

Written evidence submitted by an individual who wishes to remain anonymous (AFCB01)

I am happy for the information below be published provided my name personal details are redacted. I would be happy to provide additional comments and clarify any points that are unclear.

Background

The following notes and thoughts are drawn from my personal and direct involvement with the UK Armed Forces (in particular the Army) following the death by suicide of our son in 2021. I would first like to make it clear that following the tragic loss of our son, the vast majority of Defence People we have dealt with have been very pleasant and as helpful and considerate as they can be within the constraints they have to work within.

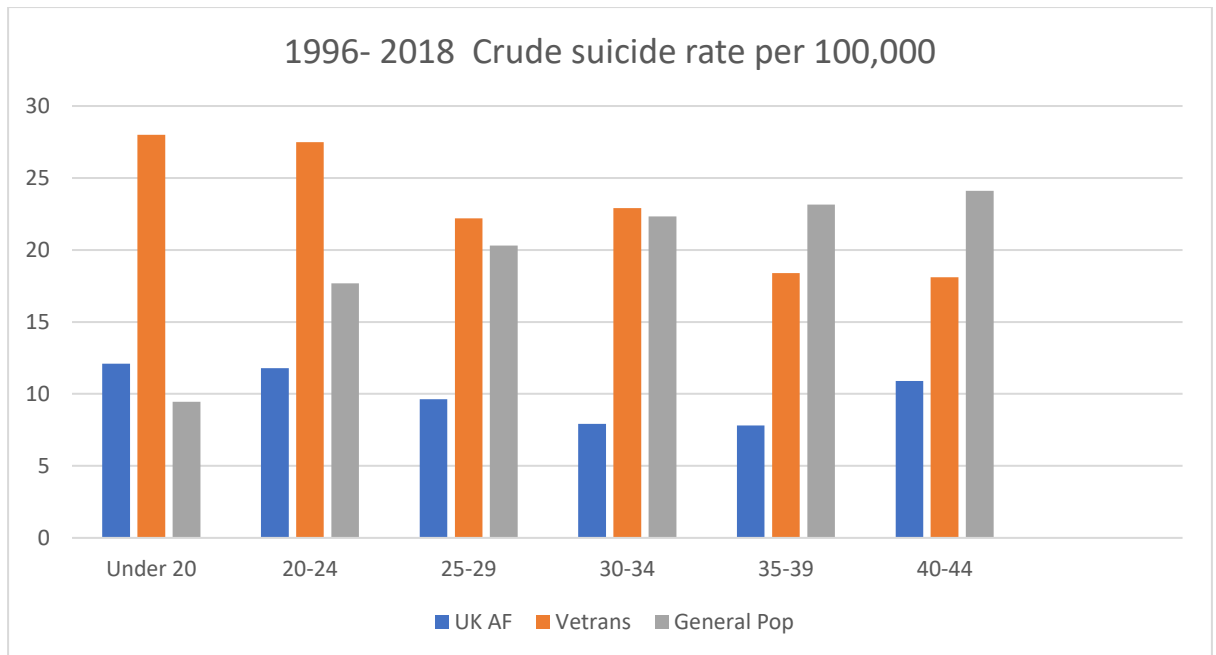
I have spent a lot of time in the last 3 years trying to understand what suicide prevention measures are in place and how the lessons are learnt from such a tragedy to try and prevent future tragedies. From what I have seen, there are areas that could be improved upon and I believe that a properly resourced Armed Forces Commissioner could address some of the issues I am concerned about and, with a few amendments to the Bill, could play a significant role in reducing suicides.

Summary of the suggested amendments to the Bill

- 1) Definitions:** It would be helpful to clarify that “relevant family member” includes parent of a Service Person, where there is no spouse, and be clear and explicit that it includes the family members of persons who were subject to service law at the time of their death.
- 2) Under 4 – 340IA (3)** that civilian welfare officers, WRVS volunteers and the like are also able to request that an investigation is carried out.
- 3) Under 4 – 340IA (3)** that somebody who was previously subject to service law be able to request an investigation takes place.
- 4) Under 4 – 340IA (3)** that the relevant family member can request that an investigation take place, if somebody who was previously subject to service law took their own life within [say] 2 years of leaving the Armed forces.
- 5) Under 4 – 340IA (3)** that an additional specific function be included to the effect that; the Commissioner shall investigate every suspected suicide of a person subject to service law at the time of their death and following the investigation make recommendations regarding any general or specific service welfare issues that could be improved upon.
- 6) Under 4 – 340IA (5)** that the relevant family member has the right to ask the Commissioner raise concerns as to the way a Service Inquiry into a suspected suicide is being carried.

