

# Evaluation of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe Plymouth



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## Introduction

Memory Cafes are designed to reduce isolation, encourage and support people with dementia and their families, and provide meaningful activities for people who are experiencing memory loss<sup>1</sup>. In order to help meet the growing need in the Plymouth area for support groups for people with a dementia diagnosis, the Alzheimer's Society, working with The Plymouth Drake Foundation, launched a new Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe in the city in October 2013. Its purpose was to provide a specific service where armed forces veterans could share military experiences, and dementia support could be made available for ex-service men and women living with dementia.

The Alzheimer's Society in Plymouth had been approached by the Chairman and the Chief Executive of the Plymouth Drake Foundation, requesting that the Society provide this service. They were aware that the Society currently facilitates a similar group for ex-service personnel in Portsmouth, 'Kitbags and Berets'<sup>2</sup>, which has proved very successful. Alzheimer's Society staff facilitating existing Memory Cafes, Singing for the Brain groups, and the Peer Support group in Plymouth had also reported that about a third of people attending were ex-service personnel, many of whom had indicated that they would welcome a service tailor made for them. They felt that their needs for peer support are potentially more profound than most due to the nature of their life experiences.

Commodore Graeme Little, commander of Devonport Naval Base, opened the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2013. He addressed service users, families and other guests at the opening: "I am delighted and honoured to open the Memory Cafe – the first of its kind in the UK. This demonstrates the strong links the city has with the Navy and the strong bonds the Navy has with the city and Naval veterans. This is another part of the city's commitment to dementia awareness and care and to the Armed Forces Covenant<sup>3</sup> which shows why the Services matter to the city and the city matters to the Services".<sup>4</sup>

The Memory Cafe is open fortnightly on alternate Tuesdays from 14.00 to 16.00. It is located at the Royal Naval Crownhill Family Centre and is run by the Alzheimer's Society Group Coordinator, supported by a team of volunteers.

The Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe generally runs to the following formula:

1	Meet and greet
2	Ice breaker - quiz/craft/talk/singing
3	Information exchange
4	Refreshments
5	Physical activities – boccia/quoits etc.
6	Leave and further information exchange

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Marlow, Group Support Coordinator, Veterans Cafe Launch Welcome Speech 22.10.2013

<sup>2</sup> Alzheimer's Society Kitbags and Berets Andover. Available at [http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/custom\\_scripts/services.php?serviceCode=23440&branchCode=14155&areaB C=WECW](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/custom_scripts/services.php?serviceCode=23440&branchCode=14155&areaB C=WECW)

<sup>3</sup> Plymouth City Council (2012) Plymouth Armed Forces Community Covenant. Available at: [http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/plymouth\\_armed\\_forces\\_community\\_covenant.pdf](http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/plymouth_armed_forces_community_covenant.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Plymouth Herald 23.10.2013. Available at: <http://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/Navy-opens-caf-military-veterans/story-19975811-detail/story.html>

## **1. Methodology**

Twenty eight individual interviews lasting approximately 15 - 20 minutes each were undertaken over six sessions at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe between February and May 2014 with Alzheimer's Society staff, volunteers, family and agency carers and service users as shown in the tables below:

Interviewees	Number
Staff	5
Volunteers	6
Family carers	8
Agency carers	2
Service users	7

### **1.1 Staff**

Five interviews with staff were undertaken as follows:

Interviewees	Number
Dementia Support Manager	1
Group Coordinator	1
Dementia Support Workers (DSWs)	3

The three Dementia Support Workers (DSWs) who were interviewed were covering for the Group Support Coordinator whilst a new post holder was being recruited. Staff also shared various planning documents, press releases, attendance data and the feedback they had received via the Comments Book since the launch of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe.

### **1.2 Volunteers**

Six interviews were undertaken as follows:

Interviewees	Number	Gender	Age
Veteran Partner	1	F	30s
Serving Naval Officer	1	M	30s
Ex Navy	1	M	70s
Ex Army	1	M	70s
Ex Army	1	F	60s
Student	1	F	20s

Four of the six volunteers interviewed had a forces background, whilst one was the partner of a veteran and the other an Occupational Therapy student. One volunteer was currently serving in the Royal Navy. Half the volunteers interviewed were female and half male. Volunteers ranged in age from early 20s to 70s.

