

Connecting Young Adult Service Children - Connected Forces project

June 2023

Funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust

The project

Working with the educational charity The Brightside Trust, the 'Connected Forces' project piloted the use of a 'near-to-peer' digital platform over 15 months, where young adults from Armed Forces families, including those living in areas with few Service children and in schools/colleges with few targeted support mechanisms, were able to meet with their peers, in a moderated and safe environment.

Purpose

The purpose of the pilot was to establish whether a virtual near-to-peer platform is a viable way to support young people from Armed Forces families and to understand the features that support success.

The focus of the platform was to tackle loneliness and isolation, to support young people living in areas with low populations of Service families, by creating a safe community space that was available to all, irrespective of geography.

The pilot also sought to improve understanding of the challenges young people from an Armed Forces family face whilst studying in post-16 education, to provide additional narrative about Armed Forces student experiences, a previously under-researched phase of education.

Governance

The project was overseen by a Project Delivery Group selected for their specialist expertise and connections to support the success of the project. The group provided support to the Project Manager with activities such as monitoring of the project against the Project Management Plan, disseminating project details to their expansive networks across the UK and providing ideas and advice to facilitate engagement. Project delivery group members included:

- Ministry of Defense Armed Force Families and Safeguarding
- Army Welfare Service
- Army Families Federation
- Naval Families Federation
- Royal Air Force Families Federation
- SCiP Alliance Hubs:
 - o University of Portsmouth, SCiP Alliance Southern Hub

- Harper Adams University, SCiP Alliance West-Midlands Hub
- Inspiring Choices, SCiP Alliance Yorkshire and Northeast Hub
- Forces Children Scotland, SCiP Alliance Scotland Hub
- Oxford School Improvement Team, SCiP Alliance Oxford Hub
- Oxford Brookes, Oxford Hub, SCiP Alliance Oxford Hub
- Canterbury College
- Nene Park Academy
- Fife College

Target group and approach

The project supported young people aged 16-19 from an Armed Forces families. The project engaged with 69 individuals across the project lifecycle (69% of our target). Beneficiaries included students from all nations, and all branches of the Armed Forces.

A breakdown of beneficiaries by engagement:

Activity	Numbers engaged
Platform participants	23 (82 registrations were received but only twenty-three individuals completed the sign-up process)
Webinars*	26
Focus groups	20

*A number of parents attended the second webinar which is not reflected in the numbers. A recording of the sessions has been made available on the Resources section of the SCiP Alliance website, so the engagements are likely to be much higher.

The platform design was strongly informed by young people through focus groups in July 2021 and further sessions in May 2022, as well as being informed by Brightside's significant experience of delivering targeted programmes to students of this age group. Three student ambassadors from Armed Forces backgrounds facilitated the platform chats.

The project piloted a variety of online activities for young people, responding positively to emerging opportunities to understand the best routes to engage participants. Piloted activities included:

- Peer led group chats called 'Introduce Yourself.'
- Ask the Expert
- Brightsparks careers hub
- Two webinars exploring future options for Service children, including higher education options.
- An online book club in partnership with Reading Force
- 1:1 mentoring opportunity*

*This opportunity was offered to the platform participants but was not taken up.

The planned recruitment approach of using the Alliance Hub network to identify college/6th form providers to partner with proved very challenging. A low awareness and lack of targeting of support for Armed forces students by these providers meant we were unable to secure the college investment needed to identify and support engagement with the project.

A broader recruitment approach was taken utilising the networks and connections of the steering group and SCiP Alliance allies to promote the opportunity. Promotional activities included BFBS radio, articles in all three Family Federation magazines, information on the UCAS website and Veterans Gateway. This adapted approach was successful in raising awareness of the programme to the intended cohort, but the reliance on gate keepers and the lack of direct contact with the young people made sustaining engagement with participants very challenging.

Project learning

Independent research, project evaluation and engagement with young adult Service children identified a perceived need for a safe, online spaces for 16–19-year-old Service children, to reduce isolation, support future choices and build confidence. Positive feedback from the focus groups chimed with this need, with 92% of the attendees reporting the Connected Forces platform looked how they expected it to look and 84% of the participants saying they would like to join the platform.

This perceived need did not translate into platform usage and the overall reach was lower than desired. Systemic challenges and limitations in the approach (including those necessary for security and safeguarding) made recruitment and sustained engagement challenging.

