

# Using Sport and Physical Activity to Support Veterans through the Military to Civilian Transition: An Evaluation Report on Moving Forces.



## GREATERSPORT

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# Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the participants that took part in this study, including those that granted the researcher access to observe and partake in the activity sessions. Without this cooperation and the willingness of participants to share their stories, this evaluation would not have been possible.

# Executive Summary

The purpose of this research was to evaluate Moving Forces, in relation to its intended outcome. The aim of Moving Forces is to support veterans transitioning from the military, with attention to mental health, social isolation, and addiction. This evaluation was concerned with the experiences of the veterans, and those involved in programme organisation and delivery. The researcher listened to the veterans and programme deliverers and observed their actions and behaviours. This data was used to explore the mechanisms and processes necessary to achieve the intended programme outcome.

## Summary of Key Findings

Our research highlights several important processes and mechanisms taking place around sport and physical activity that are key to programme outcomes being met. Our research identified:

- Time should be set aside to engage in mapping and planning. This includes understanding the needs of the delivery area and participants, identifying what a sustainable programme looks like and embedding this throughout delivery, and identifying and using delivery environments specific to participants needs. Such initial community development work is vital to ensure buy-in, stakeholder support, avoid duplication and build in long term sustainability.
- Moving Forces provided a good steppingstone for veterans to integrate themselves in their local civilian communities, a mechanism key to the aim of addressing social isolation. A focus on engagement should consider family members and the local community, to enhance engagement and facilitate integration. It is necessary for the relationships to be individual and trusting to ensure that challenges are recognised and supported appropriately.
- Veterans wanted to give back, do more and support each other. This occurred informally but should be embedded in programme design via a series of participant led opportunities.

## Summary of Recommendations

We recommend that:

- Sport and physical activity need to be decentred with a greater focus placed on participants, delivery environments, and mechanisms used to achieve the intended programme outcomes
- Family engagement and community involvement should be encouraged, as should the building of trusting relationships.
- A programme of participant led opportunities should be embedded in programme design, giving veterans the chance give back and engage beyond just physical participation.

# Introduction

## GreaterSport

Moving Forces was delivered by GreaterSport, an Active Partnership based in the North West of England. Across England, Active Partnerships are charged with addressing the challenges that exist around the promotion of sports participation and lead on coordinating the delivery of sport at a local level. GreaterSport covers the 10 local authorities of Greater Manchester encompassing a population of approximately 2.55 million. Active Partnerships are used by Sport England as a funding channel with three core functions: strategic coordination and planning, performance management, and marketing and communications, and three work areas: developing pathways for young people, workforce development and club development. In 2019, County Sports Partnerships were re-branded as Active Partnerships and, there are currently 43 across the United Kingdom (UK) committed to improving lives by growing grassroots sport and physical activity<sup>1</sup>.

## Moving Forces

In 2018, GreaterSport received funding to train and qualify veterans as sport coaches. But it became apparent that veterans were not participating in sport or physical activity, and therefore were not able to undertake further coaching qualifications. Identifying and seeking to address this, GreaterSport collaborated with key partners working with Armed Forces organisations and military veterans to obtain £319,000 of funding from Sport England. This funding was used to deliver a sport and physical activity programme aimed at supporting veterans in their transition from the military into civilian life, with attention to mental health, social isolation, and alcohol addiction, named Moving Forces, and to employ a senior development officer to lead this. Two additional Development Officers were then employed using funding from additional sources to support the programmes' organisation and delivery. Moving Forces could be considered as a deviation away from the usual work of GreaterSport, as an Active Partnership, as they are involved in direct delivery alongside their main function of strategic coordination, however this still contributes their overall purpose to grow grassroots sport and physical activity.

Delivered over a three-year period, Moving Forces consisted of weekly sport and physical activity sessions delivered by local sporting and community organisations, as well as discounted gym

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the information produced by the Active Partnerships, there is a small body of academic literature that analyses the complex work of these organisations considering the role they play in enacting policy, achieving policy objectives and undertaking partnership working (Mackintosh, 2011; Houlihan and Lindsey, 2013; Active Partnerships 2020)

memberships, and one-off experiences such as a wild camping weekends, motorsport taster days and family fun days.. The weekly sessions included, football, rugby, climbing, table tennis, archery, yoga, tai chi, and many more. Moving Forces was open to both male and female veterans of all ages, abilities, and branches of the military. Most sessions were veteran only, with links into wider civilian communities, however over time, some sessions became more inclusive facilitating the attendance of veterans and their families. The number of veterans currently residing in Greater Manchester is unknown, and with over 1,600 armed forces charities registered in the United Kingdom, this makes for a complex web of delivery.

## **Manchester Metropolitan University**

The evaluation of Moving Forces was undertaken in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). A PhD student was recruited to undertake this review across a three-year period, allowing for an independent evaluation with a high degree of academic underpinning and rigor.

This report intends to draw attention to the mechanisms and processes surrounding sport and physical activity delivery and participation, that contributes towards supporting veterans in their transition out of the military, considering mental health, addiction, and social isolation. This report provides an analysis of key themes and findings identified within the PhD research to offer comprehensive and actionable recommendations. These will be presented within a Theory of Change (TOC) model, relevant for sporting interventions concentrating on military and/or veteran populations. The proposed TOC model draws on the qualitative data collected throughout the evaluation of Moving Forces, which are initially presented as three key themes and then situated in the TOC model. Therefore, this model is specific to provisions targeted towards military and veteran audiences having evolved from analysis of the programme evaluation data<sup>2</sup>.

MMU are currently writing academic peer reviewed outputs and the final PhD thesis that will further support the findings of this study and underpin these recommendations, which will be available in 2022 and beyond.

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<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested that using TOC models within evaluation is beneficial as it allows it to be undertaken rigorously and with a more robust evidence base to explain impact, identify best practice, and consider what is it about the programme that works, for who, and in what circumstances (Coalter, 2003; Pawson et al., 2005; Fox et al., 2017; Bolton et al. 2018; Morgan et al., 2020).