### **1.3 Service users**

Seven interviews were undertaken as follows:

Interviewees	Number	Gender	Age	Carer
Ex Navy	1	M	60s	Agency
Ex Army	1	M	80s	Comes on their own
Ex RAF	1	M	70s	Partner
Ex Army/Navy	1	M	70s	Partner
Ex Navy	2	M	80s	Partner
Ex Army	1	M	70s	Agency

Three of the seven service users were ex Navy, whilst two were ex Army, one ex RAF and one ex Army/Navy. Veterans ranged in age from late 60s to late 80s. Four of the seven came to the Memory Cafe with their partners, whilst two came with agency carers and one came on his own. Four attended other Alzheimer's Society services, whilst this was the first Memory Cafe attended by the other three veterans.

### **1.4 Carers**

Ten interviews were undertaken as follows:

Interviewees	Carer Gender	Carer Age	Service User	Service User Age	Service User Interviewed
Partner	Female	70s	Ex Army	80s	No
Partner (Ex Navy)	Male	70s	-	70s	No
Partner	Female	80s	Ex Navy	80s	No
Partner	Female	60s	Ex RAF	70s	Yes
Partner	Female	60s	Ex Army/Navy	70s	Yes
Partner	Female	80s	Ex Navy	80s	Yes
Partner	Female	70s	Ex Navy	80s	Yes
Partner	Female	60s	Ex Navy	80s	No
Agency (Ex Navy)	Male	50s	Ex Navy	60s	Yes
Agency	Male	20s	Ex Army	70s	Yes

Seven of the eight family carers interviewed were female, while the two agency carers were both male. The family carers ranged in age from late 60s through to early 80s. Three of the eight family carers attended other Alzheimer's Society services as did one of the agency carers, whilst this was the first Memory Cafe attended by the other five family carers and by the other agency carer.

## **2. Data Analysis**

The qualitative data obtained from the twenty eight semi-structured interviews and from the various documents received were analysed, and the following themes were identified:

### **2.1 Information about the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe**

Family carers learned of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe in a variety of ways. Three of the eight family carers already attended other Alzheimer's Society groups and learned about the new Cafe at these groups, whilst two carers who had been in touch with a DSW

(Dementia Support Worker) found out about it through those workers. One family carer learned of the Cafe by reading an article in the Herald newspaper, another via a leaflet they had picked up whilst shopping at Transit Way in Plymouth, and another through a newsletter from the British Korean Veterans Association.

One of the agency carers stated that his client and their partner had found out about the Cafe through the Plymouth Parkinson's Support group and the other agency carer indicated that his client and their partner heard about it while attending other Alzheimer's Society groups.

## **2.2 Building the group**

Alzheimer's Society staff responsible for coordinating the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe all held the view that the group gelled quickly because the members had a military background which fosters peer support, and this in turn stimulates conversation and socialising in the safe environment of the Cafe. The Dementia Support Manager said: *You've got to bear in mind that a lot of these ladies and gents have signed the Official Secrets Act and that's very very important to them so from their point of view that still stands and there are only certain environments where it is ok to talk about this stuff and it's almost like having permission without someone saying you have permission to talk about this. It's almost like an unwritten, ok here I can talk about this stuff."*

The Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe staff were very positive about the speed with which the group became established and the following quotes are representative of those they made: *"The group built cohesion very quickly because of people having a common personal history", "The Vets Cafe has a good buzz, nice group which gets on well and they enjoy the fun and competitive games" and "the sports activities replicate R & R time in the military – very enjoyable".* Alzheimer's Society staff also highlighted the contribution made by volunteers in terms of the group gelling so quickly: *"The Veteran's Cafe is friendlier; it reaches the men and the involvement of the ex forces volunteers enables this" and "Most of the volunteers are Veterans which stimulates conversations with the Vets who attend".*