The project secured and responded directly to first-hand accounts of 16–19-year-old Service children's experiences. Refining our focus in response to these challenges allowed the pilot to gather additional learning about success factors key to improving engagement and support with this group.

Evaluation with those who did engage demonstrated the value of the approach in reducing isolation and improving future prospects. This can be seen in the participant responses in the evaluation research conducted by the Brightside Trust who developed and ran the online platform:

“I enjoyed the access I had through the platform to connect and talk to people who had had the same journey's as me and could connect with me on a level people who don't understand what it's like being in a forced family could”.

“I just enjoyed feeling normal and connected with people who could honestly share their experiences and connect with me. I was able to speak my true feelings whilst feeling understood.

“My main reason would be meeting people to share their experiences, because there's not actually very many of us in my school.”

“At first I never felt confident about university but after speaking to multiple people on the platform it had shown me actually, I have nothing to be nervous about and it's exactly the fitted path for myself and my goals.”

Given the challenges, we enhanced our attention on learning about the group's needs and synthesising learning from this pilot that can enhance future initiatives in a similar vein. A small amount of funding was repurposed to undertake an independent learning review of the project (Annex 1). This took the form of an asset-based process evaluation and was designed to collate learning from the project to help inform future work of those wishing to work with this cohort. Key learnings include:

- A need to raise awareness among post-16 providers of young people from Armed Forces families as a distinctive cohort, one that shares some characteristics with recognised vulnerable groups;
- This cohort, like their age-group peers, are typically cautious about new commitments, opportunities, and connections. They are more likely to engage with activities recommended by peers, trusted individuals from outside their family, or trusted organisations;
- Growing independence, coupled with the increased likelihood of being from a veteran family may lead to the Armed Forces element of a young person's identity feeling ancillary or historical. This increases the likelihood of complex or conflicted feelings about engaging with activities with the Armed Forces family perspective.

Legacy

The project has significantly developed our understanding of the 16-19 education sector and the challenges which are barriers to supporting Service children in this phase of education. The learnings from this project further support the learnings from the SCiP Alliance commissioned research into Service children's outcomes post-16 education which was launched in November 2022 ([Diversity-meets-complexity_FINAL.pdf \(scipalliance.org\)](#)).

In response to these projects, the Alliance is developing a framework for post-16 providers to raise awareness of Service children in post-16 education and improve Service children wellbeing and educational outcomes. The toolkit will be tested with providers to explore how we can improve recognition and support of Service children in post-16 education, with the plan to integrate the framework with the Thriving Lives Toolkit Suite which is currently being developed through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust Transformational Grants programme.

Contact details

Further details or questions about the Connected Forces project can be made to Rachel Lad, SCiP Alliance Projects Manager, rachel.lad@winchester.ac.uk

Annex 1

Connected Forces Learning Capture by Tiller Research Ltd

1. OVERVIEW

The SCiP Alliance commissioned Tiller Research Ltd to undertake an independent learning review of the Connected Forces project. This took the form of an asset-based process evaluation and was designed to collate learning from the project to help inform future work. The learning capture outlines what project partners identified as the strengths of the Connected Forces project, and their reflections on how the experience gained can be usefully applied to future work, enhancing its positive impact. There has been a focus on identifying insight that can be applied more widely, both to future SCiP Alliance projects and those undertaken by partners. The intention is this will contribute to the growing body of research and best practice evidence relating to work with children and young people from Armed Forces families.

2. METHOD

The Connected Forces learning capture drew on two data sources:

Project documentation

Records of project progress, including steering group minutes and interim project review reports;

Interviews with project partners

Semi-structured online and telephone interviews were undertaken with members of the steering group and other project partners, e.g. student facilitators. A total of 21 individuals participated, either in a 1-1 or group discussion.

A thematic analysis was undertaken of both documentation and interview contributions to identify key learning points and enablers for success.

3. KEY ENABLERS

Project partners identified what they considered to be effective elements of the process used to design and deliver the Connected Forces project. The enablers outlined in this section were independently identified by a large proportion of partners interviewed, and so represent a shared view of effective practice demonstrated by the project. These enablers are likely to be more widely applicable, and so provide a useful reference for consideration in the design of future work.

