



Photo by Emily Appleton Photography

Armed Forces Project Evaluation

Our Space: December 2025



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Introduction

Our Space is a creative theatre programme that works with adults with multiple and complex needs, including people with lived experience of homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse, reoffending, or those who feel socially isolated. The programme provides a safe space for participants to come together to explore drama processes, techniques, and skills. Over the past fifteen years, Our Space has developed expertise in creative approaches to trauma-informed practice, with significant and positive life-changing results.

An Armed Forces strand was developed in November 2023 to meet the specific needs presented by those who are currently serving or have previously served in the Armed Forces. As a military city, the need for services that support serving personnel, veterans and their families is high, including for those who are long-term wounded, injured or sick. This can result in complex mental health issues and challenges around homelessness and substance misuse. The Armed Forces strand helps to bridge a gap in the opportunities available to the Armed Forces community, providing regular and meaningful activities, which offer a point of focus, purpose, and stability, which contribute to participants' recovery and rehabilitation. The workshops create a space to be playful, connect with others, reimagine themselves and their lives and practice transferable life skills, including developing communication skills and confidence building, working in a team and developing resilience.

Evaluation

An independent external evaluation has been commissioned by Our Space, funded by the Veteran's foundation and National lottery, to evaluate and provide evidence of the programme's benefits, strengths, outcomes, and areas for development. The purpose being to celebrate the successes of the programme and support opportunities for development including further funding opportunities to continue the good work of the Our Space programme. The evaluation explored three strands of the Armed Forces project: The Choir, the Comedy event and the Production group. The evaluation took place from October to December 2025. The data collection and analysis methods are as follows:

The Choir: A video documentary about the Choir, was analysed thematically based on the Our Space Programme outcomes, which are outlined on page 6. The documentary featured Choir members and Choir leaders talking about their experiences of the Choir and the wider benefits of taking part.

The Production Group: The evaluator attended a workshop to get first-hand experience of a weekly session and held a focus group interview with three members, to explore their experiences of the group. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was carried out, including exploring themes running through participant interviews and comparing these with the three key themes of the Our Space programme outcomes.

The Comedy Workshop and Event: Feedback was received via interviews with two veterans who attended the comedy open-mic event and from a service provider from Hasler Company, who supported members to participate in the comedy workshop day and attend the evening comedy event as audience members, with one member performing in the show.

Service providers: An interview was held with a member of Hasler Company, who has worked closely with Our Space to support and refer people recovering from complex long-term injuries and illnesses, who are unable to return to military service.

Report Structure

The findings are structured with a section for each of the three Our Space armed forces groups and according to the three programme outcomes (see page 6). Participant voices are prioritised and highlighted by presenting thoughts and experiences in speech bubbles.

Special thanks go to the participants for sharing their stories, thoughts, and experiences of the Our Space programme.

All participants who were interviewed were given a choice to include their names or remain anonymous. All participants choose to include their names. Names have also been included from members of the Choir who shared their experiences via the documentary.

Choir documentary

Nick, Sarah, Laura, Gordon

Choir Leaders: Letitia, Michael

Our Space Programme Manager: Becky Ormrod

Interviews and focus groups

Production group, Choir and audience members at the Comedy event: Zoey, Paul (Stumpy)

Production group and Military Wives Choir: Lorraine

Hasler Company: Paul Weir

Programme Outcomes

<p>Outcome 1 Improved confidence, self-esteem and well-being of serving personnel and veterans</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Serving personnel and veterans attend group activities and report an improvement in their wellbeing for doing so 2. Serving personnel and veterans attend the theatre socially and feel confident to do so 3. Serving personnel and veterans will feel improved mental well-being and self-esteem
<p>Outcome 2 Development of interpersonal skills leading to a positive social life and better relationships with peers, friends, family and wider community</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Serving personnel and veterans report improvement in relationships with family and friends 2. Serving personnel and veterans report finding a new hobby/interest they attend regularly 3. Serving personnel and veterans take part in group tasks, negotiating and finding solutions that they report benefit their everyday life
<p>Outcome 3 Reduced isolation and improved integration leads to serving personnel and veterans engaging with other activities within the theatre and beyond</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Serving personnel and veterans participate in all aspects of the programme 2. Serving personnel and veterans transition into other activities in the theatre and more broadly across the city.

Summary of key findings

The Our Space Armed Forces evaluation explored three strands: The Choir, Production group and Comedy event. This report includes insights and experiences of Our Space members with a specific focus on the impact of the programme for serving personnel, veterans and their families.

1) The need for a specific armed forces and veterans' group

Participants spoke about the importance of a group where members have a shared understanding of military experiences. This includes understanding complex issues, such as experiences of poor mental health, long-term wounded, homelessness, substance misuse and isolation following transitioning out the forces. The inclusion of family members was welcomed given that they contribute much to the support of their partners yet can feel left out of some services.