Volunteers at the Cafe also expressed the view that having an armed forces theme enabled the group to come together swiftly. One volunteer observed: *"The Vets see themselves as a band of brothers and the Cafe rekindles their candles because it is interactive and they chat".* Several commented that having volunteers at the Cafe, the majority of whom were themselves veterans, also helped the group to gel quickly and efficiently. One volunteer commented insightfully: *"Volunteers with a forces background are helpful because they are aware of military culture and hierarchy whilst understanding that everyone has an important role to play".* Several volunteers felt that the presence of a current serving member of the armed forces was instrumental in helping the group to come together successfully. One volunteer commented *"The CPO immerses himself with the group which makes a big difference to them".*

Family carers considered that the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe got off to a flying start because their spouses engaged quickly in the various group activities. This was because the activities had a military focus, which in turn stimulated conversation between the people with dementia, their carers, the volunteers and Alzheimer's staff who were coordinating the sessions. One family carer commented: *"Mixing with people with different forces*

*backgrounds is good for conversation – it's easier to talk because of common histories", whilst another said 'The Vets Cafe is a stimulus for friendships amongst the men who attend'.*

Service users attending the Cafe indicated that they had been able to settle into the group very easily because there was an immediate sense of camaraderie, generated by talking to others who had served their country. A quote from the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe Comments Book is insightful: *"Lovely afternoon, thanks Frances you're doing a great job"*. Service users said that the new Cafe was very sociable. One service user commented *"I like to come here and see friends and chat about days in the army"* whilst another said *"I particularly enjoy talking to the serving officers who come to the Cafe"*.

## **2.3 Benefits for service users of attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe**

### **2.3.1 Current service users**

Alzheimer's Society staff responsible for coordinating the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe observed that whilst current service users already benefitted from attending other Alzheimer's Memory Cafes and groups, they nevertheless gained additional opportunities for social interaction and involvement in stimulating activities at what one staff member described as 'a subject specific cafe'. One of the Dementia Support Workers (DSWs) covering for the Group Coordinator commented that at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe: *"the emphasis is on the male with dementia and not their carer and here they can express themselves more"*, whilst another DSW observed: *"there is a good buzz compared to other Memory Cafes with a higher percentage of men attending the new Cafe compared to other ones"*.

One member of the Alzheimer's Society staff commented that *"by attending the Veterans Cafe service users' military experiences have been rekindled and in turn that stimulates their brains"*. One DSW provided the following insight into the benefits of attending the Cafe for one particular service user: *"There is one particular vet who attends all the services with his wife and doesn't ever say very much, doesn't very much enter into anything, he never seems distressed or anything, but at the Veterans Café and he is ex service himself, ex officer...and suddenly I turn round and he was holding a conversation with another person which was brilliant to see"*.

Alzheimer's staff were clear that current service users benefitted from being able to converse with others with a forces background, and from reminiscing and sharing their military experiences, which in turn reduced the social isolation that many of them experienced. The Dementia Support Manager commented: *"I can appreciate that a lot of people who have previously served in any of the three services feel that element of difficulty about talking about their days during war time or even through police action time to somebody who they would maybe see as a layman, a civilian about their forces days and therefore being able to attend a Memory Cafe where people are coming from a similar background, not necessarily exactly the same service, you know it might be somebody who is ex army talking to somebody who is ex navy but the experiences are similar"*.

Staff also suggested there is an understanding at the Cafe that some of the veterans' experiences may have been challenging, and their memories might be sad or even traumatic because of the loss of former comrades. Given this context a 'virtual safety net' underpins

the Cafe and as one member of staff stated, the veterans “*know that they are in a room full of people who have had the same experiences as them which is not necessarily something that they would feel comfortable doing in a Memory Cafe with how they would refer to it as civilians*”.

The Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe staff also suggested that attendance at the Cafe appeared to boost service users’ moods by rekindling their pride in having served their country, which in turn improved their psychological wellbeing. The previous Group Coordinator commented: “*It is stimulating talking to people with a similar background*” and “*it is good to chat to other men – someone different to talk to and all the volunteers are veterans which stimulates conversations*”. Staff also indicated that they had noticed improvements in some of the service users’ physical wellbeing as they became more mobile and acquired greater manual dexterity through playing boccia and quoits.

