

# LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN A TIME OF COVID-19

SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity commissioned research conducted by the University of Bath, funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS].

**'A Qualitative Investigation of the Experience of Loneliness and Social Isolation in SSAFA Beneficiaries, Volunteers, and Employees during COVID-19.'**

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What was so reassuring was that someone, outside the bubble, was taking an interest in my welfare along with my wife. That was more rewarding in many ways than perhaps the financial help that they gave me at the later stages of the review.

—SSAFA beneficiary.

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On 24 March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was declared in the wake of the Covid-19 virus which went on to claim more than 112,000 lives in England alone, with more than 4 million cases across the UK. **This global pandemic saw life as we know it change, with the new normal being one of social distancing, face masks and limited or no contact with anyone outside of your own home or household bubble.**

SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity continued to operate throughout the pandemic, but service delivery had to adapt to the government restrictions, with our beneficiaries, volunteers and employee's safety and wellbeing being paramount. Thanks to funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], we launched the 'Keep Calm, Get Connected and Carry On' project which aims to combat loneliness and isolation amongst those most vulnerable in the Armed Forces community.

The project sought to create social connections for lonely veterans and their families, co-ordinated across England, delivered locally through SSAFA's branches, and supported by our trained volunteers. It enabled technological adaptation of our support, such as Forcesline, our free and confidential helpline, and our one-to-one mentoring programme which were delivered online and remotely where required.

The grant also funded vital wellbeing initiatives and activities such as delivering breakfast rolls to those isolated in rural communities. It also helped fund the distribution of tablets to our volunteer welfare caseworkers and to Stepping Stone home (our refuge for women and children from Forces families, who find themselves without a place to live or require a place of safety).

Part of the DCMS funding was also used to commission a qualitative study to explore experiences of loneliness and isolation during the pandemic. The report also investigated beneficiaries experiences of seeking support from SSAFA including Welfare Casework, Mentoring, Forcesline and those receiving support for Digital Poverty.

Researchers from the University of Bath were commissioned to conduct the qualitative research, interviewing SSAFA beneficiaries in England who were eligible for the DCMS funded services offered as part of the 'Keep Calm, Get Connected and Carry On' project, as well as those volunteers and employees who had been instrumental in its delivery. The geographical restriction to England-based beneficiaries was a result of the funding requirements.

**The following is a summary of the research findings.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social isolation and loneliness can both seriously impact an individual's physical and mental wellbeing. Pervasive experiences of loneliness and social isolation have been identified to occur in military populations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is now clear that the social restrictions related to COVID-19 have exacerbated the suffering of those who were already experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation before the pandemic.

Previous research demonstrated that SSAFA's prior response to supporting veterans suffering from loneliness or social isolation has been quite effective. However, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, SSAFA's volunteers and employees were faced with the challenge of adapting its service delivery. The impact of these changes on service delivery and the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on SSAFA beneficiaries, in relation to their experience of loneliness and social isolation, was unexplored. Equally, the impact that such changes have had on those who deliver the support services, namely the SSAFA volunteers and employees was also yet to be investigated. Therefore, an in-depth understanding and evaluation of these issues was needed so that potential implications for service delivery could be identified. The qualitative research was carried out between December 2020 and April 2021.



We've had a number of people who've said to us, SSAFA has **saved** my life.

—SSAFA volunteer.

## RESEARCH AIM:

To investigate the experiences of loneliness and social isolation in SSAFA beneficiaries and their experience of seeking and receiving support during COVID-19. The experiences of both SSAFA volunteers and employees in providing support during the COVID-19 pandemic were also sought, with a view to identifying implications for future service development.

## METHOD:

A total of N = 57 participants completed a demographic survey and engaged in a semi-structured interview via the phone. Responses from 26 SSAFA beneficiaries, 19 SSAFA volunteers, 12 SSAFA employees all from England and connected to the DCMS funded 'Keep Calm, Get Connected and Carry On' project were analysed.