2) All three outcomes of Our Space are being met

Participants discussed positive experiences of attending the Our Space groups. Along with learning new skills, such as singing, acting, comedy, performing and developing their

artistic creativity, members spoke about experiencing improved mental health, more confidence, and better social connections. Furthermore, the Our Space groups were found to have therapeutic benefits such as improving wellbeing, enhancing enjoyment, and reducing isolation. Participants shared personal stories of recovery and how drama allows them to express themselves and cope with challenges.

3) An uplifting environment that supports healing

The Our Space groups were said to help foster resilience by helping members to recognise their capabilities and offer a supportive, flexible environment, where they can enjoy interactions with others, without pressure, whilst learning new skills. Our Space was said to offer a mutually supporting environment where members encourage and support one another to keep coming to the group even when feeling down.

4) Our Space acts as a catalyst for new opportunities

Our Space was found to act as a catalyst with members joining additional activities and groups after becoming a member of one group. For example, joining the production group then hearing about the Choir and joining that too, and vice versa. A ripple effect was also created with new members joining after seeing their friends, family and partners benefitting from the programme.

5) Developing a sense of community and belonging

Members reported improved social lives and a strong feeling of belonging to a community, which helps with improved mental health and overcoming isolation. Camaraderie, community and sense of belonging were found to be core benefits of joining Our Space.

6) Difficulties with endings and the importance of continuity

Participants raised the issue of group endings, which can leave members with a feeling of deep loss. This was said to be dangerous for individuals struggling with mental health issues. Therefore, some participants emphasised the importance of continuous involvement to prevent feelings of loss after theatre productions finish.

7) Overcoming barriers to participation

Whilst members report multiple personal and social benefits that help with healing from military trauma, improved confidence, wellbeing and joining a community, taking the first step to joining can be difficult, especially if feeling that drama or singing are not for them. Barriers to participation have been overcome by combining an introduction to Our Space with theatre visits and backstage tours to show how the theatre works and different parts fit together. This can also open up new ideas for employability after leaving the military.

The Choir

The Our Space Choir was formed by the Welsh National Opera, Cardiff, and the Our Space group at the Theatre Royal, Plymouth. The two locations are linked by a connection to the sea, which holds relevance for military personnel who have served at sea. The initial choir programme was based on the Opera 'Peter Grimes', which has a sea theme.

The Our Space Choir is made up of service personnel, veterans and family members, with a mixture of members with different levels of singing experience, including members with little experience. After rehearsing for just over five months, they performed on the main stage on Armed Forces Day on Plymouth Hoe.

During the programme, members learnt about the mechanics of singing and the joy of singing. Members learnt to sing together and listen to one another's voices and make a unified sound. The programme was found to benefits beyond singing by bringing people together around an activity that have led to improved confidence, a more positive social life, reduced isolation and have led to engagement in additional groups and activities.

Outcome 1: Improved confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing

Being part of the choir was found to have a significant impact on improved confidence and self-worth. This included renewed happiness, learning to have fun again with others after a period of social isolation, improved mental health and developing a sense of collective identity, contributing to improved confidence and wellbeing.

It's been a tricky couple of years for me, and I think that the choir and singing with people has been amazing for my mental health and I would absolutely advocate for people to do that (Sarah, Royal Navy Veteran)

We don't just sing, we have fun as well. And that's got to be a big part of it for me. Since the Falklands, it's always been about a total lack of self-worth. When I switched off from the world, I stopped socialising completely and everything I did was on my own. And so I'm kind of reintegrating myself in with human beings again (Nick, Royal Navy veteran)

The encouragement and tuition received in the Choir led to a growth in confidence and belief about potential and what can be achieved.

There were lots of things I didn't think I could do in the Choir that the very excellent tuition from has given us the confidence to realise a bit more potential than I thought I had (Sarah, Royal Navy Veteran)

The collective experience of singing within a group was a powerful experience, leading to positive feelings of connection and a growth in confidence.

After the first couple of bars of the song, we just got into it and I could hear the people on either side of me and we kind of got each other going and felt really good, really confident (Sarah, Royal Navy Veteran)

Members of the Choir took part in a Welsh National Opera performance, which involved singing to an opera-loving audience who gave positive feedback to the Choir members about their performance, saying that they sounded good. This gave members a confidence boost.

I've really enjoyed it actually. I was quite nervous before, but um yeah, I'm really glad that we've done it now and yeah, I feel like I enjoyed it once we got here and were with the team, the nerves kind of left us (Laura, husband is in the Royal Navy)

I thought it went really, really well. I think everyone's enjoyed it as well. I'm not brilliant at remembering all the lyrics and I know I got some of them wrong tonight... But actually, I'm proud, but I'm pleased that I've done it as well (Nick, Royal Navy veteran)

An additional unexpected outcome of the Choir programme arose, with some members reporting improvements in their physical health along with improved mental health.