The Cafe volunteers said that they had seen current Alzheimer’s Society service users benefit from the new cafe by interacting with each other, with their carers, and with the volunteers and staff at the group. Volunteers observed that the service users enjoy the Cafe and that the atmosphere there was one of ‘chatter and laughter’. Two volunteers noted that one of the service users who attends the Veterans Cafe on his own benefits markedly from socialising with the armed forces volunteer, who is instrumental in initiating and involving service users and carers in discussions. One volunteer suggested that “*the magic ingredient is the emphasis on older veterans and their carers having an afternoon out rather than on having a dementia label*”. Another volunteer said it was clear that the service users enjoyed the Cafe because: “*they keep coming back!*”

The three family carers who were already attending Alzheimer’s groups with their partners prior to the opening of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe were clear that, whilst their spouses benefitted from attending all the Alzheimer’s Society groups in Plymouth, the new group had nevertheless provided additional benefits. Family carers considered that their partners were less passive and more communicative and socially interactive at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe than at other groups. One carer commented: “*It’s easier for him to talk because activities focus on shared memories*”, whilst another stated ‘*Men speak more here to each other*’. Family carers also mentioned that their spouses had made new friends since attending the Cafe; the following comment is representative: “*My husband now has an affinity with ‘B’, which gives ‘B’ a sense of value – both their faces light up when they see each other here*”.

The agency carer who was already attending Alzheimer’s Society groups with his client prior to the opening of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe considered that the new Cafe had improved his client’s wellbeing: “*He participates more in this Cafe – it gives him his self respect back and builds his esteem*”. The agency carer also observed that his client was “*very proud to come here as an ex soldier, he puts on a smart blazer and badge and he talks about what he has learnt at the Veterans Cafe afterwards – he doesn’t do this as much after attending other groups*”.

The four service users who were already attending Alzheimer’s Society groups prior to the opening of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe indicated that they whilst they liked attending all the different groups, they found the new one particularly sociable. One service user commented: “*I like this one as I can chat and reminisce with other people who have*

*been in the forces”, whilst another said “Here there are more men to talk to and things to look at and have a chat about”. A further service user who had been attending other groups for several years suggested that it was easier to talk and engage with men at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe because of their shared history: “I’ve taken in books and magazines about World War Two and we’ve discussed these and others have borrowed them”. One service user made this complimentary comment: “It’s very good, educational and stimulates the brain and I wouldn’t miss it because we are a band of brothers – coming here gives us a good sense of worth”. One of the service users also added in the Comments Book: “Very welcoming and enjoyable and thanks for all work you put into it”.*

### **2.3.2 New service users**

Alzheimer’s Society staff working at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe indicated that service users who until recently hadn’t used any Memory Cafes or groups were clearly benefitting from their attendance; they were mixing well with other members of the group, reminiscing and partaking where possible in the various quizzes and physical activities. The Dementia Support Manager mentioned that *“they had seen a ‘ripple effect’, with reluctant users coming into the Veterans Cafe, feeling nurtured and then going on to Singing for the Brain or accessing the Dementia Support Service to actually get extra support”.*

Volunteers observed that the group was very welcoming and that new service users soon appeared to be enjoying the social atmosphere of the group. The competitive yet supportive nature of the physical activities for both service users and carers generated, according to one volunteer *“a lot of laughter and discussions as well as gentle exercise”.* Two volunteers suggested that the physical activities were particularly beneficial for a couple of the new service users who had hearing and/or speech difficulties and were less able to participate in the quizzes etc.

For five family carers, attendance at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe was their first experience of attending a group for people with dementia and/or their carers. Four female family carers had previously been unable to persuade their partner to attend a group, but having been to the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe they were now either attending or planning to attend other group activities in the city. Three family carers suggested that their partners felt there was a stigma in going to a Memory Cafe and consequently they had been reluctant to attend. However, the carers had managed to encourage their partners to attend by focussing on the opportunity to socialise with other veterans. The male family carer, a veteran himself, was also optimistic that, having attended the Veterans Cafe with his wife (a non veteran) who had enjoyed her visits, they might be able to attend other group and day opportunities in the near future.