The small sample size of this study reflects the parameters of the research and the nature of the methodology itself. The interview transcripts were analysed using a qualitative method, namely Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

It is important to note, the analysis of these qualitative interviews seeks to find themes amongst the responses to guide further discussion and evaluation, it is not a reflection of SSAFA's whole network nor can it be used as representative of the entire Armed Forces communities experience during the pandemic.

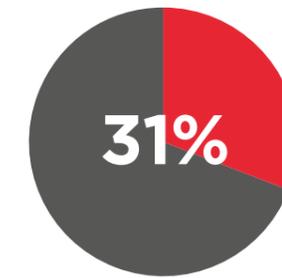
## THE BENEFICIARY SAMPLE CONSISTED OF: 26 BENEFICIARIES



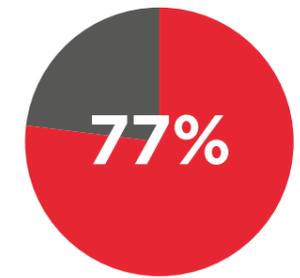
18 of whom had served in the Armed Forces and 1 who is currently serving.



were family members of former serving personnel.



of beneficiaries interviewed were married or in a relationship.



of beneficiaries reported living alone or in supported or temporary accommodation.



The age range of the beneficiaries interviewed were 24-58 years old.

**To note:** Living alone and being single have been showed to increase rates of loneliness and social isolation during the pandemic amongst the general UK population. (Office of National Statistics, Coronavirus and Loneliness, 2021).

## TO PUT THE SAMPLE SIZE INTO CONTEXT, IN 2020, SSAFA:

Supported

79,540

individuals with our charitable services.

54%

of our beneficiaries were aged under 60.



**It's hard sometimes.** What I'm trying to get at is people are struggling psychologically. They're struggling and loneliness is bad anyway, but then you've got that added extra of not having your friends around and not being able to do what you need to do. The only highlight... The highlight of my week, this week is going for an Aldi shop.

—SSAFA beneficiary.



Knowing I can help somebody else makes me feel good inside. I've definitely got something from continuing to support people through their journey, during COVID, **it's meant something to me**, definitely.

—SSAFA volunteer.



We witnessed a

**35%**

reduction in the number of cases reflecting the global shut down, the 'stay at home' messaging, and suspension of some of the traditional referral pathways for our beneficiaries (eg GP surgeries, local authorities, personal welfare services provided by our 130+ service delivery partners).

**BUT WE ALSO EXPERIENCED A DRAMATIC RISE IN DEMAND FOR PARTICULAR SUPPORT:**



**94%**

Our **Mentoring service** supported 94% more individuals transitioning out of the Armed Forces compared to 2019.



**35%**

SSAFA's Transitional Mentoring Impact Report (February 2020) outlined that the **Mentoring service (one-to-one contact)** had helped to reduce social isolation by over 35%.



**34%**

Our **bereavement support groups**, which switched to virtual meetings only, saw a 34% increase in attendance.



**21%**

**FANDF**, our forum for Forces Families with Additional Needs and Disabilities, engaged with 21% more families than in 2019.



**104%**

**Stepping Stone home**, our provision for women and children from Forces families, supported 104% more people compared to 2019.



**Forcesline**, our free, confidential helpline, saw a significant increase in the number of contacts (calls, email and online enquiries) related to loneliness and isolation.

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF BATH REPORT

*“A Qualitative Investigation of the Experience of Loneliness and Social Isolation in SSAFA Beneficiaries, Volunteers, and Employees during COVID-19.”*

## **Beneficiaries’ experience of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19:**

- Beneficiaries had a unique and heightened experience of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19 due to their Armed Forces background and training.
- Pre-existing loneliness, social isolation and mental health difficulties were perpetuated and amplified throughout the pandemic.
- Many of the skills and strategies specific to an Armed Forces background that had previously fostered resilience, were incompatible with the lockdown restrictions.
- The pandemic highlighted differences between beneficiaries and civilians in perceived values and societal norms, exacerbating feelings of social disconnection.
- Multiple stressors and vulnerability factors led beneficiaries to feel they had not managed to adapt to the pandemic in civilian life, contributing to feelings of loneliness, low mood and social isolation.