Singing can have quite profound personal benefits for individuals and their well-being. Also it can have amazing physical health benefits. I think that's an area that's starting to really to be explored. So, for instance, in some of our recent work, we've seen that people have improved their breathing. And it also seems that singing actually seems to reduce pain (Michael Graham, Welsh National Opera)

It's been really good for me, especially as I've been recovering from long covid, because I've had a lot of challenges with being able to find things which allow me to be able to use my brain but don't need too much physical involvement. I breathe more easily now. I'm able to sing properly again, which I haven't been for a long time (Gordon, Royal Navy Veteran)

Outcome 2: Development of interpersonal skills leading to a positive social life

Creating opportunities to bring members of the armed forces together was found to be important for both members of the armed forces' sense of identity along with the armed forces being part of Plymouth city's identity. The choir was said to be a good tool for bringing people together and building confidence and camaraderie.

The armed forces community is massive in Plymouth. It's a really big part of the city's identity. So there's a natural need to bring some of those people together. And choirs are just so good for building confidence and camaraderie um and just for general well-being as well (Letitia Jones, Choir leader)

For veterans, the opportunity to engage with other veterans through membership of the choir was said to be important due to being able to connect with people with similar lived experiences.

There's something quite comforting about being around other veterans. They're the most non-judgmental group of people because they've all had experiences of some sort. Whether they're shared places that we've been, people that we know, it's almost like being well, it is like being part of a massive family (Nick, Royal Navy veteran)

The structure of the choir provided stability, continuity and a sense of knowing what was coming. This can be important for neurodivergent individuals, providing a good environment for developing connections and building friendships.

As an autistic veteran that it's not always easy going to the regular groups because they're a little bit out of your control. Here you know what you're going to do. I've built a really solid group of people who I have a connection with (Gordon, Royal Navy Veteran)

The choir was open to partners of service personnel, providing opportunities for family members, who can benefit from the group activities, including reducing isolation and developing connections. A member of the choir spoke about joining once her children reached primary school age, giving her the opportunity to develop new connections and pursue a hobby. The act of singing was said to increase feelings of happiness.

I feel like I've got a bit more time on my hands. It's just really good when you start singing. It just makes everybody happy, doesn't it (Laura, husband is in Royal Navy)

The feeling of rapport, connection and togetherness, was highlighted by a choir leader, who spoke about how the group supported one another and had a lot of fun together.

I just think it's so impressive what everyone has achieved considering they only met and came together in March that they had most of them not sung in choirs before. But I also just love the rapport that's built up with the group. How everyone has a good laugh together. Everyone's very supportive of one another and that's just lovely to see (Choir leader)

Outcome 3: Reduced isolation, engaging with activities in the theatre and beyond

Being part of Our Space and the Choir was found to play an important role for those transitioning out of the Navy by providing continuity and reconnecting with other forces personnel after leaving the forces.

I left the Navy after 23 and 1/2 years of service. And I've been involved in Our Space program through the theatre royal for quite a while, bit over a year now. And it's kind of given me that that sense of continuity (Gordon, Royal Navy Veteran)

The forces Choir group offered support and ability to either start or develop an interest further. Whilst some members had little singing experience others were excited by the opportunity to develop this further and connect with other forces personnel.

It's very difficult coming out of the armed forces and being part of an entity and then being cut off essentially. I saw on one of the armed forces groups that there was a choir going. I very much enjoy singing in the car and in the shower and I thought it might be an opportunity to get some training and to actually sing with other people which has been amazing (Sarah, Royal Navy Veteran)

Being a member of the choir was found to be helping with overcoming isolation and reintegrating with people and activities.

Since the Falklands, it's always been about a total lack of self-worth. When I switched off from the world, I stopped socialising completely and everything I did was on my own. And so I'm kind of reintegrating myself in with human beings again (Nick, Royal Navy veteran)

The fact that the Choir was specifically for forces personnel and their families, helped with the transition out of the forces by providing comfort in knowing that other in the group had shared experiences and would understand one another. This made members feel more confident and comfortable about joining a group.

The good thing about the armed forces choir is that we're all ex-military and there's a shorthand I think for those of us that have served we kind of understand each other. So I felt a little bit more comfortable with that (Sarah, Royal Navy Veteran)



The Production group

The Our Space Production group started in the Autumn term 2025, with 16 members attending the first session. The group meet on Monday evenings from 7-9pm at TR2 and are working towards a bigger production for next September 2026. This is an ambitious project that will bring together multiple Our Space groups for a series of linked production events in Plymouth. During the weekly workshops, members learn drama techniques, engage in playful drama games, do creative writing exercises and work together to develop a performance.

The Our Space Production group is made up of service personnel, veterans and family members, with a mixture of members with different levels of drama experience, including members with little experience, some with a past interest in drama and some who have taken part in other programmes in the past, which use drama for expression and healing for veterans and military personnel.