The family carers were very positive about attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe and said that their spouses had benefitted from talking and socialising with others from similar military backgrounds, and through participating in the physical activities (boccia/quoits) run by the volunteers. One family carer commented that her partner *“looks forward to the cafe and enjoys it – especially the company of those with similar histories”,* whilst another said *“coming here has made a big difference – we wish it was every week because it is the highlight of our week”.* Another carer said that she liked the ways in which activities at the group provided opportunities to contrast life in the armed forces today with the past. Another carer suggested that the historic inter-forces rivalry was a useful catalyst for conversation, giving everyone *‘a good laugh!’*



One agency carer, himself a veteran, stated that he and his client had never attended a Memory Cafe until the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe was opened, and that they were now regular attendees. He said that his client really enjoys himself at the Cafe, socialising with others with a forces background and taking part in the physical activities. He added: *"I'm really glad that 'D' enjoys coming here – it would be great if this Cafe was weekly"*.

The three new service users were all very positive about the group. In particular they all mentioned that by coming to the group they got out of their houses and socialised with other like minded people. One service user commented: *"Coming here gets me out of the house and it improves my mental and physical health because I talk to others as well as play games"*, whilst another service user said that going to the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe has *"given me something to look forward to and build up my confidence"*. Two service users mentioned that having enjoyed the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe they were now going to other Memory Cafes. However one did say *"I still like the Veterans Cafe best cos it's easier to chat with others who've served their country"*.

## **2.4 Benefits for carers of attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe**

### **2.4.1 Carers already attending community services for people with dementia and their carers**

Alzheimer's Society staff responsible for coordinating the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe stated that whilst carers already benefitted from attending other Alzheimer's groups, the new Cafe nevertheless gave them the opportunity to reminisce alongside their partners and to socialise with other female carers who had been wives of those serving in the armed forces. One member of staff suggested that the female carers attending the Cafe benefitted from being with other ex forces wives and said *"there is that camaraderie – this is what it was like at home whilst Mr was serving, bringing up children on their own even though they were married and there is a massive culture to living in that sort of environment"*.

The Dementia Support Manager indicated that the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe provided an extra support mechanism for carers of people with dementia who had been in the forces, when their partners had difficult days because of some of their negative military memories. She pointed out that *"there can be people who are having hallucinations that can be very real that are around their past experiences, and therefore for the carer there is that ability to not feel like you're on your own"*.

The Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe volunteers suggested that the existing carers benefitted from their attendance at the new Cafe because they were able to socialise with others whose former and current lives were similar, which enabled conversation to flow easily and helped to nurture a culture of 'mutual support'.

The three family carers who had attended Alzheimer's Society groups in Plymouth with their partners prior to the opening of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe had already derived many benefits from participating in these groups. Benefits included increased social and support networks and access to information and advice, all of which had helped them in their role as carers. However they had also gained some new or additional benefits from attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe, including enjoying time spent reminiscing with their partners and others whose lives had taken similar paths. One carer mentioned that she felt wives were able to enjoy the new cafe more and relax because their husbands

quickly engaged in the group activities. This was because they had a military focus, whereas at other Memory Cafes *“much of their time was spent prompting their husbands, so no respite for them”*. The following quotes from carers are indicative of those they made: *“Very happy group, lovely company”* and *“The best Memory Cafe we go to”*.

The agency carer who was already attending Alzheimer’s Society groups with his client prior to the opening of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe indicated that the days when he and his client go to the new Memory Cafe are some of the best days they have together, because his client always wants to attend and because he is so communicative afterwards.

#### **2.4.2 New carers attending community services for people with dementia and their carers**

The Alzheimer’s Society staff working at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe indicated that carers who until recently had not used any Memory Cafes or groups were clearly benefitting from their attendance at the Cafe, because they were now socialising with others in a similar situation and were receiving information and advice to support them in their role as carers. One member of staff suggested that undertaking activities alongside their partners and having fun together increased the carer’s sense of wellbeing.

