



Annex A – Studentship Application Form

Title of proposed research – Health & Wellbeing pathway
An evaluation of the ‘Surfwell’ program for promoting mental health and wellbeing among emergency service personnel: A case study of Devon and Cornwall Police force.
Your research proposal.
<p>IMPORTANT: There is a <u>strict</u> 1300-word limit, fully inclusive of everything except references. This includes all the written text, quotes, in-line citations, section headers, captions, the contents of tables and any foot-/endnotes. Each figure/graphic should be counted as equivalent to 200 words. Tables should be counted as the number of words they contain. Proposals that are found to be overlength will be rejected. Remember that if you are applying to one of our interdisciplinary programmes, a clearly articulated interdisciplinary approach should be evident.</p>
<p>1.1 Research potential</p> <p>In the United Kingdom (UK), the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected public mental health and the ability of mental health services to cope with demand (1). Emergency service workers are at increased risk of mental health disorders compared to non-emergency services personnel (2); elevated stress levels from routine work stressors and repeat exposure to trauma may increase the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), secondary traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression among police officers and staff (3-5). A recent review identified, among 40,299 UK police officers and staff surveyed, probable depression was roughly 10%, anxiety 8.5%, and PTSD roughly 4% (6). Another survey of 16,857 police officers and staff reported 20% have PTSD symptoms (7). A review of 30,878 ambulance personnel worldwide indicated prevalence rates for PTSD were 11%, depression and anxiety rates were 15%, and general psychological distress were 27% (8)</p> <p>Mental ill health is a key cause of presenteeism and absenteeism which adversely impacts occupational functioning (9), and directly impacts readiness to emergencies (6). It is recommended that emergency services support recently trauma-exposed staff (6); however, help-seeking among first responders is typically delayed due to ‘stigma’ (10) and police culture, which may inhibit open and honest discussion around mental health issues (11). In addition, the National Health Service (NHS) mental health services are not designed or sufficiently resourced to meet the needs of emergency services: long waiting times, stepped care model. Emergency services have invested in peer support, occupational health and</p>



employee health assistance programmes e.g., the Blue Light Together package (12); however, there is a need for bespoke interventions.

An emerging treatment for mental ill health, is surf therapy. Surf therapy programmes provide opportunity to take on the challenge of learning to surf and to experience surfing in a non-judgemental, supportive group (13). Surf therapy combines physical activity, exposure to nature, and peer support, all of which are reported to have beneficial effects on mental health (14-16), and specific mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety (17, 18), and PTSD (19-21).

'Surfwell' is a surf therapy, well-being initiative within the Devon and Cornwall Police force (DCP). DCP faces the highest long term (>28 days) absences due to sickness (22), with 38.4% of sickness absence due to mental health (DCP Sickness absence data, 2021). Surfwell enables police officers to attend a supervised surfing session, alongside a peer-support group talking therapy session, aiming to promote their wellbeing and health. Surf therapy research is currently limited to poor quality studies (e.g., no randomised controlled trials, small sample size) within military populations from the United States of America (U.S) (18, 23). Robust research, among the UK population, is needed to confirm the effectiveness of surf therapy and ensure generalisability of results. Furthermore, the literature has not identified any processes behind, or moderators involved in positive change; without this, data collection and analysis cannot be directed effectively. Surfwell is already established; therefore, collaboration with DCP provides a perfect opportunity for higher quality research, with experienced surf-therapy practitioners, to address gaps in the literature.

An unpublished report by the University of Exeter (2021) independently evaluated Surfwell. The report found immediate personal gains such as positive changes in mood, motivation, confidence, sense of achievement, and acceptance of mental health difficulties. Furthermore, the report cited self-reported sustained benefits (6-8 weeks) such as greater resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, and improved perception of difficulties. Although this report provides support for Surfwell, it has several limitations. Firstly, no control group was included in the study; therefore, conclusions regarding the efficacy of Surfwell cannot be drawn. Secondly, immediate benefits were measured using unvalidated questions (24). Thirdly, the sample size was small ($n=20$). Overall, the evaluation uncovered positive trends in



thoughts around Surfwell; however, well designed follow up research, using higher quality design, with quantitative and qualitative evaluation is needed to confirm the positive impact of Surfwell.

Therefore, this research aims to: (i) Work with stakeholders (DCP) to create a logic model to direct data collection and analysis towards the main parts of Surfwell (ii) Conduct a high quality randomised controlled trial investigating Surfwell's impact on mental health (iii) Conduct an evaluation, using qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate barriers and facilitators of surf therapy access, and to inform theory regarding the mechanism of action of surf therapy.

1.2 Research Design

i. Research Question

Does the Surfwell intervention lead to a sustained change in mental health among Devon and Cornwall Police officers and staff?

ii. Research Method Overview

The proposed PhD will be collaborative with DCP. Surfwell would be classed as a complex intervention by the Medical Research Council (MRC) and National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), thus the proposed research will use MRC and NIHR complex interventions research guidance (25).

iii. Ethical Issues

Ethical approval will be attained from a University of Exeter Research Ethics Committee. All research will follow the University's Ethics guidance.

Participants may demonstrate CMD's at baseline, there may be worsening of symptoms potentially leading to suicidal episodes. Therefore, this study will:

- Not deny treatment or discourage treatment seeking.



- Follow established protocols for the detection and management of suicide risk.

iv. Beneficiaries and Impact

The study will benefit individuals through a sustained improvement in mental health. This will subsequently benefit emergency services and the communities they serve. The study supports the ESRC's strategic priority for mental health research. There is potential to offer Surfwell all emergency service personnel. Additionally, Surfwell findings may be generalisable to UK military populations, since, PTSD and common mental disorders (CMD) rates are reported to be similar in UK police force and military personnel (6, 26). Within the Police, the National Police Wellbeing Service have already funded some Surfwell sessions in the wider police force.

Surfwell could be used to complement the wider Force's, health and wellbeing strategy and mental wellbeing plan. There is an existing peer support network and Surfwell has the potential to become a bespoke peer support intervention combining group support with a blue health approach to wellbeing (27). The findings will inform future wellbeing planning and policy.

In addition to the direct collaborators at DCP, external surf therapy organisations have expressed interest in the project such as 'Resurface UK' and 'Surf Therapy CIC'. Resurface UK provides surf therapy retreats specifically designed for resilience and trauma recovery. Surf therapy CIC individuals who are ex-military or emergency frontlines workers. These organisations will provide avenues for knowledge exchange and allow establishment of networks and relationships with research users; meaning this PhD will offer high potential for real societal impact outside of academia.

Word count (please complete): 1298

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