Outcome 1: Improved confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing

The themes of improved confidence and wellbeing were prominent within the Production group interview discussion. The weekly activities were said to be fun, playful, and sociable, bringing people together. This helped to lift members and provide an enjoyable supportive environment, which in turn helped boost confidence and feelings of wellbeing.

It is confidence boosting, isn't it (Zoe)

It helps to build confidence, it does help to build it (Stumpy)

It's something I enjoy. So therefore, if you enjoy it, it's going to help you in the long run (Stumpy)

Joining in and feeling uplifted

The warmup activities and drama games were said to help build social connection and provide enjoyment that made members want to join in even if they had not previously thought they would enjoy the sessions.

It really is uplifting. As far as the groups go (Production group and Choirs) we totally get so much out of it both of us (self and husband). I can speak for both of us we both get so much out of it (Lorraine)

The games, it makes you interact, you don't just sit and watch what other people are doing, you get involved. My very first time I came to the theatre group, I said, I don't like games, and then at the end of the evening, we did a writing session, where we speak about what we've written and my two sentences were "I don't like games, I look forward to seeing you all next week" so that kind of turned it all around for me! (Zoe)

Supporting transitions and providing continuity

The Our Space groups were said to help with transitions out the military, which can be challenging especially after serving for many years. The Our Space armed forces and veteran's groups helped to provide purpose and connection with other veterans and family members. This helped to lift members and provide continuity.

Coming out of the military after so many years yeah he found the transition really really difficult but both the choir and the drama group have just lifted it. He looks forward to it all the time and he does both and he said to me last night, "drama tomorrow" [enthusiastically]. He was really excited! (Lorraine)

You do look forward to it. After the Production group you've got three days to the Choir and then it's only four days again to the theatre (Zoe)

Release from daily troubles

Participants explained that the drama workshops gave them a release from daily troubles and frustrations, providing time to forget about life difficulties and enjoy the moment, which was also felt to be therapeutic.

It gives me a release that I can be the person I want to be. Not who I am so I could be somebody different. You know, I'm not Paul of such-and-such character. I'm being somebody else. It is a release, you know, all the pent-up frustrations, I've got in my head and get rid of them. I've got a script, and I'll read through that and take myself away. You forget about the troubles you're living day to day (Stumpy)

I think you can forget about daily life. You get engrossed in in a character or a theme and it just that's what you take on for that period of time and it's just you just don't have to think about anything else it is a release (Zoe)

To me I think it's therapy, it helps me a lot (Stumpy)

Definitely. This theatre production definitely is therapy (Zoe)

Healing from trauma

Members shared how different theatre programmes had helped with recovery and healing from past trauma. Stumpy spoke about a variety of programmes that he had been involved with, including Bravo 22¹, BLESMA², Combat Stress³ along the Our Space theatre project 'Boots at the Door' in 2015.

¹ Bravo 22 - Recovery through theatre

² BLESMA – A charity that helps serving and ex-service men and women who have lost limbs to rebuild their lives

³ Combat Stress - A charity offering therapeutic treatment to former members of the Armed Forces suffering from a range of mental health conditions; including post-traumatic stress disorder

I started with Bravo 22 at first. I'm still a member of Bravo 22. Which is Recovery Through Theatre, with Royal British Legion. I started there and that's sort of where I got the bug. I could be somebody else and get rid of my problems by being somebody else (Stumpy)

I got help. I needed it. Just after we finished 'Boots at the Door', it comes to a head and my daughter turned around and said, "Dad, if you don't stop drinking this time next year, you'll be dead." And that was a big kick to make me wake up (Stumpy)

Stumpy spoke turning his life around and now using his experiences to help others by giving talks about his story in schools, universities and with first responders. This highlights the important role of theatre programmes, including Our Space, for transforming lives. Demonstrating how drama and theatre can support healing and open new pathways for those recovering from military trauma.

Through BLESMA I go into schools and talk to kids, first responders, police, ambulance, nurses. We went to one university to do a talk in front of psychologists. Told them my story. And they go, how could you get over that? I said, well a lot of help through 'Combat Stress', other things that helped me (Stumpy)

Outcome 2: Development of interpersonal skills leading to a positive social life

The Our Space Production group along with the Choir provided a new hobby or interest for members that they could attend regularly and look forward to. Some members mentioned that their partners or friends joined after seeing the benefits that they themselves got from the weekly sessions. Others reconnected with people they knew previously or made new friendships within the groups.

A sense of belonging

One participant spoke about how being a member of Our Space provided a sense of belonging. This was said to be very important providing a community of like-minded people who understand one another. Our Space programmes are open to armed forces, veterans and their partners, which was said to be important as partners can feel disregarded yet

play an important role in supporting military personnel both during their time in the military and with transitioning out of the military.