# Background

## The British Armed Forces <sup>3</sup>

- There are currently 195,050 men and women serving in the British Armed Forces.
- Females currently represent 11% of the serving population.
- Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) represent 11.7% of the serving population.
- In 2017, there were an estimated 2.4 million veterans residing in the UK, predominantly white, males and aged 65 plus.
- It is projected in 2028 there will be 1.6 million Armed Forces veterans living in the UK. It is unknown how many of these veterans will be located in Greater Manchester.
- 750,000 veterans residing in the UK are of working age (16-64 years old) accounting for 2% of the total working age population.

## Moving Forces <sup>4</sup>

- 82% of Moving Forces participants were male, 18% female.
- 71% of Moving Forces participants served in the Army, 63% the RAF, 8% the Navy, 1% the Marines and 5% were veteran family members (See Figure One).
- 36% of Moving Forces participants identified as having a physical or mental health condition, 53% did not, and 11% preferred not to say.

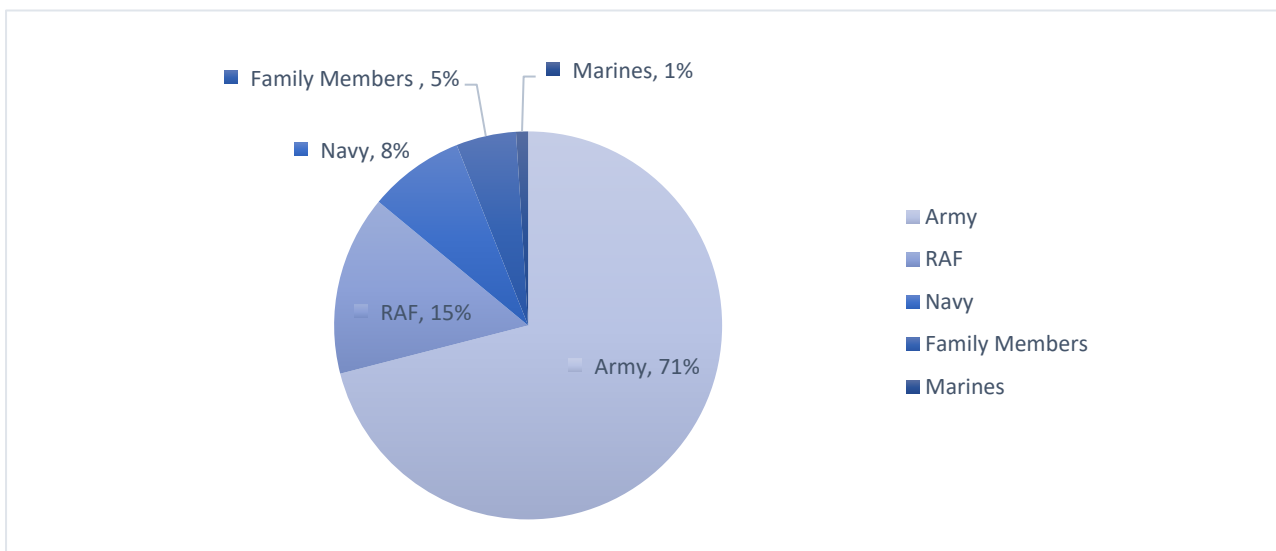


Figure 1- Moving Forces Participants Branches of Service

<sup>3</sup> These statistics are available from a series of reports produced by the Ministry of Defence (2018, 2019, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Data gained from participant questionnaires completed at baseline, 3 month, 6 month and 12 month intervals.

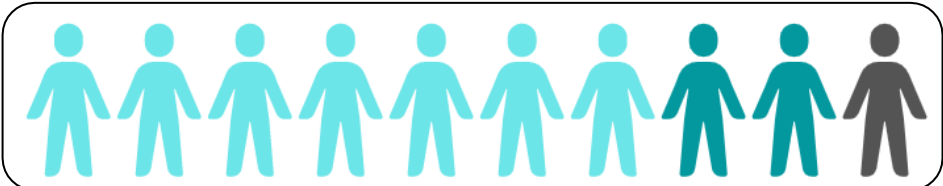
# The Research Process

The research for this evaluation was collected by a PhD student at MMU. This evaluation was concerned with the experiences of the veterans undertaking the military to civilian transition and engaging in Moving Forces. With this focus, the researcher listened to what both the veterans and those involved with organising and delivering Moving Forces had to say, as well as observing their actions and behaviours. It was important that the researcher understood the military environment, as well as the environments created across the Moving Forces programme, therefore a range of qualitative data was collected and analysed. This included,

- Observing and joining in with activity sessions on the programme including indoor and outdoor climbing, football, yoga, and tai chi.
- Working at the GreaterSport offices, including attending relevant meetings and events, to observe the work undertaken by those responsible for organising and delivering Moving Forces.
- Conducting in-depth semi-structured with veterans engaging in Moving Forces.
- Conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews and follow up interviews with GreaterSport staff and external stakeholders involved in the organisation and delivery of Moving Forces.

Prior to collecting this data, the research project undertook a procedure to ensure to it adhered to an ethical code of governance set out by MMU. This included gaining participants consent and permission, avoiding risk, and ensuring all participants remain anonymous. As such, the quotes presented within this report have been anonymised.