## **Beneficiaries’ experience of receiving support during COVID-19:**

- Beneficiaries’ interactions with SSAFA volunteers and employees were experienced as highly positive.
- The SSAFA services received met beneficiaries’ needs and were highly valued.
- The shared values between beneficiaries, volunteers and employees are highly valued and important to beneficiaries. These shared values facilitated beneficiaries in feeling understood, supported and contained.
- Beneficiaries identified several barriers to service accessibility across the charity and public sector. These included technology-specific barriers (i.e. computer illiteracy or digital poverty), perceived feelings of stigma related to disclosing mental health and financial difficulties, and difficulties associated with transitioning to civilian life; specifically, a lack of post-service care coordination, as well as low visibility and awareness of SSAFA and its remit.

## **Shared experiences of volunteers and employees in delivering support to beneficiaries during COVID-19:**

- Both volunteers and employees reported perceived disadvantages in reduced face-to-face service provision including; difficulties with conducting a full needs assessment in the absence of both home visits and of non-verbal communication; difficulties with completing paperwork and obtaining required documentation; slower rapport building via online communication.
- Volunteers and employees identified that barriers in access to technology and varying levels of computer literacy amongst both beneficiaries and volunteers had created difficulties with engagement for some beneficiaries.
- Volunteers and employees reported observing worsening levels of beneficiaries’ loneliness and social isolation throughout the pandemic.
- Employees and volunteers reported an increase in the complexity and severity of mental health concerns, particularly of beneficiaries with suicidal ideation.
- Employees and volunteers identified the benefit to beneficiaries of the informal ‘wellbeing calls’ that had occurred during the pandemic and recognised the exponential increase in demand for this.
- Employees perceived that remote case-working had made SSAFA services more accessible and inclusive to some beneficiaries who may have not previously accessed the service, when face-to-face service provision was the only option offered previously.



... they have **given me back the person that I was before**, and I have been able to share my part in him having PTSD which I know now, he had... They have rung me, and they have helped me in ways that I wasn’t getting help.

—SSAFA beneficiary (family member).



# KEY SUGGESTED IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

*“A Qualitative Investigation of the Experience of Loneliness and Social Isolation in SSAFA Beneficiaries, Volunteers, and Employees during COVID-19.”*

- SSAFA volunteers and employees to continue to resource and deliver the excellent communication and support that they are currently providing; which has been reported by beneficiaries.
- To consider how SSAFA services can be made more visible to the Armed Forces community, especially at the point of transitioning from service to civilian life.
- To consider options for dissemination of information regarding the services SSAFA provide, via means that will reach potential beneficiaries who are not computer literate or are in digital poverty.
- To consider the value of a needs assessment in order to achieve digital literacy, in preparation for leaving the Armed Forces. This could include an assessment of an individual's capability in relation to the following three areas;
  1. The hardware required (i.e. electronic devices),
  2. The connections/data required (i.e. access to internet) and
  3. The skills required to operate the hardware and internet connection.
- To consider how SSAFA can partner with other organisations who are already providing or looking to focus on this key area of need.
- To build on the success of the informal 'well-being' calls and 'neighbourly support' (referred to by employees and volunteers as befriending) which was offered to beneficiaries by some employees and volunteers during the pandemic.
- In response to employee, volunteer and beneficiary considerations of the benefit of a befriending service, to wider explore the value of extending well-being calls with a more formal recognition of the notion of befriending.
- To explore the value of further developing existing partnerships with other organisations already working in this area. For example, Age UK, which SSAFA currently signpost to.
- To explore opportunities for embedding befriending type of services within existing volunteering. Such opportunities could be offered to beneficiaries to consider once the caseworking or other welfare support they are receiving from SSAFA has come to an end.



