

Op NOVA Service Visit 2024: Life-changing support for veterans in the justice system
24.07.24, Kent Police Training College, Coverdale Avenue, ME18 9DR

Keynote Speaker Summary: Lived Experience

Delivered by: Anthony Muckell and Nicholas Newell

Anthony Muckell, NHS Armed Forces Patient and Public Voice Group.

Anthony opened the lived experience session with an account of his experience as a veteran in the justice system before services such as Op NOVA were nationally available. His journey included a 20 week custodial sentence (of which he served 10 weeks) and a stay in a psychiatric hospital, but his underlying health issues were not addressed until he later came into contact with Op COURAGE, the specialist mental health service for veterans.

For Anthony, accessing specialist support was life-changing, and he firmly believes that had Op NOVA been there at the start of his journey through the justice system, his experience would have been vastly different.

Like many veterans, Anthony's journey through the justice system was rooted in his undiagnosed PTSD and wider challenges in transitioning into civilian life. He also felt disengaged from mainstream civilian support services and was deeply reluctant to disclose his service history, fearing that custodial and healthcare staff would not understand, and that disclosure could potentially put him at risk from peers in custody.

"My friends had told me not to tell anyone I had served. Just keep your head down and mouth shut, they said... I didn't even disclose to the prison's Veteran Champion as I didn't see the point ... I felt I had nobody in my corner. I had no one to say this is how it works, this is what you need to do." Anthony's insights into his reluctance to disclose have vital lessons for the health and justice sectors. It is important to understand that veterans often have deeply rooted feelings of shame, anxiety and fear that prevent them from initially disclosing their Service history.

Op NOVA's experience indicates that veterans are far more likely to be forthcoming if questions about their service history are substantiated with a qualifying statement such as 'because there is specialist support available to veterans'.

“I think had Op NOVA been available to me ... if someone had been there to say we understand you are a veteran, we know you have mental health issues, we are going to connect you with Op COURAGE rather than a mainstream civilian service ... I may not have made the two attempts on my life that ultimately brought me into contact with the justice system.”

Anthony has applied his lived experience to benefit other veterans in the health and justice sectors. As an active and valued representative of the NHS Armed Forces Patient and Public Voice Group, he has used his lived experience to shape the NHS Op services, ensuring that the services are designed to fit the needs of the Armed Forces.

Notably, Anthony has been the driving force behind the NHS ‘Say You Served’ campaign and he continues to shape and advocate for services that promote veteran health and wellbeing. His work with Op NOVA has been life-changing for both himself and the veterans the service supports. Through sharing his experiences and working with the Op NOVA teams, police, custody, and probation teams are able to understand and respond to veterans in their care with empathy and understanding, ensuring that more veterans feel enabled to refer to the life-changing and life-saving support from Op NOVA.

“Through my work with police, I’ve come to realise that many are veterans themselves ... and even those who aren’t veterans will take the time to understand us. The most important thing is that they care about veterans and want to help us ... and that’s the message we need to get out to veterans in custody.”

Op NOVA would like to acknowledge and thank Anthony for his significant work in shaping and enhancing the service.

Nicholas Newell

Nicholas’s journey through the justice system highlights the value of Op NOVA’s specialist support. Like many veterans, Nicholas felt a reluctance to ask for help.

Medically discharged in 2005, Nicholas felt he had lost a service career that he loved and was incredibly proud of. He felt underprepared for the sudden transition to civilian life and overwhelmed by feelings of shame and anger.

“From a very young age, I knew I wanted to join the Army. My grandfather served in the Navy and my uncle was in the Paras. Military life was in my blood. I never got to serve as long as I wanted to ... I never got a sense of closure. I felt a loss of pride, stability, identity and community.”

Consequently, Nicholas's mental health spiralled, he fell into addiction and ultimately came into contact with the justice system. Prior to being arrested, Nicholas had been diagnosed with complex PTSD and ADHD by his community GP, but the support didn't resonate, and he wasn't ready to accept help.

"I used drugs and alcohol every day to try and stop the memories from when I served. I thought self-medication was the answer and I kept telling everyone I was OK."

Nicholas was ultimately arrested and referred to Op NOVA, which connected him with specialist caseworkers who understood his experiences.

At first, Nicholas was reluctant to engage with Op NOVA, but was aware that it was there as a specialist support system for veterans in the justice system.

"When I asked for help, it was there. It was on my doorstep. My caseworkers were invested in me ... when I relapsed, they were there regardless of the hour. They knew the justice system and helped me to realise the changes I needed to make to show the courts that I had better rehabilitation systems in place than the prison service could provide."

Op NOVA provided life-changing support to both Nicholas and his family, helping him navigate his court proceedings and address his mental health and addiction issues before ultimately supporting him to engage with training and employment. Nicholas is currently about to begin an HGV license, coordinated and funded through a collaboration with Op NOVA and other military charities.

"I'm still very proud to have served. I loved being in the Army. I'll never shy away from that. Op NOVA has helped reengage me with the community I love ... a few years ago, I wouldn't have dreamt that would be possible."

Nicholas is an exceptional example of the resilience that characterises the veteran community. He actively participates in many veteran community groups, volunteers as a welfare co-ordinator at a veteran charity and is driven to 'give back' to the veteran community by sharing his experiences with veterans in the justice system.

Op NOVA would like to acknowledge and thank Nicholas for his contribution to the OP NOVA Service Visit and his ongoing peer support to current and future Op NOVA clients.

Referral to the Op NOVA Support Team:

Freephone: 0800 9177 299

Monday to Friday: 8am – 8pm | Saturday: 8am – 2pm

Online referral form:

www.forcesemployment.org.uk/opnovareferral

Email: opnova@forcesemployment.org.uk

Secure Email: opnova@forcesemployment.cjsm.net