**10 veterans interviewed, all of whom engaged in Moving Forces.**  
**1 female and 9 males.**  
**7 served in the Army, 2 in the Navy and 1 in the RAF,**





**11 deliverers interviewed (some on multiple occasions), totaling 14 interviews overall.**

**8 with GreaterSport members of staff and 6 with external stakeholders.**

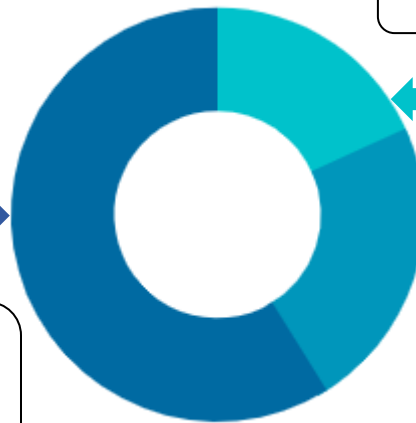


**Total of 440 hours of observations**

**259 hours of organisational observations, including working at the GreaterSport Offices, attending events and meetings.**

**80 observation hours of face to face activities**

**101 observation hours of online activities**



## Findings

Across the following sections the key themes from the evaluation data will be presented, starting with programme delivery and crucial factors such as mapping and understanding needs, programme sustainability and the session environment. This followed by the second theme of engagement, considering both family and community engagement, as well as the role of relationship building in facilitating engagement. The final theme addresses the veterans desire to give back, and inclusion of participant led opportunities, such as peer support and volunteering, within the programme design. These themes are then developed into a TOC model to explain programme impact, identify best practice, and consider mechanisms in the programme that work for veteran and military communities and in what circumstances these are effective. This model, and the supporting themes, then inform several high impact recommendations that can encourage engagement, maximise impact and facilitate Moving Forces achieving their intended programme outcome.

# Theme One – Programme Delivery

The delivery approach of the Moving Forces programme relied on the power of sport and physical activity, and its inherent potential to prompt change, build character, and for participants to experience residual effects felt from engaging in it. This was built on an understanding that playing sport or doing physical activity within a ‘social club’ setting was enough to support the military to civilian transition process, considering specific challenges such as social isolation, mental health, wellbeing and alcohol dependency. The research suggested that this was possibly not the most effective approach to, with sport or physical activity alone not being enough. Learnings from the literature suggest that sport needs to be decentred<sup>5</sup>, and instead it is the importance and value of that which surrounds the activities that should be recognised<sup>6</sup>. It is these additional wraparound aspects that can prompt change and attend to the identified challenges of social isolation, mental health, and alcohol dependency within Moving Forces. The three themes discussed throughout this report and within the proposed Theory of Change Model, will present examples of what these wraparound aspects can involve specific to military and veteran populations. Therefore, a key recommendation for provisions seeking to support veterans in the military to transition process is to decentre sport and focus the mechanisms and process that surround it and contribute towards the programme objectives. This includes providing opportunities for engagement outside of taking part of sports and activities that are offered. Examples include volunteering, coaching, officiating, and team support roles.

## **A GreaterSport staff member described his view on the role of sport in Moving Forces:**

“It’s just add-on ... it’s a way of giving that individual development and building veteran communities.”

## **An external stakeholder described his view on Moving Forces’ approach to delivery:**

“There needs to be something extra, I don’t think sport is enough really in my opinion”

## **Recommendation 1**

When designing a military focused sport for development initiative, it is essential to decentre sport and focus on the mechanisms and process that surround it, contributing towards programme objectives.

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<sup>5</sup> Sport or physical activity is not the condition or factor necessary for the desired changes to occur, instead attention needs to be placed on the mechanisms, processes and experiences that surround it. Coalter (2017) describes this as de-centring sport to understand what works, in what conditions and why, reframing sport as the site of change not the cause of it.

<sup>6</sup> This has been identified and recommended by a number of scholars within the field of sport development over a 20-year period. These academics include Crabbe (2000), Coalter (2007, 2012, 2017), Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) and Spaaij and Schaillee (2020).

## Recommendation 2

When undertaking programme design, co-produce and co-design sessions with veterans that are led by sport for development philosophy, to implement mechanisms and processes that are appropriate to the group.

## Mapping and Understanding Provisions and Needs

On setting up and delivering new support projects and programmes, this research highlighted the importance of understanding what provisions currently exist to avoid replication, competition, and potential conflict. This includes understanding the assets available in the designated area, the organisations that are currently active in this field and what they are delivering, and the needs of the community being targeted<sup>7</sup>. For Moving Forces, this includes understanding the different needs of each borough in Greater Manchester, the facilities available in each, and what organisations are currently working with military and veteran communities across Greater Manchester. Taking the time to do this planning prior to engaging with delivery, to map and understand the existing provisions and needs, enables the programme to progress in a manner that enhances buy in from both programme stakeholders and beneficiaries, minimises potential conflict with organisations who may be targeting the same audience, and learns from existing knowledge to ensure provisions, approaches and mistakes are not repeated. Therefore, it is a necessary recommendation for any sport development provision that, prior to engaging in any form of delivery, a period of planning and mapping is essential. It is recognised that these may shift across the duration of delivery, but for these shifts to occur, the mapping and planning needs to have been done at the outset. This includes understanding the needs of the community at the focus of the provision, knowing the assets of the area the programme will be delivered in and outlining the anticipated outcomes and future directions of the provision. This should also be considered throughout the delivery process, especially if there are any breaks or disruptions to delivery, such as those caused by the recent pandemic. Periods of planning and mapping should still occur within these instances, instead of rushing back into delivery.

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<sup>7</sup> Outlined in the academic literature, the ABCD framework draws on these processes. The ABCD framework is a method that involves working with the community to identify strengths or assets, to articulate future directions and desired outcomes, and working with partners to mobilize these strengths or assets to help achieve the desired goals (Misner and Schulenkorf, 2016).

### **Another GreaterSport staff member reflected on the planning and delivery of Moving Forces:**

“There's never anything wrong with taking a step to plan and really reading the situation. I think we were so keen to have something out there ... but we sort of just acted on emergency where, in reality, we probably could have gone away for a week or two, and then come back and said, actually this is the real plan. I think the learning is don't just react to things have a look at what's really going on, really talk to people, make sure that veterans are involved in every decision that we make, and make sure what you're doing is definitely for the community and not so that you feel like you're being active in something.”

### **An external stakeholder described their experience of working with Moving Forces:**

“If they had spoken to us about that and they had spoken to the Burnley's and the Bury's and the Everton's and stuff like that to really learn from them then maybe there would have been a bigger impact.”

### **An external stakeholder described the impact of Moving Forces being delivered within their local borough:**

“There was already established organizations in Tameside that were working with that demographic and I think wider support for those organizations was probably better than an absolutely new entity. I think the new entity has caused a lot of friction, a lot of political friction ...”

