

# The Veterans Hearing Fund



BY DAWN P BRAMHAM

**Dawn Bramham** introduces us to the newly launched Veterans Hearing Fund (VHF). This organisation aims to improve the lives of military personnel with hearing loss by providing access to technologies, services and bespoke rehabilitation that are not routinely available via the National Health Service.

The launch of the Veterans Hearing Fund (VHF) by the Royal British Legion (RBL) at the 2015 BAA conference was a quiet landmark in the care and wellbeing of our military personnel. The Fund is an opportunity to provide those who have lost hearing in the course of their service to be supported in minimising the impact hearing loss has on their lives. All audiological and ENT professionals need to be aware of its existence and promote the accessibility to those eligible.

## Hearing loss and military service

For many service personnel and veterans, leaving service with an associated hearing difficulty seems to be an accepted result of forces life. Almost all who enlist will be exposed to high levels of noise, from small arms fire, engines, and in some circumstances, blast noise exposure. As a result, there is an over three-fold likelihood of hearing loss for military personnel compared to the general population.

As hearing professionals, we all know how hearing difficulty can have a profound effect on an individual, and in turn the relationships with family, friends and those around them. Add to this the complexity of mental health issues associated with being involved in conflict, and returning to work outside of the forces environment, and those affected are faced with a challenging time.

## Remit of VHF

As a result of campaigning and the Lost Voices report published by the Royal British Legion in 2014, the UK Government committed to a five year, £13 million funding for the Veterans Medical Funds, generated from Libor fines. This fund was split into two parts, mobility (Veterans Mobility Fund –VMF) and hearing (Veterans Hearing Fund – VHF) the main objective of VHF is to minimise disadvantage and make everyday life easier for veterans suffering with hearing difficulties. VHF aims to provide hearing instruments, peripherals and therapies. This can include in the ear (ITE) and receiver in the ear (RITE) aids, as well as

standard behind the ear (BTE) aids, Bluetooth streamers to link hearing aids to household items and rehabilitation support such as auditory training support, lip-reading and listening skills programmes to help veterans engage more confidently in social situations. VHF will provide technology and therapies that are not typically available through statutory services, such as the NHS. It should be noted that surgical interventions, such as cochlear implants or implanted bone conduction devices, are expected to be undertaken within the NHS, and are outside of the scope of the fund.

Whilst it is anticipated that the majority of applications will be from within the UK, the fund is also available to overseas personnel. In terms of numbers of eligible individuals, and applications, it is a somewhat unknown entity – there is no clear data on how many applications to expect, or indeed how many are eligible. This in turn gives the RBL a unique opportunity, to collate this information, and build a comprehensive picture of hearing loss within the armed forces.

## Our role

To audiologists, NHS and commercial, this is an amazing opportunity to offer their clients the best care. This can mean additional “peripherals” such as Bluetooth streamers, connectivity options and personalised care packages, i.e. not just ITE and the most expensive device, but a tailored approach. If your client would benefit from hearing therapy, lip reading, or additional technology, all options can be considered. The intention is to improve the wellbeing of the client and improve their ability to engage within social and employment situations that otherwise may be challenging.

It is acknowledged that this is a level of care above that provided via the NHS. However, there is strong technology within the NHS that can also be complemented by additional technology, and I would advocate that NHS audiology services publicise this fund widely, as there are a great number of younger personnel, as well as older, who previously

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would not have been considered as eligible by audiologists. Similarly, the commercial sector has an important role in promoting access to the fund. As part of our history, evidence of military service should be identified and the fund can be discussed as part of any needs assessment.

**Application process**

Both VHF and VMF have a two stage application process. The first stage seeks to establish eligibility. Applicants for VHF are required to submit their service medical records including their audiometry data. If however the applicant is in receipt of a War Disablement Pension or received an Armed Forces Compensation Scheme award as a result of their hearing impairment, then they can submit evidence of this for their eligibility. Applicants for VMF are required to submit evidence of their War Pension or Armed Forces Compensation Scheme Award. The second stage application will be completed and submitted by the applicant’s clinician in conjunction with the applicant. Applications will then be considered by the Veterans Medical

Funds Advisory Panel. Applicants will be notified of the decision made by the Royal British Legion’s Grants department.

The Advisory Panel (of which I am a member) has recently met for the first time. During this meeting, we reviewed a range of applications, including those from overseas. Whilst the vast majority sat within the commercial sector, this is not entirely unexpected as this was historically where such War Pension funded care was provided. It is anticipated that the process of reviewing applications will be timely, and that a great deal of the work will now be conducted electronically.

More details about the Veterans Medical Funds, the application process and the application forms are on The Royal British Legions website; <http://www.rbl.org.uk/vmf>  
 The Legion offers services to assist service personnel, veterans and their dependants with claiming disability benefits, managing their finances, accessing military compensation, adapting their homes, and finding jobs through online training and employment resource. They offer support for carers, including seaside respite breaks, run six care homes, and offer immediate needs grants and other forms of help for those in crisis.



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**Declaration of Competing Interests:**  
None declared.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dawn Bramham qualified as an audiologist in 1989, and has worked within adult audiology, with a specific interest in vestibular assessment and management since then. She became Head of Service in 1994, and completed her MSc in 2001. She is also Chair of the BAA Audiology Supplies Group – an independent group of audiologists who evaluate technology and instruments for provision to the NHS.