Volunteers at the Cafe revealed that carers who were new to the group often expressed their relief at finding a welcoming place where they and their partner could go, and they highlighted the sense of camaraderie which enabled them to socialise with people in a similar situation. One volunteer stated that one of the new carers had told him coming to the Cafe *“had given her the opportunity to offload, pick up tips, make new, supportive friends and feel more optimistic about life”*.

The five family carers who were new to Alzheimer’s groups were unanimously positive about their experience and the benefits for them, as carers, of attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe. One carer said *“it is superbly run, the staff and volunteers work together and it’s great to have the armed forces present”* and another commented: *“they do a wonderful job here – they are really patient and caring which is helpful to you as a carer and my husband loves it”*. A further endorsement for the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe can be seen in the following quote from the Comments Book: *“Always enjoy Veterans Cafe – it’s why they keep coming back”*.

It was evident that the five family carers were less socially isolated, had made new friends and had increased their information and support networks since attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe. One carer indicated that she was very grateful for the new Memory Cafe, commenting that it had enabled her to *“Meet other carers, talking and sharing concerns and swapping suggestions”* and that she had *“built a new friendship with another carer who brings her husband”*. Another carer made a similar point: *“You meet other carers – realise you’re not alone and swop ideas”*.

Family carers also explained that since attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe they were more informed about what services were available for people with dementia and their carers in Plymouth, and also about what was happening for older people and carers in general. Family carers indicated that information was sometimes hard to come by until they came to the Cafe. One said *“by talking to other carers I find out what is going on”* and another said that by coming to the group *“I pick up loads of useful information from other*

carers and by talking to the staff and volunteers". Another family carer said "it is a pity that there is not a single directory which lists what is available in Plymouth for people with dementia and their carers".

All five family carers indicated that having attended the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe they either were, or else would consider attending Alzheimer's Society and other groups because they felt more confident that they and their partners would benefit from doing so. One family carer said: "First step for us might try other groups now", whilst another commented "this might be the start of us going to other groups and the opportunity for us to do separate things".

The agency carer who was new to attending Alzheimer's Society groups felt that his client's partner had benefitted from attending the group because it was clear to her that he enjoyed attending. It also benefitted her, because it reduced the many challenges she faced as a carer and provided her with respite for leisure and social activities. The agency carer considered that it would be beneficial if the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe took place weekly, rather than once a fortnight.

### **3.0 Emerging Issues**

#### **3.1 Promotion and Publicity**

It is emerged from the interviews undertaken with service users and carers that they had learned about the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe through a variety of sources and media. Many of the service users and carers attending the Cafe had heard about it through 'the grapevine' rather than from more formal information sources. It would appear that the role of the DSW is vital in promoting the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe to people who may be reluctant to attend a group or a Memory Cafe, and to those who have recently been diagnosed with a dementia. Ongoing publicity about the Cafe within the various ex forces organisations is also seen as useful, as are regular features in the 'Herald' newspaper and other local media.

#### **3.2 Venue and location**

The Royal Naval Crownhill Family Centre is regarded positively by those facilitating and attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe. One member of the Alzheimer's Society staff stated: "It is nicely accessible, nice kitchen, breakout space; toilets are easily accessible so from that point of view all the facilities are there". The venue is also seen as friendly, and welcoming, enabling conversations to take place readily amongst the groups of service users and carers around the tables. One family carer commented: "The Veterans Cafe has a totally different layout – much more welcoming" and a service user said 'it's more like a social club or mess here which I enjoy". The venue is also seen as spacious; two physical activities can take place concurrently, giving service users and carers a choice of physical activity options. Two family carers also liked the fact that the venue had doors which beeped when they were opened, which helped them to keep an eye on their partners who had a tendency to wander.

Service users and carers who come to the Royal Naval Family Crownhill Centre by car are positive about the plentiful and free parking at the venue, which they see as a bonus. Those who attend who don't have cars or who can no longer drive do however face a few

challenges in getting to the Cafe. One volunteer commented *"It's a bit of a walk to the bus stops with lots of subways if you catch the bus and this time of year if it's a bit dark and it could be a bit intimidating...if you've lost your cognition"*. A few service users and carers who are unable to use the bus and no longer have a car had to get taxis to the venue which is expensive. One of the DSWs mentioned that she knew of a couple who wanted to attend the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe but who were unable to do so because of the logistics of public transport from Plympton. One of the family carers mentioned that she brought another carer and service user to the Cafe with her and her husband because *"it's hard for them to get here otherwise"*.