I just think it gives you a sense of belonging. That's the most important thing, a sense of belonging (Lorraine)

I think often as a wife you're disregarded a little bit sometimes. Sometimes you go through a lot, you know. Keeping the home fires burning when the men are away, looking after the children and spending months at a time. It can be really difficult. Our Space really helps because it puts you into a community who understand all of that, who understand what it's like to go away. And it could be from either side of the fence. Do you know what I mean? It can be as the person going away or as the person left at home. So, it does give you that feeling of belonging (Lorraine)

Support network and camaraderie

Participants spoke about the importance of being part of a supportive group. The Production group and Choir were said to have a strong sense of camaraderie and both staff and members were very supportive of one another, checking in to see if everyone is okay and picking each other up if someone was having a difficult time.

It's all the people as well, I mean, everybody. It's so lovely, you know (Zoe)

It's the camaraderie (Stumpy)

A lot of times you know you'll have a moment and everybody sort of surrounds you, and checks that you're alright and it's lovely (Zoe)

Everybody is just so supportive, you know, and even if somebody's having a bad time. You've just got everybody's back (Lorraine)

Familiarity and family

The new Our Space Production group provided a sense of familiarity, and a feeling of being back with a family again. Being part of an armed forces and veterans' group was considered important due to having shared experiences.

When I walked in and seen Lee, who's the director of Boots at the Door, which I did in 2015, and then I seen a few other cast members there as well, so it was quite familiar. So it's like being back in that little family again because obviously we worked together for nine months doing Boots, and that was fantastic (Stumpy)

It definitely gives you a clearer understanding because when it's somebody you love going through that difficult period I've often felt he can't be the only one and then being in a group like this you know he's not the only one (Lorraine)

This group all has an association with the forces, and maybe that's why it's so therapeutic (Zoe)

Building resilience

Being a member of the programme was said to help develop resilience and make participants feel more capable than they previously thought.

I think having done programmes before, I think it does help with resilience. I think you're always going to be a little bit fragile in some areas (Lorraine)

I think it teaches you, doesn't it? It makes you realise that actually you're more capable than you think you are. You might think I can't do that. But actually, you really can (Zoe)

Outcome 3: Reduced isolation, engaging with activities in the theatre and beyond

Enjoyment and reduced isolation

Participants discussed how being a member of Our Space helped reduce isolation by providing enjoyable and uplifting activities, which provided something to look forward to each week along with being a good support network.

I'm by myself, I live on my own, I work from home, I have nobody coming in. I've got family obviously, but in general day to day. I don't have a partner, you know, the kids are all grown up, left home. It's great to have a place to go (Zoe)

I enjoy it. It's getting me out, talking to other people, getting me to interact, not be at home watching the TV with the dog (Stumpy)

Yeah, exactly that. I spent about 10 hours yesterday just in front of the telly (Zoe)

Getting involved and exceeding expectations

Getting involved with Our Space was said to help with confidence and socialisation leading on to other opportunities and exceeding members expectations.

When I first joined the choir I thought, well for the first week I'll just sit back and watch what everybody's doing. So it's like me sitting there watching everybody sing, how ridiculous is that! But they bring you in and you are part of the group, it's great (Zoe)

I think it's one of the biggest confidence builders, you know, performing on the stage. When I first joined I was like, well I might do backstage stuff or something like that. I never thought for one moment when I first joined the drama group that I would have done what I've done with drama (Lorraine)

The dangers of group endings and loss

Members spoke highly of the Our Space groups that they were in, both the Production group and Choir, and the personal and social benefits beyond signing and theatre. However, participants also raised the issue of group endings, which can leave members with a feeling of deep loss. This was said to be dangerous for individuals struggling with mental health issues.

But the only thing about it, you'll find that at the end of it, when it's all done, you'll feel a loss. It's a loss because you're all, you've been together, like, with Boots, we were together for nine months and you get really friendly with people and then it's like, then you don't see them again. What's happening then? Where's my support network? You have a pit in your stomach (Stumpy)

There is a loss, yeah. We need to finish one and then start on another one. We can have a break and then come back and start something new (Zoe)

Totally. It's like a death. I'm not kidding (Lorraine)

I think it would be for everybody to be fair, to keep going, not to do this and then that's it because that's actually dangerous for people's mental health. People with poor mental health, it is dangerous for people (Lorraine)



The Comedy

The Our Space comedy event was held on one full day on 7th November 2025. This was an in-depth workshop during the day followed by an open-mic comedy event in the evening, where local comedians would perform along with Our Space members who had taken part in the workshop and wanted to have a go at performing comedy. The workshop gave ten members of the Armed Forces community the chance to try stand-up comedy.

A twelve-week set of comedy workshops had been run previously, which worked well but not had consistent attendance. Therefore, a one-day immersive comedy workshop was developed as an alternative format. The evening event was attended by an invited audience of friends, family and service providers, to ensure a positive and supportive environment for first time performers.