**I'm on my own.** I found myself sat talking to the cats. I needed to talk... It's the not being able to just get up and go out, not meet up with somebody and have a chat and have a coffee somewhere. It's that. That's the isolation bit. Going to your neighbour's house for a chit-chat and whatever or just going for a walk. You just can't do it. It's very frustrating.

—SSAFA beneficiary.

- To explore the possible value of a Social Prescribing model, in line with considering the value of developing a more preventative model of care.
- For SSAFA volunteers and employees to keep working towards to dismantling the stigma associated with seeking support, by continuing to normalise and validate those asking for help during their contact with beneficiaries.
- To consider the value of developing campaigns aimed at dismantling stigma around help-seeking, particularly in relation to mental health and financial difficulties.
- To consider if there is room to articulate the links more formally and visibly between SSAFA and statutory service provision. The aim would be to increase beneficiaries' confidence and trust in approaching statutory services to which they are signposted, to ensure they access the required services and support to which they are entitled.
- To consider formally evaluating the feasibility and desirability of a hybrid model of online/face-to-face service provision.



# A BASIS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Closing remarks from **Sir Andrew Gregory**, SSAFA Controller

The COVID-19 pandemic that struck in 2020 and the consequent restrictions placed on society heightened trends and exacerbated symptoms amongst SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity's beneficiaries that were already becoming apparent. In 2018, our own research report "The Nation's Duty" found that 64% of the 1,100 SSAFA beneficiaries then surveyed reported feeling lonely or isolated since leaving the Armed Forces. Knowing that fact, the impact of a series of sustained national lockdowns on our beneficiaries, and indeed on the work and wellbeing of SSAFA's 4,700 volunteers, was of significant concern to us as a charity and service provider.

This insightful qualitative study, undertaken by a research team from the University of Bath, led by Dr Josie Millar with oversight by Professor Julie Barnett, provides further examples of the challenges being faced. Having interviewed a small sample – 26 of the 79,540 beneficiaries that we assisted in 2020 – it is not intended to be seen as representative of all SSAFA beneficiaries. However, the themes and experiences highlighted chime with the anecdotal feedback from across our network during the pandemic and gives a starting point for further exploration, evaluation and discussion.



The first key theme is that an Armed Forces background acted as a double-edged sword during the pandemic, disarming some as it exposed and amplified differences of values, culture and perspective between civilians and veterans when faced with the COVID-19 restrictions. Some veterans, instilled with a sense of duty to help through action, found being told to stay home and effectively do nothing very difficult; they also found watching people breaking lockdown restrictions alien to the concept of following orders. The pandemic compounded pre-existing challenges faced by some veterans of loneliness, mental and physical wellbeing; this was exacerbated by the removal of traditional coping mechanisms such as meeting up with friends; while that is true for many others, veterans found it especially hard due to the sense of teamwork and the camaraderie that are part of military life.

Thankfully, SSAFA had a positive impact over the last year as our beneficiaries tried to navigate these unprecedented times. Our beneficiaries, and our volunteers, have benefitted from the fact SSAFA continued to operate throughout the pandemic, with all the beneficiaries interviewed being "incredibly grateful for the service provided by SSAFA."

The next theme is that there are clear personal benefits of volunteering. As well as being very proud of those who volunteer for SSAFA, volunteering for SSAFA kept people busy and connected during lockdown; one said, **"I'd be desperate for something to do if it wasn't for this [volunteering with SSAFA]"**. The report equally recognises the pressures on our volunteers, who are trying to support others during lockdown, as well as navigating these strange and unfamiliar times themselves. But for many of our beneficiaries, it is our volunteers who are the personal face of SSAFA and their interactions had to be adapted in accordance with government restrictions, something they and our staff coped with admirably.