### **A GreaterSport staff member reflected on their delivery approach:**

“I think paying more attention to what veterans are actually asking for and not what we assume will be good ... For instance, the rugby, the common wisdom was rugby is the army game and it will be brilliant, but it really didn't get off the ground and in hindsight no one was asking for it and we were trying to drive it to make it work.”

## **Recommendation 3**

Prior to delivery and during breaks in delivery, undertake a period of mapping and planning to understand the needs of the community, the assets of the area and the anticipated outcomes and future directions.

## **Sustainability**

On shaping, organising and delivering Moving Forces, our research highlighted the need for sustainability to be embedded throughout the whole programme. This included sharing some responsibility for programme administration and organisation with veteran volunteers (see Theme 3), key partners and/or the local community, as well as building in processes for the programme to be self-sustainable at the very outset, rather than once it has become established. A key aspect to this is understanding what a sustainable programme looks like as it may not be a continuation of the existing format. For example, programme sustainability may require a move towards online videos, resources, or toolkits, or a move towards greater accountability and responsibility being

placed on the clubs and organisations delivering the activity sessions. However, it is ultimately recommended that this needs to be understood and established before reaching the final stages of delivery.

**A GreaterSport member of staff recognised the different forms the Moving Forces programme could take for it to be sustainable:**

“You know, if we didn't get funding extension or if my role went, that could still be a living, breathing thing, a resource of that legacy of the program online digitally.”

**An external stakeholder explained his views on the sustainability of Moving Forces:**

“But then what happens when you pull out you know, do they continue the sport in isolation? Would they go to group if it was not full of military veterans and it was full of normal community members? I am not quite sure. I think there needs to be a more concentrated look at what would the long-term sustainability of the programme be as opposed to just giving taster sessions.”

**A GreaterSport staff member shared their thoughts on the sustainability of Moving Forces and importance of involving external stakeholders in this:**

“How do we get into the combined authority and say look this is work that we're almost doing on your behalf and how do we continue this after the 3 years, because I think if you go GM wide and then it stops the year after, or half of it stops, or some of it stops, I think that is bad, so it's how we continue it after that period.”

**The researcher observed a veteran raising his concerns about the sustainability of the programme:**

The veteran said he enjoyed it and these sessions have done so much for him since March, giving the examples of feeling better and not falling asleep at work. He said that he wants to make sure the sessions carry on, he even suggested that if money get tight (i.e. not being able to afford an instructor) they could just deliver the sessions between themselves.

**Recommendation 4**

Identify and embed critical success factors to sustain the programme in the long term, this will be dependent on the needs, geography and organisational context of the military/veteran community.

## Session Environment

The different environments of Moving Forces, in which the activity sessions were held, at times were identified as a barrier. For example, some sessions were described busy or loud which was then intimidating for veterans who lacked confidence or had anxiety or other mental health challenges<sup>8</sup>. This is significant considering that Moving Forces has a specific focus on supporting veterans who are facing mental health challenges, as well as social isolation and addiction. Another example includes the session venues being welcoming and supportive of Moving Forces, with a willingness to offer veterans valuable opportunities and guidance. Overall, the key recommendation is that activity sessions need to be held in an environment that is specific to the needs of the participant group and, connecting this to an earlier learning, this can be established through clear mapping and planning procedures.

### **A veteran reflected on the environment of the climbing sessions:**

“I don’t know if actually meeting up having the coffee ... or moving it to a day where it is not as busy, because I know sometimes the Climbing Clan that’s there can be actually quite daunting. If you’re wanting to come and try something out but then look round and just see everyone who you just assume is experienced, it is daunting to be there and go 'oh wow there is too many people watching me' and all that stuff.”

### **A veteran commented on the importance of the coach in creating the right session environment:**

“I don't think it would be as big a success without the environment the coach creates.”

### **In a conversation with the researcher, a veteran highlighted how good an opportunity these climbing sessions were:**

The veteran said that he was pleased the attendance numbers are increasing, because this is such a good opportunity and venue. He said that not all climbing centres are this friendly and helpful and that there are valuable opportunities to progress with the links to the climbing clan.

## Recommendation 5

Identify and use delivery environments that meet the needs of the military/veteran community driven by mental and physical health, avoiding intimidating and overwhelming activity spaces.

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<sup>8</sup> The recent publication from Sport England (2021) outlining a 10-year vision to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity, adapting and rebuilding disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic, specifically considers Active Environments and the positive and negative impacts spaces and places can have on engagement. This includes ensuring that sport and leisure facilities are inclusive and offer better, more affordable experiences for the people that use them.

# Theme Two – Forms of Engagement

## Family Engagement

Considering the military to civilian transition, data from this research has highlighted and reinforced the existing academic literature that outlines the importance of family and that it is not only the veterans who undertake a transition and experience possible challenges, but their families also<sup>9</sup>. Acknowledging this, to support the transition process with a particular focus on social isolation, mental health, and addiction, it is recommended that support provisions should extend their focus beyond the veteran and consider family members also.

Where family was included in Moving Forces, this research identified that it acted as both a barrier and facilitator to engagement. In some instances, veterans did not want to sacrifice time with their family to engage in the programme and so this prevented their participation. However, when sessions were opened to include family members this enhanced engagement, with some family members motivating and encouraging veterans to take part. This was identified to have a positive impact as it facilitated the improvement and development of family relationships, and this was especially relevant in sessions that demanded teamwork or individuals working together, such as climbing, sailing or kayaking. For example, the climbing sessions, became popular with veterans and their children as they were able to directly assist their child's climbing progress and physically support them when they faced challenges. It was also evident that some veterans engaged in further climbing sessions with their family members outside of Moving Forces, demonstrating a shared bond that had been fostered through their engagement in the programme.

### **A veteran described his thoughts on the inclusion of family members in Moving Forces:**

“Normally with the help and support and everything else it is just specific to veterans only and the people that get neglected are the wives, girlfriends and the kids. When I started taking my son there, because I thought right I want him to do an activity like this because he is going to learn valuable skills for later on in life, and keep active and stuff like that, as well as the bonding between the two of us because we don't get much time together, so it was so beneficial. Like I say, it's not just veterans but families and I think everybody should be involved within the family to help with relationships and stuff like that.”