Outcome 1: Improved confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing

Comedy is core feature in military communities, due to its role in building camaraderie, boosting morale, escapism and helping cope with stress and trauma. The comedy strand of Our Space sought to recognise and build on the culture of comedy fostered in the armed forces community.

This event was about more than just comedy; it was about confidence, connection and community. The courage shown by our participants, and the warmth of the audience, made it a truly special evening (Becky Omrod, Our Space programme manager)

Participants shared ways that laughter and humour can be used in the forces, including for bonding, camaraderie, healing and masking life difficulties.

You use humour to hide a lot of things (Stumpy)

Banter and humour, to take the mick out of each other (Zoe)

That's common nature, it boosts you, they say laughter is good medicine, yes it is (Stumpy)

Outcome 2: Development of interpersonal skills leading to a positive social life

A worker from Hasler Company spoke highly of the comedy event and the potential to encourage members to get out, socialise and enjoy themselves. Our Space activities were said to offer way to connect with others and develop communication skills.

It was absolutely brilliant. Yeah, we took we took eight guys down there, and they absolutely loved it. That was that was a fantastic day. And I've already got people asking me about when the next one is (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Activities that encourage socialising and connection with others were said to be especially important for those recovering and soon to transition out of the military. The comedy event provided an excellent opportunity for this.

It was really nice because some of the guys who were strongly encouraged to do it, they would just sit in their rooms and fester and just be on their own on their game station all night. These are people that in a few months time are not going to be in the military. They haven't got that comfort blanket of being in the military. So it's getting them all to socialise (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

The comedy workshop ran throughout the day and was followed by a break before the evening comedy show. Paul spoke about how this provided a good opportunity for members to get to know one another.

We dropped them off and said, you're doing this all day. And they go but there's a two-hour break and we said right, socialise, do something with each other. So, they stayed in town, and they had some tea and then some food and they socialised and then they went back in the evening (for the comedy show). So, it's about sort of getting all these people to gel. It was a really good exercise for them all to communicate and get down there and spend some time with each other and the other veterans (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Outcome 3: Reduced isolation, engaging with activities in the theatre and beyond

The comedy event offered a chance for military personnel to take part in the comedy workshops, participate in the comedy show or come along and watch and support the show. Along with providing opportunities to develop their creativity and performance skills, the event also offered a safe and welcoming community for veterans to get out and enjoy activities with one another. Veterans who attended the evening comedy performance spoke enthusiastically about the event and the hope for more events.

It was really good. The compere, she was so funny herself. I mean, let alone the other comedians. The young one, when he'd come out and openly admit that he's bisexual, and he's autistic. It was fantastic. It's like talking to your son. It was funny (Stumpy)

*There was a guy (Navy veteran) that had done the workshop during the day. He was b***** funny. I mean, for only doing that one day, he had his work laid out pretty well, you know, and he did a good job. You'd think he'd done it before, but he's a total amateur and he was funny as well (Stumpy)*

It was just all lovely. They were all funny. Hopefully there'll be more (Zoe)

The success of the comedy event led to participants telling others about how much they enjoyed it, which has sparked enthusiasm for more military personnel who want to attend future events.

We've got so many people that would like to attend it because they've come back now and it's almost like an advertising thing for we're doing different things (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Stakeholder views: Hasler Company

An interview was held with a member of the operations unit from the Royal Navy Recovery Centre, Haslar Company. The Royal Navy send seriously wounded, injured and sick personnel to Haslar to support them with recovery and transition out of the military for those with medical conditions, that aren't conducive to them remaining in service. The operations cell encourages patients to engage in a range of activities that will help with the rehabilitation. This includes working with Our Space due to the opportunities offered for military personnel and veterans.

I work in the operations cell, and we look at a range of different activities for people to get engaged in. You know, everything from art, physical activities, sports, adventurous training. And some of those along the more kind of therapeutic type things, you know, whether it be art, mindfulness, wellness and obviously then you've got Our Space and the Theatre Royal (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Hasler patients are encouraged to keep an open mind and try new things, because activities such as the theatre can have wider benefits for their recovery beyond the activities themselves.

I challenge a lot of our patients to keep an open mind. Even if they think that the arts or Our Space or anything to do with theatre isn't for them. Come along, have a look at the the different types of things that go on there and then try and look at how it might benefit their recovery or a facet of their recovery (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Outcome 1: Improved confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing

Mutually supporting relationships with other veterans

The opportunity to mix with other veterans was said to be an important aspect of the Our Space armed forces strand. Veterans can share a particular set of experiences, which can lead to a common understanding. Along with mixing with different cohorts of people, being able to mix with other veterans allows for mutually supporting relationships with others who have insight into the specific difficulties and processes that they might be facing.