### **3.3 Frequency**

Several of the family carers, the two agency carers and most of the service users attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe suggested that they would like it to be open once a week rather than once a fortnight because they found it such a positive experience. One service user said: *"I wish it was every week because it would give me something to look forward to"*, an agency carer stated that: *"His client would like the cafe to be weekly"* and a family carer commented: *"We could do with it happening weekly and possibly in another part of the city"*.

### **3.4 Attendance**

Attendance figures collated by the Alzheimer's Society reveal that between 16 and 22 people normally attend the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe each fortnight. Only one of the current service users attending is female, while all but one of the family carers are female. Both agency carers are male. Although it is clear that there are a good number of people attending the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe, many of whom are regular attendees, it is nevertheless worth reflecting on the comment made by the previous Group Coordinator *"that there must be others out there who would benefit who we have not reached yet"* and the following comment made by a volunteer: *"We only have one female with a dementia attend so far who is the partner of a vet - must be others who might like to come"*.

### **3.5 Partnership working**

Effective partnership working has been a cornerstone in the development and operation of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe in Plymouth. Many organisations worked with the Alzheimer's Society in Plymouth on the development of the new Memory Cafe, enabling it to be launched in October 2013. This strong partnership ethos has also ensured the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe has evolved and operated successfully over the last ten months. The following comment made by a DSW is indicative of those made: *"The Veterans Cafe has a high profile and is well supported by other organisations"*.

### **3.6 Activities**

It is clear that service users and family and agency carers all appreciate the range of activities that occur at the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe. The format of an icebreaker session comprising quizzes, crafts and talks followed by information exchange, then refreshments and finishing with physical activities was viewed positively by participants. Special activities and visitors were also welcomed; as one carer wrote in the Comments

Book: *“A lovely afternoon – enjoyed the cream tea”* and another *“A good afternoon, especially with the dog”*.

Two family carers made suggestions in the Comments Book about having ‘sing songs’ at the Cafe: *“would like a sing song of war time songs”*, whilst another said *“A sing song would be good – not necessarily wartime as we are getting younger!”* However, it was also apparent from the Comments Book that singing was not popular with everyone: *“We liked the games at the end – not so much the sing-along”*. Another carer made the following point: *“Lovely afternoon but a carer only session would be helpful!”*

Staff and volunteers at the Cafe were generally positive about the activities that took place. However they did highlight a number of challenges they face in terms of providing the activities on offer. Designing quizzes which could be answered by veterans from different military backgrounds and ranks was one such challenge. However, this was also seen as an opportunity for inter service and rank banter, competition and humour. Staff also pointed out that they needed to be sensitive to the varying needs and abilities of the service users when creating quizzes and activities.

A second challenge identified was balancing the needs of service users and carers in some of the activities. One family carer mentioned in the Comments Book: *“the talk was good for the carer but not so much for the cared for, could of done with being 15 mins”*. A DSW stated: *“The challenge is finding something they can both participate in and enjoy”*, whilst a volunteer made a similar point: *“Activities need to be sensitive to the abilities of people aimed at and attending”*. Another volunteer raised a different challenge, stating that *“some carers are too protective and talk over their partners”*. The Dementia Support Manager indicated that *“what we do try and do is ensure that our activities are at, are pitched at a level that is appropriate, but you have to take into consideration that each person with dementia is at, attending is at a different level of ability, so I think it’s about being flexible in your approach especially when you are talking about activities when you are asking someone to access their memory”*.

Staff highlighted two particular issues regarding the activities. The first concerned the length of time it took to research material for inclusion in the military quizzes. As a member of staff pointed out *“The different forces have different histories and cultures as well as some similarities and this has to be reflected in what we do”*. An entry in the Comments Book also suggested that some of the service users and carers were unfamiliar with some of the terminology used in a quiz because it related to United States rather than United Kingdom Service Personnel. The second issue concerned the capacity to offer a greater variety of physical activities, which was likely to necessitate additional funding.