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<sup>9</sup> Marital conflict, divorce and parenting problems have all been identified as challenges across the military to civilian transition impacting on spouses and children as well as the veteran (Sayer, Carlson and Frazer, 2014). Families also experience stress and anxiety across the transition and are required to adjust and adapt in a similar manner to their veteran family member (Thomas, 2018). Despite this, only a small number of support provisions encompass family members, but those that do have been identified to have a greater impact on the partners or spouses compared to the veteran (Bauer et al., 2017).

**A GreaterSport staff member discussed the influence of family:**

“It's shown that families are one of the biggest pulls to getting veterans to come, and not just to come but to consistently join in on sessions, and to take more ownership of it”

**A GreaterSport staff member discusses family engagement in Moving Forces:**

“We've got three, four generations of a family coming to a few sessions, and I know just from speaking to them, that it's had a huge change within their family and helped family relations a lot.”

**A veteran described the driver behind their engagement in Moving Forces:**

“... without my partner pushing me I really wouldn't have, I probably wouldn't have bothered.”

### **Recommendation 6**

Support provisions should extend their focus beyond the veteran and consider family members, to ensure the veterans' wider network also receive the necessary support.

## **Community Involvement and Integration**

Our research identified that Moving Forces provided a good steppingstone for veterans to integrate themselves within their local civilian communities, a mechanism key to the programmes aim of addressing social isolation. Moving Forces provided a safe, familiar space in which veterans could deal with any challenges they faced and negotiate the life change, but also offered avenues to branch out into civilian communities through established and trusted connections known to the programme. As an example, the Moving Forces archery sessions equipped veterans with the basic skills in a wholly veteran environment, but then also provided an avenue to join the archery club within the local community, if the veterans wanted to pursue these skills further. Having this established steppingstone between Moving Forces and community clubs or organisations bridged the gap and encouraged veterans to integrate with their local communities and develop new social networks. It has also been identified in the academic literature that veteran support programmes should provide safe social spaces, however it is only within the sport for development literature that this is considered as tool to remove barriers and encourage community integration<sup>10</sup>. Considering our findings alongside the existing literature, it is recommended that community involvement in the programme should be encouraged as this facilitates a veteran integration into their community following their transition out of the military. Also, connecting this to an earlier theme, this can also contribute towards the programmes sustainability, sharing responsibility and accountability across several community stakeholders.

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<sup>10</sup> Shields, Kuhl and Westwood (2017) explain that successful veteran support programmes provide safe cultural and social spaces where veterans appreciate each other as masterful rather than weak. In the sport for development literature, sport based programmes provided safe spaces which broke down racial, cultural, and religious barriers, developed understanding and facilitated community integration (Johns et al, 2014; Park and Ok, 2017).



**A GreaterSport staff member describes the steppingstone process and its importance to Moving Forces:**

“It is that in between step where you give them a safer environment where they know people, where they know people will know them, and there's a lot less stress and anxiety around that, and then from there, they can see that it's a much shorter distance to the next place ... the true product of the programme is watching the veterans branch out further ...”

**An external stakeholder highlighted a possible reason why community involvement has previously been limited:**

“There's a lot of partners out there that I think maybe don't quite understand the military mentality and ethos of what they bring or what they've got to offer...”

**An external stakeholder outlined the importance of involving the local community in Moving Forces:**

“Segregating ex-military into their own little worlds and not involving civvies isn't healthy so if you can involve families in things or civilians into it as well then great.”

**The researcher observed some veterans discussing their ambitions to extend their involvement beyond Moving Forces:**

[Veteran A] wants to improve the links to the Climbing Clan so the session isn't restricted to just a Wednesday and there are more opportunities, such as outdoor climbing. [Veteran B] agreed saying that they have started making connections with the Climbing Clan with an interest to try more outdoor and lead rope climbing.

**In a conversation with the researcher, a GreaterSport staff member discussed the activity of some of the veterans outside of the Moving Forces sessions:**

Some of the veterans have been meeting up as a group outside of the Moving Forces to go climbing at the climbing centre. They have arranged this themselves and did so because they wanted to get back into the indoor climbing, even though the sessions are not able to get up and running yet due to certain venue restrictions.

**Recommendation 7**

The programme must have wider community involvement and programme design features to facilitate veteran's integration into local civilian communities, such as housing, support, alcohol services, counselling/wellbeing, and employment.

**Relationship Building**

Our research identified that building a personal relationship and degree of trust with the veterans encouraged engagement and overcame any initial suspicion. This personal approach was facilitated through the involvement of consistent instructors who were keen to get to know the veterans on an individual and personal level. This approach meant that these instructors were better positioned to recognise veterans who were dealing with any personal challenges or issues and identify the most appropriate actions to take. In the academic literature, it is recommended

that professionals working with veterans need to be understanding and build a level of trust, however this recommendation was derived from a clinical setting and has not been applied to physical activity instructors or deliverers<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, following this research, it is suggested that this recommendation is extended into sport development, in which sport based support programmes should seek to establish consistent deliverers who endeavor to build a trusting relationships with the veterans that are engaging.

**A veteran explained the importance of the relationships he had developed within Moving Forces:**

“I feel relieved that if let’s say that I slip back into myself again and I felt that things were getting on top of me or I felt anxious about something there is somewhere to turn and I don’t have to open up to anyone or you know break down in front of anyone or need a hug from anyone but there is something there. The group of people there would understand what I am going through.”

**A GreaterSport staff member shared their thoughts on relationship building within Moving Forces:**

“I think with that kind of more informal wraparound communication, that's where those really strong bonds are quite often formed, when people really get to know each other and see ... not just an organization that will helicopter in and put something on for veterans, but we see ourselves as a group together as a kind of community of maybe Moving Forces.”

**A GreaterSport staff member highlights the lack of impact being a civilian or veteran had on relationship building:**

I think I've been surprised at how the vast majority of veterans haven't really been bothered whether it's someone ex-military or a civilian delivering sessions. I think I anticipated a bit more of people being obstructive and a bit difficult and a bit suspicious of non-veterans and I think there is still elements of that but much less than I thought there would be.'