Project Design Enablers

Meaningful participation of the target group in the project design process

Project partners noted that young people from Armed Forces families had been directly involved in the design of Connected Forces. This included some aged 16-19 (the target group), and others who were slightly older, contributing recent experience of being a member of the target group. The project design

was enhanced by ensuring it was informed by this lived experience. In addition, this participation highlighted two key factors that further enhanced the project design, and would be valuable considerations when designing future projects:

Recognition of diversity within the target group

When designing projects, focus is often placed on the unifying or defining characteristics of the target group. However, shared experience sits alongside individual characteristics and circumstances. Through meaningful engagement of the target group in the design of Connected Forces, the project was responsive both to diversity within the cohort and shared characteristics;

Activities or events aligned with interests and motivations

Participation of the target group in the design of Connected Forces highlighted that motivations to engage were typically aligned with interests rather than identity. As such, evidence of a 'need' was insufficient for identifying an activity or event with which a young person from an Armed Forces family would want to engage. Exploring interests and motivations was shown to be important.

Recognising the importance of trust and relationships

Project partners noted that the most effective connections of young people with Connected Forces were facilitated through pre-existing relationships, such as with a trusted individual or organisation. It was suggested that the target age-group is typically cautious and are much more likely to engage with an activity if recommended by a trusted individual or brand.

Recognising the priorities, as well as potential contributions, of partners

Project partners typically noted that their commitment to Connected Forces comprised two distinct elements: (a) recognition that the project sought to address a clear, evidenced need, and (b) a view that involvement with Connected Forces would benefit their own work. The project benefitted from drawing on the experience, knowledge and contacts of partners. Partners were typically able to contribute to a greater extent where the project sought to deliver outcomes relevant to the core objectives of their organisation or role, and/or enabled them to develop contacts.

Project Delivery Enablers

Effective Partnership

Project partners noted that Connected Forces had been enhanced by having a steering group that was actively engaged in supporting the delivery of the project. This group brought a diverse range of skills, experience and connections, and comprised members who were willing and able to provide practical support to the delivery team. Some noted that this contrasted to their previous experience of steering groups, which had focussed solely on governance of stakeholder management. The Connected Forces steering group combined a strategic role with an opportunity for the delivery team to request specific advice or support for specific actions, and this was found to be an effective way for the project to benefit from the wide range of skills and connections within the steering group;

Responsive Project Management

Project partners noted that Connected Forces was managed flexibly, with a focus on intended outcomes rather than process. This was viewed as an appropriate fit for a pilot project that was seeking to test out a new idea in an area with a known need, but limited evidence of effective practice. Partners identified key features of effective practice in the management of Connected Forces:

- o Responding positively to emerging opportunities throughout the project, where these contributed towards achieving intended outcomes;
- o Reflecting on learning and emerging research evidence relevant to the project, and actively seeking ways to apply this;
- o Ensuring good communication with partners and stakeholders, keeping everyone informed of developments and changes, and seeking input to draw on the expertise of partners;
- o Clear recording of actions, and actively reviewing these at regular intervals to provide accountability for progress.

4. KEY LEARNING POINTS

Review of the Connected Forces project documentation and discussion with project partners identified learning points that provide useful considerations for future projects. These have been grouped into three key areas: developing understanding of the characteristics of young people aged 16-19 from Armed Forces families, learning around effective engagement, and learning around intervention design.

A Deeper Understanding of the Cohort

Understanding of the detail and complexity of the experience of this cohort was very limited at the point of inception of Connected Forces. Significant research has been undertaken more recently, with the publication of *Diversity Meets Complexity: Supporting Armed Forces young people to thrive in post-16 education* (Granada & Mulcahy, 2022), which informed the ongoing development of the project. Project partner reflections on their experience of Connected Forces identified additional learning points to contribute to the growing evidence base to support better understanding of this cohort:

To understand the cohort, it is important to consider their experiences both as 'a 16-19 year-old' and as 'a young person from an Armed Forces family'.

Post-16 is a major life transition for young people in the UK. It is a point that represents significant divergence of education and work choices, and for many young people marks the start of transition to greater independence from their families. For many of those aged 16–19 from Armed Forces families, elements of self-identity that reflect those of age-group peers are more prominent than those arising from being a young person from an Armed Forces family.

More likely to...

