitate mutual understanding between employers and leavers, including open-day events with networking opportunities and courses. These both improve understanding of leavers support needs and help develop a skills pipeline.

Whilst providers are attempting to utilise available funding streams such as the ELC scheme to better support ex-forces individuals, they are restricted by the accessibility of frameworks and portals. Help from policy makers in the simplification of these would reduce barriers faced by providers and increase the funding and support offer for service leavers.

Future Outlook

What are we doing now?

In respect to future activity to support service leavers employers are seeking to either build upon existing good practice or adopt new ways of working to better support or attract service leavers and veterans. Many firms have made progress in inclusive recruitment and providing equal opportunities while also recognising diversity and being flexible to accommodate different needs. This involved adjustments to the interview process such as starting with informal conversations to build trust with service leavers and to make them feel comfortable.

Employers also highlighted the importance of good workplace culture and the impact this can have on employee retention, particularly with service leavers. They referenced the importance of having peer network systems in place during employment, which help with the process of transitioning to civilian life and dealing with any risks or challenges.

Going forward, employers would like involvement in sector-led sector-specific partnerships and there is a strong willingness amongst employers to partner with education and skills providers to improve policy and practice for service leavers. Many employers cited examples of ongoing activity in this field. Examples included partnering with local colleges and councils

as enterprise advisors, attending armed forces open days, offering internships, etc. Those consulted are open to listening better to service leavers about their resettlement challenges and including them in employability events and workshops as guest speakers. Guest speakers and keynote speakers were felt to be an effective method of communicating challenges and opportunities, and employers (particularly those with experience of the armed forces themselves) cited an interest in either participating in or delivering sessions.

What more could policy makers and providers do?

There are a number of measures and organisations in place to support service leavers, but the research has shown that understanding is mixed and there is an urgent need to continue to change perceptions of the potential of service leavers, who can bring valuable skills to organisations. Employers have advocated for service leaver employability and support initiatives, especially those addressing knowledge and confidence gaps including practical and interactive workshops sharing lived experiences. There is also a strong willingness to partner with education and skills providers to (a) improve policy and practice for service leavers (b) showcase the value of employing service leavers and (c) highlight accessible career pathways and transferable skillsets.

At a high level, South Yorkshire partners should: raise awareness and visibility of service leaver skills, promote opportunities and signpost employers to service leaver employability initiatives, connect service leavers to employers through organised events and provide more tailored support for service leavers to transition to civilian life. This can be achieved through a number of formats. More connections could be made between those interacting with leavers and there is an opportunity for providers to work in partnership with the CTP, Job Centre Plus and the MoD. This might include participating or hosting regional CTP careers, recruitment and training events or offering training through the CTP ex-forces employment programme. This builds on employer sentiment that service leavers should be involved earlier in the resettlement process. Engagement that starts from leaving the services and all the way through to ongoing support while in employment is crucial for retention and a smooth resettlement process. Providers can play a role in acting as the connectors and advocates.

Providers could work with military charities to offer training tasters (TechVets for instance works with partners who offer training for career paths into IT from Project Management to Cyber Security) and build strong links with armed forces champions in Jobcentre Plus to ensure they have good knowledge of training opportunities. Accessible and practical opportunities were noted to be important for partnerships. Employers can often be disincentivised by the costs of attending training provision, particularly if there is no clear output. Providers could play a key role working with local authority armed covenant leads to promote the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) which encourages employers to support defence and inspire others to do the same and take a positive stance towards reserves, cadet force adult volunteers and veterans who are either existing or prospective employees.

Veterans and Service Leavers make a significant contribution to the South Yorkshire economy through their participation in the workforce. By improving the support from military to civilian employment their unique skills and attributes can continue to be better recognised and utilised.



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