What happens is it's kind of a sort of mutually supporting relationship, if you like. So those veterans who have been left the military for however long it might be, they can chat to the guys who are still serving or about to become veterans. It's like a form of informal mentoring where they talk about how they felt. Quite a lot of those would have been medically discharged as well. And how they felt in the coming months before they got medically discharged and how it might feel when they transition and they leave (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Mental health and regaining enthusiasm

Our Space groups and activities were said to help with wellbeing particularly for those who are experiencing mental health issues. Having an enjoyable place to go can help with regaining enthusiasm and having something to look forward to.

With some people, particularly people receiving treatment for from what we call DCHM Department for Community and Mental Health, they might lack enthusiasm or their general wellbeing. I'm finding that some people genuinely look forward to that part of the week (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Our Space was described as a safe space for members to attend, where they can be accepted and not judged as they are recovering from various medical issues.

A good example is there was a guy who had a stroke. So his speech and language was something he was really self-conscious about as he was recovering. Being involved with Our Space gave him that safe space not to be judged or ridiculed but supported. When he was involved in those activities, it was really good for him to give that a go. And, the speech and language therapist said this would be a really good thing to get involved with (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Something to look forward to

Whilst some members have felt before joining Our Space that it was not for them, many who have been encouraged to give it a go, have been surprised at how much they enjoy it. Hasler company encourage people to try new things. This highlights the benefits of the Our Space group beyond the drama activities, offering a place to meet and mix with others in a fun, playful and supportive environment.

So in the past we've, we've done a sort of eight week workshop and people have turned up and thought maybe it's not for them, but actually when they go there, they go and have a bit of fun and they just enjoy the session (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

I say to all the patients in Haslar Company, give it a go. Keep an open mind because you're going through recovery. And what I say to them is there may be a hobby or a sport or something which they can't do because of the, because of the position they're in, and they might find something else which kind of lights that fire or gives them something to look forward to and a new group of people to get involved (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Outcome 2: Development of interpersonal skills leading to a positive social life

Transitioning out of the forces and meeting new people

Paul communicated the importance of groups that can help veterans meet new people as they transition of the military. Resettling in a new place where they may not know anyone can be isolating and lonely. Our Space was said to help bridge that gap and provide new social circles and veterans groups.

It can, you know, soften the fall. Also it can be a healthy distraction because it's something that you're really into, a hobby or something that you're enthusiastic about, something that you really enjoy (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Quite often they will they will continue on with Our Space, and that's really important because it's that smooth transition because a lot of people can become quite isolated and lonely. Because let's just say someone joins a company and they have to leave their ship. So they've been on the ship for however long with lots of other people. They don't know many people in the company, but it looks as if they're going to attend a medical board soon, and then they're going to transition, particularly if they're resettled in Plymouth. Then we say, well, look, if you don't know many people in Plymouth, this is a gateway for you to open up and engage and mix in different circles and, and meet lots of other different people (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

A sense of community

The theme of community featured highly within all interviews. The sense of community fostered amongst armed forces and veterans led to members supporting and encouraging each other to keep going to sessions. This is especially helpful when going through difficult times to reduce isolation and maintain a sense of being part of a supportive group.

It induces a sense of community. So they will encourage each other to come along for the sessions and support each other. If someone's maybe not feeling so good, not really up for it, they'll go, no, hang on, we're all in this together. Let's all go and let's do the whole thing (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Outcome 3: Reduced isolation, engaging with activities in the theatre and beyond

Reduced isolation

Paul spoke about the isolation that can occur when members transition out of the Navy and leave behind communities and friendship groups that they have built up. Our Space was said to provide opportunities for Hasler members to meet other Hasler patients and also join a new community of veterans.

We'll get quite a lot of foreign and Commonwealth sailors and the odd marine with their own ship's company, they might, you know, they might have like a friendship group on there, which they now haven't got those. And they might have been assigned into Hasler company. And they might have come from Portsmouth or Scotland or wherever it is. So it's kind of like a double whammy. And then the other bit is well-is what, what this does is rather than them staying in their single man rooms, if you like, or single person rooms. Yeah. Not only not only do they get to meet some of the people in Hasler company, but they might get to know those other people as well (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Members recommending others

Hasler patients who had joined Our Space and found they enjoyed it and benefitted from being a member, were found to recommend others. The common experiences of being a patient at Hasler and then transitioning out of the forces, led many who had travelled this path to recommend it to others in similar situations.

So, I regularly see some of the guys who have then transitioned and left, and then then you get to see them at workshops. And now they're the people that are talking to some of the patients [from Hasler] who are about to leave [the military] and they're saying, yes, I was a patient in Hasler company too. It's all pretty informal, but they're starting to sort of informally signpost each other [to Our Space] (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

Barriers to participation

Those who had participated in Our Space report were finding multiple benefits, including personal, social and wellbeing benefits along with enjoyment, community and belonging. However, a barrier was said to exist in terms of taking the first step and giving it a go. Paul spoke about the benefits of combining an introduction to Our Space with theatre visits and backstage tours that can help new and prospective members to envision how the theatre works and how different parts and programmes fit together.