Notes justifying the suggested amendments

- 1) **Definitions: “Relevant Family Member”** – I assume this would be those who are considered to be the legal next of kin as a minimum? I would like to see “Relevant Family Member” include parents so that under 4 – 340IA (3) of the Bill, a parent (if there is no spouse) would be able to request that the Commissioner consider a matter for investigation.
- 2) **Under 4 – 340IA (3) -Civilian welfare officers, WRVS Volunteers** and the like should be able to request an investigation. As I read the Armed Forces Act 2006 (367-370) Civilian Welfare Officers may not be subject to service law, but rather be subject to ‘service discipline’. I feel civilian welfare officers certainly need to be given the ability to request an investigation as they can have a good grasp of matters of concern. WRVS volunteers and similar volunteers do a tremendous job supporting service people, like ‘canaries in the coal mine’, could be the first to notice matters of concern. The Bill could be amended to read “..... a person subject to service law **or service discipline** or a relevant family member”
- 3) **Under section; 4 – 340IA (3)** Somebody who was subject to service law, but has subsequently left the Armed Forces, should be able to bring a matter forward for the Commissioner to consider investigating. A service person may prefer to leave the Armed Forces rather than go through the stress of making a formal complaint. After leaving, the person may feel that their experience still merits investigation, if there is a wider welfare issue. It is often the case that if there is a low level of abuse, people often prefer to leave an organisation rather than make a complaint. This is particularly true the more junior the individual and where abuse is being perpetrated by somebody in a more senior position. To be able to raise a concern of something that was occurring while a person was subject to service law is, I feel, important in picking up low levels of abuse.
- 4) **Under section; 4 – 340IA (3)** that the relevant family member can request that an investigation take place if somebody, who was previously subject to service law, took their own life within [say] 2 years of leaving the Armed Forces. Transition from the Armed Forces to civilian life can be challenging, particularly for young people. The graph below shows the suicide rate for veterans alongside the averaged suicide of Service Personnel between 1996 and 2018. As can be seen the suicide rate for young veterans is significantly higher than others of the same age group. Both the Armed Forces and associated charities play a role in supporting the transition to civilian life but, clearly from the evidence below, a greater level of oversight and understanding is needed. If the family felt that there was something associated with service life or the transition back to civilian life, then an investigation might be beneficial in understanding and improving the transition process in order to improve outcomes for young veterans.



[Using data of veteran suicide rates from this study. [Suicide after leaving the UK Armed Forces 1996–2018: A cohort study | PLOS Medicine](#) then placing this data alongside averaged suicide rates from the 'figure 6 data' from the [Armed Forces Suicide Statistics](#) this graph is produced].

5. Under 4 – 340IA (3) that an additional specific function be included to the effect that; the Commissioner shall investigate every suspected suicide of a person subject to service law at the time of their death. Following the investigation, make recommendations regarding any general or specific service welfare issues that could be improved upon. I believe that such a specific function could be hugely beneficial in preventing future suicides.

5.1 Under 4 – 340IA (3) of the Bill, a person subject to service law along with the relevant family member can request an investigation to be carried out. Immediately following a suspected suicide however, the person who has died cannot request an investigation themselves and the family are, quite possibly, not going to be in the right emotional state or sufficiently knowledgeable to request an immediate investigation. Under these circumstances, I feel, it would be the right thing to do for the State to step in and mandate that the Commissioner carry out an independent investigation on behalf of the family and the service person who has died.

5.2 I have met a number of Armed Forces families bereaved by suicide, none I have met have been content with the internal investigations carried out. The Commissioner could provide the reassurance families need that a proper independent investigation into suspected suicide is taking place.

5.3 While it is the case that every serious incident including a suspected suicide would result in a Unit or Regimental level investigation called a Learning Account (Army). In my experience, individual units do not have the experience or understanding, of matters relating to suicide, to properly review the matters that

may have contributed to a suicide. The conclusions of the Learning Account for our son's death was superficial, generalised and did not sufficiently analyse the circumstances that may have contributed to his death. This is not criticism of the individuals involved, I am sure they did their best within the limits of their knowledge and experience. Suicides are thankfully very rare, so I would not expect individual units to have the knowledge needed to analyse the circumstances leading to a suicide.

5.4 If the Commissioner was mandated to conduct such an investigation, they would be able to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding to conduct an investigation which is more productive than existing unit level investigations.

5.5 - 12 months following our son's suicide, another lad at the same regiment died in similar circumstances. He was just 18 years old, neither our son who was 19 or this other lad had a diagnosed mental illness. There were however likely common factors which were not identified in the Learning Account, but have subsequently been picked up in the Service Inquiry. The Service Inquiry has only taken place because there were two suspected suicides close together.

5.6 There was no Service Inquiry for our son's suicide, and because of the intrusive nature of a Service Inquiry, we are glad this was the case.

5.7 If there had been an independent investigation, as I am suggesting, at the time of our son's death then, I believe, that the death of this other poor lad may have been avoided.

5.8 While this is only one example, if Members wish it, I would be happy to provide evidence which demonstrates that the UK Armed Forces is not having the desirable impact on suicide prevention and there needs fresh-eyes and independent oversight to support the work already being carried out to reduce suicide.

5.9 I don't foresee any investigations by a Commissioner necessarily replacing the existing Learning Accounts or any Service Inquiry. The Commissioner's investigation may be able to sit between the two types of existing inquiries and supporting both. It should be remembered that the vast majority of suspected suicides do not result in a Service Inquiry, so very few suicides are thoroughly investigated by people with knowledge and experience of such matters.

5.10 I would envisage that the Commissioner's investigation would:

- a) be much quicker than any Service Inquiry and would not normally be automatically published other than to the family if they request it.
- b) be more detailed and in depth than a Learning Account.
- c) Be carried out by persons experienced and knowledgeable of the factors that can be contributory to suicide.
- d) involve the family as much as they wish to be involved

- e) make recommendations for improvements in welfare and preventing future deaths
- f) be independent of the Armed Forces but support Armed Forces suicide prevention work.

5.10 It is this last point that I feel is very important, in providing comfort to families. The Commissioner would develop an in depth understanding of any common factors around suicides and not only be able to provide independent advice to Parliament but also feed into the Armed Forces Suicide Prevention Health Priority Group.

6. Under 4 – 340IA (5) When a family is involved with a Service Inquiry (SI) and, if they are unhappy with the way the SI is being carried out or what information is going to be published, the family can request the Commissioner raise concerns with the convening authority for the SI. While all the Officers I have met regarding the Service Inquiry I have had involvement with have been very helpful and considerate; I don't believe there is any legal right to raise a grievance and relying on the goodwill of individuals is no substitute for have a legal right. I would therefore suggest that (in relation to a Service Inquiry) a relevant family member has the right to request that the Commissioner investigate any grievance while the SI report is in draft form and well before it is concluded and published.

December 2024.