**A veteran describes his relationship with a session deliverer:**

“He is not ex-military for him to come down and to coach us and to give his time up to take us to games and stuff like that, that, it’s just again it comes down to respect and I’ve got a lot of respect for him for what he does for us and I know that he respects us for what we have done for the country or for him, and stuff like that.”

**A GreaterSport staff member discussed the importance of building relationships:**

“The thing that I've seen is that as long as you personally know some of these veterans, then they are fully with you the whole way. So, having someone who does have that personal relationship, just is only a credit to themselves and to the programme.”

## **Recommendation 8**

Programme deliverers/instructors should be consistent across delivery arms and seek to establish a trusting relationship with the veterans in each intervention context.

<sup>11</sup> The literature suggests that professionals supporting veterans need to be more understanding of their experiences and needs. This includes building trust and improving their relationships with veterans to enhance the support provided, and the likelihood of veterans engaging with it (Verey and Smith, 2012; Wainwright et al.,2017; Bowes, Ferreira and Henderson, 2018).

# Theme 3 – Giving Back

## Veteran Peer Support

Peer support is a key theme within the academic literature, recognising its value and that impact is greater when it is achieved via peer support methods<sup>12</sup>. Across the programme informal social support systems emerged, driven by the desire and willingness of veterans to support each other within the activity sessions and across the Moving Forces programme. However, it is recommended that this peer support and veteran leadership should be designed and formally built into provisions so that it is core to programme delivery.

### **In the climbing session, the research observed an instance of the veterans supporting each other:**

Within the pairings, the experienced climber showed the new climbers how to tie in and encouraged them to give it a try. By the end of the session most of the new climbers had a good idea of how to do it and were keen to get it right. This set up happened by accident, but it was so beneficial as it got everyone climbing and it was peer to peer learning with both new and experienced climbers getting something from it. It was great to see, added to the smooth running of the session, helped to break down barriers, got people chatting and helped the group to bond.

### **One veteran spoke about his desire to use his own transition experiences to support his peers:**

“I think I have got something to offer, I think my experience of leaving the army and then what I have done since I have got out, I think could help people. I’m not saying it’s the template for everyone, but I think I could offer something. I think because I’ve lost a lot of my hang ups about things and I’m not as anxious about stuff anymore, I think I can speak to people, relate to people and maybe offer them help. I don’t know how I go about that or anything but yeah, I wouldn’t mind doing something like that. I feel like it would be wasted if I didn’t do that and I think I could help people, if I didn’t help people then I think it would be a bit of a shame really.”

### **One veteran spoke about the impact the peer support in Moving Forces has had on him:**

“In my own mind, I was the only person that dealt with these experiences. Whereas now when you have a chat with some of the lads in the football team, it’s not that case at all and having that, knowing that I’m not the only one who went through those experiences. In the back of your mind you know you’re not the only one, but at the front of your mind you think to yourself ‘why has this happened to me, why is it me this has happened to’ and to be able to speak to other lads and know that it is not only me, that’s helped.”

### **Another veteran spoke about his want to support his peers:**

I hoped to get the friendships, but then hoped to be able to help people how I was helped, or how using my experiences like we mentioned before, being able to use my experiences to help people get through what they need to get through.

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<sup>12</sup> Peer support has been highlighted within the academic literature as a widely available, inexpensive and effective means of gaining social support and reengaging with the local community (Albertson et al., 2017; Wainwright et al., 2017; Drebig et al., 2018). The literature also recommends the creation of safe social bonds, peer to peer support networks and ambassador roles, mechanisms that can be embedded with sport for development or veteran support programmes (Ahern et al., 2015; Derefinko et al., 2018).

**One veteran described the nature of the peer support network within the Moving Forces football sessions:**

“As you spend more time playing football with each other, you communicate anyway on a football pitch, but then when somebody pitches up on a Tuesday night, you can see maybe that they’ve had a rough weekend. You can see that because you have played and spent a lot of time together, and you can just ask the question sometimes. It’s the same with if somebody doesn’t pitch up, I think obviously quite a few people will quietly message them in the background or pick the phone up, it’s that first step, and if you have played football for 12, 14 months and somebody comes back with certain answers then obviously they are either A) content or B) you actually want to do some digging. I think that comes with Moving Forces creating that kind of team ethos and nothing to do with football, just that team ethos that he is one of your friends and you want to make sure that he’s okay at the end of the day.”

### **Recommendation 9**

Peer support and veteran leadership through a formalised volunteer recruitment and retention programme should be designed and formally built into the core of the intervention.

## **Veteran Volunteering**

The Veterans who engaged Moving Forces were willing and enthusiastic to do more, give back and support other veterans. This included taking on more responsibility within the activity sessions, offering financial support for the programme, volunteering for additional roles, and sharing their own stories in the knowledge that it could support others (this is evident in some of the quotes presented above). This enthusiasm from the veterans to do more can act as a facilitator for engagement, in which Moving Forces is veteran led and provides opportunities for peer support, upskilling, and contributing to the wider community. Volunteering was not an area of focus for this research or Moving Forces and therefore data was not collected specific to this topic. As an emerging theme, a greater focus on veteran volunteering would add significant value, providing further insight and understanding around engagement, as well as how this contributes towards programme impact and delivery. As a recommendation, this would be an area for any future research or programme delivery to consider.

For veterans that are physically unable to play sport or engage in the physical activities, this excludes them from Moving Forces. However, providing volunteering opportunities beyond participation can encourage different forms of engagement and offer veterans the chance to give back and support their peers. Examples of such volunteering roles include coaching, officiating, event support and team management. This takes the focus away from physical participation, while still allowing the veterans to feel part of something while supporting their peers. This can also support programme sustainability with veterans taking responsibility of essential supporting

and delivery roles. Thus, as a further recommendation considering veteran volunteering, it is suggested that provisions should consider and provide other possible forms engagement beyond just physical participation.