**I enjoy it. I'd be desperate for something to do if it wasn't for this [volunteering with SSAFA]. My wife walks guide dog puppies and I get involved in that, but I'd be pulling my teeth out by now I think.**

—SSAFA volunteer.

The demographic profile of those involved in this study demonstrates that SSAFA's volunteers come from all walks of life and not all have a previous military connection (52% were in the military, 31% had a family connection and 15% had no former connection). Their common interest in supporting those in need, combined with the training they receive from SSAFA, ensures that our beneficiaries feel they are speaking to someone who understands them and empathises without judgement.

Technology is a constant theme in the report; as well as highlighting SSAFA's growing reliance on it, especially during the pandemic with the need for remote interactions, it also shows that, in some cases, it presents a barrier due to the "varying levels of computer literacy amongst volunteers and beneficiaries". SSAFA is proactively exploring the barriers of digital poverty and digital illiteracy. Working with one of our commercial partners, Computeam, SSAFA's Volunteer Experience teams are exploring new and sustainable solutions so that we can continue to provide support for all.

In parallel, our partnership with Weston College offers SSAFA volunteers the opportunity to attend IT courses that cater for a range of skill level from basic entry IT skills to Microsoft Office 365 exam level. These opportunities, along with other inhouse support, aim to address the perceived need for upskilling; they will bolster volunteer confidence in using virtual methods of communication and digital platforms.



That **five-minute chat at the doorstep** has now become a **ten-minute chat between these people and it's an exchange of just being human again isn't it?**

—SSAFA volunteer.

Digital poverty is a significant issue that has affected many parts of society over the last 18 months, something we saw first-hand when distributing tablets to our volunteers and beneficiaries and we are grateful to the DCMS for the funding which enabled us to provide these essential devices. They helped people stay connected, allowed children to complete their schoolwork and much more besides. While digital poverty and digital illiteracy are not problems uniquely restricted to the Armed Forces community or to older generations, as may commonly be thought, further research into these barriers would help the military charity sector ascertain the extent of these problems.

Finally, the importance of direct human interaction, not least for mental and physical wellbeing, has been greatly missed by many people during the coronavirus lockdowns, something the report articulates. The demand for, and positive feedback of, the informal wellbeing calls and interactions between volunteers and beneficiaries demonstrates how vital these are. As one of our beneficiaries stated, **“I needed to talk”**. The benefits of talking and connecting were not just expressed by beneficiaries. Volunteers expressed a desire for the implementation of a “formalised ‘befriending’ service” and provision to help expand veteran-focused social circles. SSAFA will investigate how best to meet the intent behind this important observation.

We welcome the recognition and encouragement to continue our existing service delivery practices and strategies. We will continue to tackle the perennial problem of perceived stigma around seeking help, particularly by continuing to expand our awareness campaigns that highlight the charity and the support SSAFA provides. We want to build on the success of our existing partnerships with other organisations to ensure we continue to provide tailored, personalised support to those in the Armed Forces community who need us the most.

I conclude by thanking the University of Bath for their work and indeed our beneficiaries, volunteers and employees for sharing their experiences of loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. SSAFA will learn from this report and it will, as it says in the charity’s mission statement, continue to help those in need ‘regain their independence and their dignity’; nothing is more important than that.



**Lieutenant General**  
**Sir Andrew Gregory KBE CB DL**  
Controller



**Our veteran of 97 said to me, a while ago...** He parachuted twice out of a Stirling Bomber and over Arnhem and he said ‘this is worse than war for me, because in the war we could hug somebody’.

—SSAFA volunteer.



SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity, has been providing lifelong support to our Forces and their families since 1885. Last year our team of volunteers and employees help more than 79,000 people in need, from Second World War veterans to young men and women who have served in more recent conflicts, and their families.

SSAFA understands that behind every uniform is a person. And we are here for that person, and their families – any time they need us, in any way they need us, for as long as they need us.

#### GENERAL ENQUIRIES

- Call 020 7463 9200
- Visit [ssafa.org.uk](https://ssafa.org.uk)



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