Both staff and volunteers at the Cafe suggested that there will need to be plenty of new activities to keep it fresh as it develops and they offered many suggestions as to how this might be achieved. One volunteer proposed that *“it would be useful to make a calendar of various military events/anniversaries to help plan activities etc. e.g. like the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D Day, 100 years since the start of World War 1 etc.”* Another volunteer suggested: *“maybe do talks with a military theme – using u tube etc to spark memories and discussions”* and another said we should *“organise a trip to the Naval Heritage Centre at the Naval Base”*. A member of staff thought that it would be good to *“respond to requests from service users and carers and to see the Veterans Cafe evolving to reflect this”*.

### **3.7 Volunteers**

It is evident that the volunteers make a significant contribution to the successful operation of the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe. One DSW highlighted the invaluable role they play: *“They welcome new people, they sit down on the different tables and help with the quizzes and they take the lead and are socialising”*. The volunteers are a valuable resource and many of them, as veterans themselves, have a particular empathy with the service users. It also very clear that the volunteers have knowledge and skills which could be harnessed to develop the Cafe further. The Dementia Support Manager stated: *“I think we need to nurture them to come up with ideas of the sorts of activities that we think we could do? Who could we access to maybe get memorabilia which we could use as a focus for reminiscence etc”*.

However, many of the volunteers have other commitments and both they themselves and the Alzheimer’s Society staff indicated that there have been a few occasions when volunteer numbers have been down, and DSWs have had to pitch in to make up the numbers. It seems likely that there will always be a need to recruit new volunteers for the Cafe, and in particular volunteers with a military or service background, to ensure that each session can be supported effectively.

### **4.0 Conclusion and recommendations**

It is clear from the interviews with the various stakeholders that the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe has reduced isolation, provided support and encouragement for people with dementia and their families, and offered stimulating and meaningful activities for people who are experiencing memory loss. It has helped ex-service personnel with dementia to remain living well with their dementia in the community.

The partnership working which enabled the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe to be developed and which sustains it today should be celebrated, because it has clearly benefitted both those veterans who were already attending existing Memory Cafes and groups and those who are new attendees. This is also true for their respective family and agency carers.

Given the benefits for service users and carers of attending the Cafe it would be worthwhile to consider options not only for sustaining it at its current level of operation but also for extending the service, for example by opening it on a weekly basis or by running a second such Cafe at a different location in the city. An annual city wide armed forces veterans’ health needs analysis such as that conducted by Public Health Southampton<sup>5</sup> could provide a valuable insight into the prevalence of dementia within the Ex-Service Personnel population in Plymouth. This would also assist in establishing future levels of demand for and the planning of such services in the city.

Whatever decisions are taken regarding the above, there will remain an ongoing need to promote and publicise the Ex-Service Personnel Memory Cafe/s. Key challenges are generating information materials which overcome the stigma often attached to groups for people with dementia and their carers, and ensuring that this information is received by the

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<sup>5</sup> Southampton City Council (2012) Veterans’ Health Needs Assessment Southampton. Available at: <http://www.publichealth.southampton.gov.uk/Images/Veterans'%20Needs%20Assessment%20May'12.pdf>

'harder to reach' groups within the veterans population in Plymouth. Outreach activities and community events across the city should continue to be held regularly in order to engage those veterans who may be vulnerable to social exclusion.

The role of the Group Coordinator, the Dementia Support Workers, the Memory Service, the Commander of Devonport Naval Base, the Royal British Legion and Veterans organisations in promoting and sustaining the Cafe will continue to be essential. Similarly it should be recognised that, due in part to the age profile of the volunteers and the fact that many have other commitments, there is likely to be an ongoing need to recruit and develop new volunteers. Newly retired veterans and students from health and social care courses would enrich the mix. Finally, given that the service users are an evolving and heterogeneous group, there will also be an ongoing need to ensure that group activities are reviewed regularly and kept fresh. Opportunities for engaging with military cadet organisations and schools could be explored to develop intergenerational activities.