**One veteran spoke about the voluntary role he has taken on within Moving Forces and how he would like to develop it:**

“[The programme lead] gave me the opportunity to take the lead on the climbing as well as putting in place for me to become qualified as an instructor, which has been absolutely amazing and that’s been great. And again, I just want to keep pushing towards that and ideally it would be nice to have a really good regular group together, and my ultimate goal is to help not just doing the Wednesday night, or whatever night it is, but to do weekends away where we go away camp out, do some climbing and then light a fire have a barbeque and some drinks where we can all just unwind and relax in complete isolation from everywhere else and just have a good time, and that’s families included.”

**One veteran outlined his willingness to take on an additional volunteer role:**

“Moving forward, if something else comes up and they need someone to volunteer, to turn up each week to make sure they are there and they all enjoyed it, I would be willing to do that.”

**An external stakeholder described the willingness’ of ex-military to do more and give back:**

“There is a will from the ex-military that they don’t always just need to take part in what’s being delivered, they like to deliver their own stuff as well.”

**A GreaterSport staff member spoke about their experience of the veterans wanting to do more:**

“What they really want to do is to give back further ... they want to be able to help their fellow veterans, they want to be able to help us. I think in my experience with the programme, and my experience with veterans, if you give 10%, you get 90 back, as long as you show that you’re invested, they will give as much as they’ve got to give, and help out in every way that they can.’

**A veteran described his intent to step up and do more to support Moving Forces:**

“If there was other things they wanted and they were looking for help I would definitely get involved, whether it was organizing something or they just needed bodies to volunteer for something, or even if it was going out there and spreading the word. I don’t need another job, but I need to feel like I’ve done my bit to try and help people who are looking for help, and help Moving Forces”

**Recommendation 10**

Provisions should offer voluntary roles which provide alternative approaches to engagement as well as avenues for veterans to do more, give back and support their peers.

**Recommendation 11**

Provisions should consider and provide other possible forms engagement beyond just physical sport participation, such as officiating, coaching, and administrative support roles. This should be directly linked to workplace opportunities and employment.

# Proposed Theory of Change

A TOC uses logic models to outline how a programme is intended to operate and to test whether it achieves its stated objectives and if so, how. This approach involves stating the long-term change or intended outcomes desired or anticipated by a programme and then specifying the assumptions or logical steps by which change is enabled and outcomes are achieved. This is based on identifying the programme inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts of the programme, and the development of models to articulate how, in theory, these are linked, making explicit the assumptions that underpin the programmes' design. Using this framework allows for a richer, more nuanced, but practical appreciation of the programme under investigation and specifically considers what is it about the programme that works, for who, and in what circumstances. This also encourages a shift in focus from families of programmes to families of mechanisms, opening the 'black box' situated between the inputs and outputs to capture the processes relationships and experiences that contribute towards achieving the desired programme outcomes. Using this framework within evaluation has also be suggested as useful as it can be undertaken more rigorously, with a stronger evidence base to explain impact and identify best practice. Ultimately, TOC facilitates an understanding of not just whether the desired programme objectives were fulfilled, but also how they were achieved<sup>13</sup>.

The overall intended outcome of Moving Forces was to encourage and sustain physical activity in ex-service personnel. This was supported with three further outcomes which included reducing the risk of social isolation, the likelihood of mental health challenges and to minimise drug and alcohol dependency<sup>14</sup>. The proposed TOC model presented below draws on the research data to understand the processes, relationships and experiences that contribute towards achieving these outcomes. This data has been presented as three key themes across this report and, now situating them within the TOC model, this illustrates best practice and the proposed logical steps to take for Moving Forces to have the desired impact.

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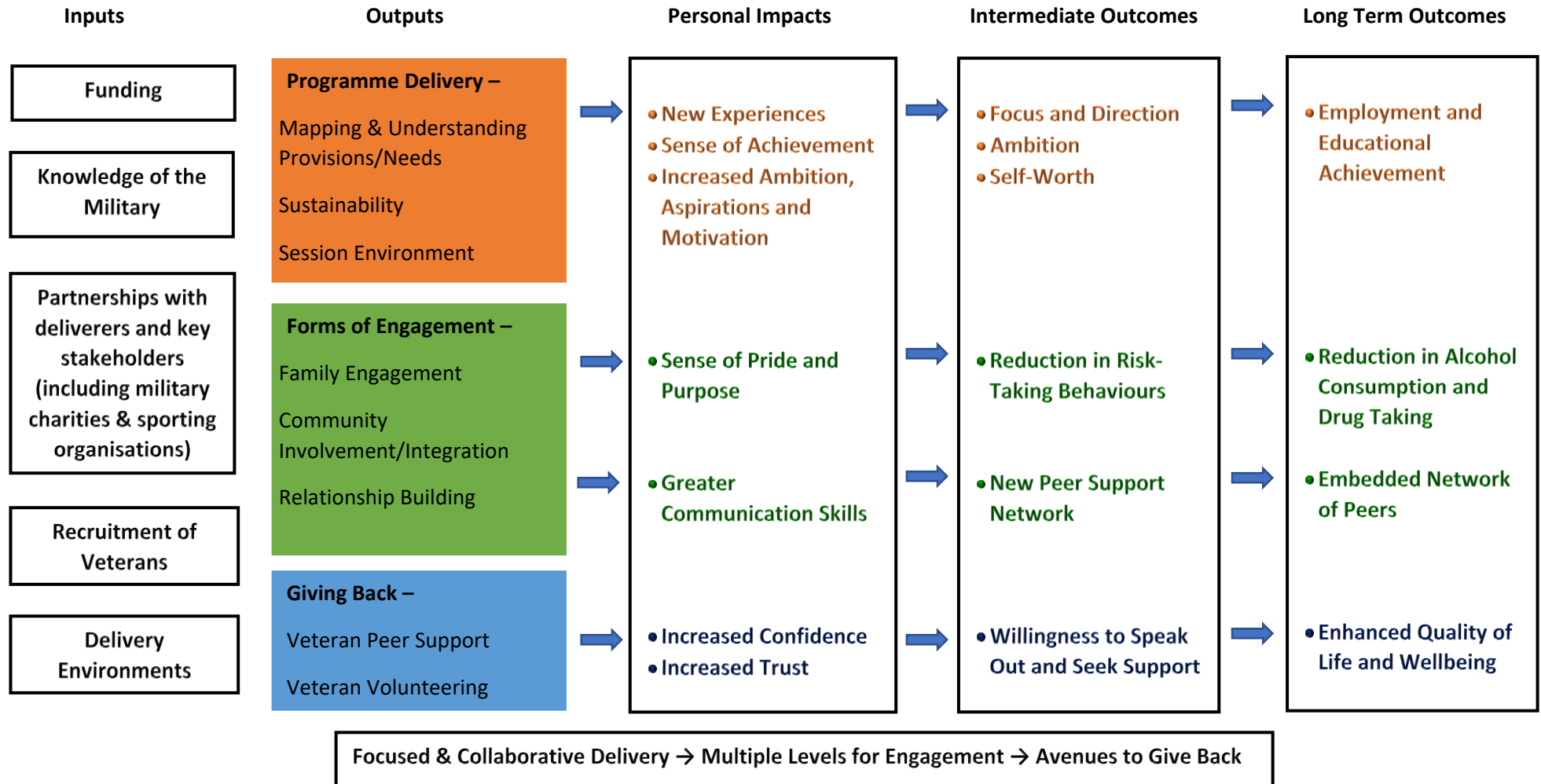
<sup>13</sup> There is a growing body of academic literature that concentrates on theory of change as an approach to inform policy and programme design, considering the mechanisms used and the programme context as well as its outcomes. These have been used across a range of disciplines and policy domains, including sport and physical activity programmes (Coalter, 2003; Pawson et al., 2005; Fox et al., 2017; Bolton et al. 2018; Morgan et al., 2020).