There is significant diversity in individual experiences. Nevertheless, common differences were identified between the 16-19 age group and younger age groups from Armed Forces families:

- o This cohort is more likely to **be from a non-serving family**. This means that the Armed Forces element of their identity may feel more 'historical' than 'current'. The family transition to veteran life is likely to affect how open a young person is to engaging with activities defined with an Armed Forces perspective: even though this will objectively be of great relevance, it may not feel relevant;
- o This age group is more likely to be **developing their own identity**. This is likely to be increasingly separate from their family identity, developing alongside their likely increasing independence. For some of the cohort, the Armed Forces may be viewed as part of their family identity, and therefore not of primary relevance to them as an individual;
- o Project partners noted that this age group is typically cautious. They are more likely to have been let down, or to **have felt let down**, perhaps with past offers of support that did not work out as they expected. Trust is an important aspect of engaging with services or activities, and this trust needs to be earned;
- o Developing identity combined with cautiousness make it more likely that this cohort will **be hesitant about being open about being from an Armed Forces family**. Activities need to be sensitive to the effect of negative past experiences and/or a young person not wanting to stand out as 'different'. This needs to be considered alongside a recognition that the opposite will be true for others, who may be motivated to speak openly about being from an Armed Forces family and view this as a key aspect of their identity;
- o Many of this cohort will have high social capital resulting from positive experiences and opportunities of being from an Armed Forces family. This is a powerful resource that young people may need support to fully utilise.

The importance of recognising holistic identity

Project partners agreed that it was important to recognise that a 'one-size fits all' approach is inappropriate, with some suggesting that there is more diversity within this cohort than there is a shared opportunity or need based on the Armed Forces element of their identity. This has practical implications for project design:

- o Partners noted a need to ensure projects are all-inclusive from beginning, for example by recognising and accommodating a range of preferred communication styles and personal perspectives;
- o When focus is placed on the impact of a young person's experiences rather than the origin, similarities can be drawn with recognised vulnerable groups. For example, care experienced young people may experience similar long-term impacts of family separation as those from an Armed Forces family, even though there are key differences in the context of that separation. There will be instances where young people feel they have more in common with those who do not share their experience of being from an Armed Forces family than those who do.

Effective Engagement

The Connected Forces project promoted significant reflection on the process of engaging 16–19-year-olds from Armed Forces families. Project delivery demonstrated the principles of effective and impactful listening recommended by the SCiP Alliance's report *Listening to Learn: The voices of Service Children* (Hall, 2020), which had drawn predominantly on examples of work with younger age groups.

Project partners reflecting on the Connected Forces project confirmed the relevance of the principles from the *Listening to Learn report*- be deliberate, be open, be child-centred, be willing to change- to the 16-19 cohort. In addition, learning was identified from the Connected Forces project relating to the detail of how these principles can be applied effectively with this older age group, which will usefully inform future practice.

'Identification of need' is not the same as 'identification of want'

A key reflection of project partners was a need to recognise that what motivates young people to engage is not necessarily the evidenced need identified by support organisations. A consequence of some of the characteristics of this cohort, identified above, is that they can be more cautious about engaging. This means they need a stronger reason, and more reassurance, to engage than is perhaps the case for younger age groups.

Suggestions from project partners included:

- o This group is more likely to engage with concrete activities or specific information than they are with more abstract notions of support. The specific activity needs to appeal by being interesting or enjoyable in its own right, regardless of any perceived benefit that it may offer;
- o Project partners noted that much engagement with Connected Forces started from a point of more general relevance to 16–19-year-olds, e.g. exam preparation. Engaging with others who shared the perspective of being from an Armed Forces family added value, for example through a common understanding of strengths (e.g. resilience) and challenges (e.g. curriculum gaps), which are more likely to be shared with others from Armed Forces families than with age-group peers;
- o There is considerable value in recognising how past experiences can be harnessed to positively shape future experiences, but to be engaging the focus should be on moving forward, not looking back. Where young people do not view the Armed Forces to be a central element of their identity, they may fail to recognise the transferability of their experiences to their chosen focus. Focussing activities not on where young people have come from, but where they are now and where they aspire to be in the future, is likely to increase engagement.

