



‘I have no idea what impact this will have on veteran suicides. It just doesn’t bear thinking about’

FOR Tony Wright, head of Forward Assist, a North East-based charity which helps forces veterans struggling to cope with society, it’s a bittersweet time.

He was chosen this week as a Point of Light, part of a new award scheme launched by the Prime Minister which recognises outstanding volunteers who are making a change in their community and inspiring others.

It is welcome acknowledgement of the success Tony’s organisation has had over the last decade. Yet most of the work is based on group therapy and support, a coming together of like-minded ‘lost’ souls, rejuvenated by the ‘esprit de corps’ missing since leaving the forces.

Due to the Government restrictions now in force, such gatherings are banned.

The repercussions for those who seek Forward Assist’s help, Tony fears, could be grim, especially with talk of social distancing and lockdown measures lasting up to six months. “Many male veterans do not

With talk of the Government lockdown lasting up to six months, a North East charity which helps veterans already struggling to cope with society fears that the isolation might push some over the edge. MIKE KELLY reports

have any emotional vocabulary and/or emotional resilience,” Tony says, “which makes talking about things difficult.”

Last November General Lord Richard Dannatt, the ex-head of the British Army, said veteran suicides have become an “epidemic of our time”.

He played a key role in the setting up of the charity Help for Heroes in 2007 and said more needs to be done to stop traumatised British soldiers killing themselves.

Military charity sources in general have expressed fears that hundreds of veterans in the UK had killed themselves in the two years leading up to Dannatt’s comments – and that was, of course, before the current lockdown.

And while they were perhaps con-

centrating on veterans of recent conflicts, Tony knows that trauma can last for decades, as they have dealt with people who have served as far back as Aden in the 1960s.

Tony said: “I have no idea what impact this will have on veteran suicides. It just doesn’t bear thinking about. The aftermath of six months plus isolation will be a huge challenge.

“I envisage more veterans will struggle with their mental health and well-being when not able to get outside and keep busy whilst being of service to others. The sooner we can get individuals tested to see if they have the virus and stay at home and not volunteer, or be tested for Covid-19 antibodies before volunteering, the better.

“This pandemic will put a massive

strain on families, resulting in family breakdown, possible domestic violence and controlling behaviours and, I guess, drug and alcohol misuse will escalate.”

Tony, from Dudley, North Tyneside, joined the Royal Marines in 1978 and was medically discharged three years later after seriously injuring his shoulder during basic training.

Following this, he faced a period of homelessness and unemployment before returning to the education system and gaining qualifications as a social worker.

His experiences inspired him to support other veterans in adjusting to civilian life, particularly those with post-traumatic stress disorder.

He set up About Turn CIC in 2009 and it later became Forward Assist,

with the mission of engaging veterans in community projects that make use of their transferable skills, providing them with new employment and education opportunities that also serve to reduce social isolation and promote physical and mental wellbeing.

Programmes include a training partnership using a decommissioned military Land Rover from the Falklands as a mobile coffee truck. The charity has also staged social and sports events like fishing, which proved particularly therapeutic.

He said one of the ironies of the present situation is that the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund has given out hundreds of thousands of pounds for group activity projects that reduce isolation and loneliness, which at present cannot be delivered.

“A fundamental rethink is needed as to how best to reallocate those funds,” said Tony.

One suggestion was adopting a