<sup>14</sup> These outcomes are identified and outlined in the Sport England Core Market Submission Form completed in September 2017.

**Ultimate Outcome:** To encourage and sustain physical activity in ex-service personnel.

**Intended Outcomes:**

- Reduce risk of social isolation.
- Reduce likelihood of mental health challenges
- Minimise alcohol and drug dependency



# Final Reflections

This report has identified three key themes, surrounding the delivery of sport and physical activity, that have the potential to maximise the impact of Moving Forces. Experiences, mechanisms, and processes in the areas of programme delivery, forms of engagement and giving back have been recognised as having an important role in achieving the intended programme outcomes.

Across programme delivery, the research highlighted the importance of decentring sport to focus on the processes and mechanisms that surround it. Some of these processes include gaining an early understanding of what a sustainability looks like and building this into programme organisation and delivery from the outset, undertaking a mapping and planning period prior to delivery, and during breaks in delivery, to understand the needs of the participant group and delivery area, as well as identifying the available assets. This also enable the selection and use of delivery environments that are specific to the needs of the participant group. This research has highlighted that these factors are key to programme delivery being undertake in a manner that contributes towards the programme outcomes.

Regarding different forms of engagement, this research identified that the inclusion of family members and the local community aided engagement, integration into civilian groups, and veterans receiving appropriate specialist support when necessary. Pivotal to this engagement, integration and support was the development of trusting and personal relationships, including relationships among the veterans and between the veterans and deliverers. These engagement processes are crucial to the Moving Forces programme identifying and supporting veterans with mental health, isolation or addiction challenges, relevant to the programme outcomes.

Finally, the theme of giving back highlighted the desire of veterans to do more, whether that be through supporting their peers, volunteering, or taking leaderships roles. This research highlighted the need for veteran volunteering to become a greater focus in which peer support and veteran leadership is embedded within programme design and multiple avenues for engagement are provided that look beyond physical participation. Ultimately, these opportunities allow for veterans to succeed in their desire to support their peers and give something back.



# Strategic Recommendations

This report has presented a range of recommendations across each of the three themes discussed. It is recognised that it may not be possible for all of these to be actioned and implemented, therefore three high impact recommendations are suggested below that can encourage engagement, maximise impact and facilitate Moving Forces achieving the intended programme outcomes.

## **Strategic Recommendation 1**

**Understand the needs of the participants and the delivery environment of the programme within the first phase of delivery (0-3 months).**

If not undertaken at the outset of the programme, a period of time should be dedicated to mapping and planning. This should consider the needs of the group targeted by the programme and understanding the environment/area the programme will be delivered in. Reach out to other organisations in this area or those who work with this target group, to develop this understanding and share best practice. This should be used to shape programme delivery.

## **Strategic Recommendation 2**

**Encourage community involvement and the facilitation of trusting relationships across the full duration of the programme.**

Moving Forces provided a good steppingstone for veterans to integrate themselves within their local civilian communities, a mechanism key to the programmes aim of addressing social isolation. Trusting relationships should be established with individuals and organisations in the local community and embedded in the delivery of the programme. Utilise those that are passionate, engaged and want to be involved on a consistent basis. Include those that have little connections to or experience of the military as this will develop the programmes' civilian networks. Encourage relationship building and empower the veterans to make their own connections and extend their engagement beyond the boundaries of the programme.

### **Strategic Recommendation 3**

**Design a volunteer led delivery component focused on successful military transition, and this should be implemented within the first 6 months of programme delivery.**

Within the programme design, embed avenues for peer support and voluntary opportunities, beyond playing roles, that enable individuals to become leaders, support their peers and contribute back to the programme they are part of. Empower veterans to embrace these roles and take ownership of the programme as this has the potential to enhance both engagement and programme impact.

### **Strategic Recommendation 4**

**In future initiatives, employing sport and physical activity to support military veteran communities utilise an evidence led approach in the early phases of programme design.**

When scoping shaping and designing an intervention around outcomes such as mental health isolation and drug or alcohol dependency it is vital to horizon scan the existing evidence base to drive early programme philosophy. For example, it is well established that sport alone does not deliver such goals. However, specific processes mechanisms and intervention features must be explicitly built to be able to address needs, behaviours and overcome participant engagement challenges.