The real barrier is getting people to keep an open mind and give it a go. So it was introducing the Our Space stuff, also getting people to learn a little bit more about the theatre as well. So we did some really good stuff where Becky organised some visits, where the guys were going to go to backstage and there was a really good program that she ran for, you know, for us where we got to see lots of different facets of the theatre, but they also did some Our Space stuff as well. So people can see how it all fits together (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)

This was also found to help with employability by opening up new ideas and possibilities for future employment after leaving the armed forces.

Some of the guys have when we've gone down and some people from the theatre have shown people around different types of employment and stuff. Even if they've not looking for a work placement down at the Theatre Royal it's given them ideas for different types of employment that they might get engaged in (Paul Weir, Hasler Company)



Conclusion

The Our Space Armed Forces evaluation explored three strands: The Choir, Production group and Comedy event. The report highlights the voices and experiences of military personnel, veterans, family members and a stakeholder from Hasler Company who works closely with Our Space. Participants spoke highly of the programme and ways it enriches and improves their lives in multiple ways, including personal, social, community, health and wellbeing benefits. The following summary of key messages highlights the strengths of the Our Space armed forces programme and areas for consideration.

Personal benefits of participation

The benefits of participation in Our Space exceed expectations. Participants spoke about multiple benefits of taking part in the groups, activities and events. This included improved mental health, improved confidence, feelings of renewed happiness, feeling uplifted and learning to have fun again after periods of depression and social isolation. Physical health benefits of participation in the Choir included improved breathing and pain reduction.

Healing benefits of the drama, signing and comedy activities

Members found that the activities of drama, theatre, singing, and comedy, had therapeutic and wellbeing benefits, along with developing artistic creativity. Activities and workshops gave members something to look forward to and were described as healing, offering release from daily troubles and leading to regaining enthusiasm after periods of depression and isolation. Performing and singing together provided feelings of unity and connection and the drama activities and themes provided a vehicle for expression and contributed to healing from trauma. The comedy workshop and event offered an opportunity for individuals to socialise and get to know one another along with fostering an environment of collective enjoyment.

Community connection and belonging

Members of Our Space reported improved social lives and a strong feeling of belonging to a community. The importance of belonging to a community featured strongly. The Our Space forces strand was found to help with supporting transitions and providing continuity, which is especially important for those who are feeling a loss of community and purpose after many years in the military. Leaving the forces, including for those who are long-term wounded, injured or sick, can leave people feeling cut off, lonely and isolated. Individuals can feel separated from communities and friendships that they have built up over years in the military. Therefore, developing new connections with other military personnel and veterans can provide familiarity, due to shared experiences amongst people who

understand one another. This was found to help provide a mutually supportive environment, and continuity when transitioning out of the military.

Benefits of an Our Space armed forces strand

The evaluation found evidence of the importance of the need for a specific armed forces group, including shared understanding of experiences, transitions out of the forces, and a sense of belonging. The multiple personal, social and wellbeing benefits of belonging to Our Space were strengthened by the specific experiences of armed forces personnel and their families. This highlights the importance of Our Space, as a tool for healing, recovery from trauma and transforming lives. Demonstrating how drama, theatre, singing and comedy can be a catalyst for change opening up new possibilities for members.

Areas for consideration: Barriers to participation and danger of endings

The evaluation found that, for participants, the beneficial outcomes of participation exceed their expectations, having benefits beyond the enjoyment of the activities themselves and learning new skills. This included activities being uplifting, therapeutic, supporting healing from trauma, providing new purpose, opportunities for community connection and sense of belonging. Activities also acted as a catalyst for new opportunities, such as leading to participation in additional groups and events and providing inspiration for future employment.

However, taking the first step to joining can be difficult for some, especially if feeling that the arts, drama and singing are not for them. Barriers to participation have been overcome by combining an introduction to Our Space with theatre visits and backstage tours to show how the theatre works and different parts and programmes fit together. This has helped with inspiring ideas for future employment for those leaving the military along with highlighting the benefits of the programme. Developing creative ways to combine benefits of the programme offer a positive way forward. Likewise, participant testimonies from those who have been through a similar process of transition from the military were found to encourage others to take up these beneficial opportunities.

The broad range of benefits and support offered to participants helps to fill a gap in support services for military personnel, veterans and family members, which is much needed to complement support services in Plymouth due to its military city status. However, members also spoke about the dangers of group endings, such as when a theatre production finishes. This was said to lead to deep feelings of loss, which can feel like an injury. The paramount need for such services raises the importance of continuity, which will rely on securing ongoing funding streams to be able to continue the Our Space armed forces strands.