Existing relationships are crucial

The cautiousness observed in this cohort emphasises the importance of earning and building trust. Project partners identified the important role of trusted champions in promoting effective engagement. Engagement was enhanced when an invitation or recommendation to participate in Connected Forces

came from a trusted source, such as a teacher with whom a young person already had a trusted relationship, or a direct email from a trusted organisation.

Discretion

This cohort is more likely to be open to engaging when an opportunity or support is offered discreetly. Awareness of the possibility of negative past experiences, and that a young person may not wish to promote the Armed Forces element of their identity, means that it is important to offer a safe space for young people to feel comfortable engaging.

Opportunity to apply experience

Volunteer near-to-peer facilitators were motivated by the opportunity to utilise their experience to support others. This highlights the importance of recognising the positive impact of experiences, where young people may not feel a need to 'be helped', but can benefit from engaging as a volunteer or facilitator.

Intervention Design

Connected Forces project partners identified learning relating to the design of the project and its processes that would be useful to consider in future work.

Confirmation of need

Project partners were agreed that Connected Forces had confirmed a need for targeted work with young people aged 16-19 from an Armed Forces family. It was agreed that this needed a different approach to work with younger age groups due to the context of post-16 being a point of significant transition, and the likely changed context of the Armed Forces element of identity. Project partners identified three key areas where future work would be worthwhile:

- o Enabling young people from Armed Forces families to connect with others who share this experience;
- o Awareness raising of the cohort of young people from Armed Forces families among post-16 providers. The experience of Connected Forces showed that awareness of this group is low, especially among colleges, even though they may have similar experiences to recognised vulnerable groups;
- o Developing resources specifically designed for this cohort, that focus on empowering young people by harnessing their experience to enhance future outcomes.

Project and activity processes

Connected Forces partners identified the following practical considerations for future project or activity design:

- o It is important to aim to integrate project cycles with the academic year. There are limited windows of opportunity to engage young people through schools and colleges, though this an effective route to building the trust necessary for engagement. Fitting with the cyclical demands

and opportunities of the academic year is likely to significantly increase the support from schools and colleges, and therefore is more likely to engage young people;

o It is important to be mindful of the capacity and practical constraints of partners who may support engagement. In addition to thinking about yearly cycles, ensuring project processes fit neatly with other constraints will increase the likelihood of securing the support of local partners;

o It is important to identify the mechanisms for engaging young people. It is not sufficient to have an evidenced need and an agreed response, there needs to be clear pathway for the target group to engage. It is likely that this requires active pulls, such as regular reminders, alerts, recommendations and contact from facilitators, even after initial contact has been made and interest established;

o It is important to be mindful that behaviour does not necessarily follow stated intention. This cohort is presented with a wide range of opportunities, and even if a young person finds an opportunity appealing, they may not have the time or sufficient focus to engage. Taking note of behaviour may prove to be more informative in designing an effective intervention than focussing on stated intention, e.g. from a focus group.

5. A REFLECTION ON CHALLENGES

Connected Forces was a pilot project seeking to develop a new intervention for a target cohort that had received limited attention in previous research. As such, the project encountered a number of challenges, which also indicate learning points that are likely to be more widely applicable. These add to the project's learning around structure and engagement.

Structural Challenges

- Post-16 providers generally have low awareness of Armed Forces families, and even where they are familiar with this group there are few opportunities to identify individuals within this group. This means that there are several steps required to effectively utilise the potential of working with post-16 providers to engage young people from Armed Forces families. Initial awareness raising among providers and support to develop ways of identifying the cohort are needed before the implementation of a specific activity;
- Regional and national variations in educational structures offer different opportunities and present different challenges. Devolved education policy is a key variable, though school and post-16 structures vary within nations as well. What works in one location is not necessarily transferable;
- Connected Forces project partners noted the small scale of the pilot, which meant there was limited capacity to follow up on every new idea or instigate the personalised support that may be necessary to secure engagement from this cohort.

Engagement Challenges

Engagement of young people

- o There needs to be an appropriate balance of safeguarding and accessibility. Safeguarding should not be compromised, but it is recognised that young people are more likely to engage if they can get instant responses and/or can view what is on offer before committing;
- o The 16-19 age group is more likely to engage if they were already engaged in work related to the Armed Forces element of their identity at a younger age;
- o Trust of families is important; but this age group will not necessarily be attracted to something recommended or endorsed by their family.

Engagement of partners

- o Projects are always an additional ask, so engagement from professionals and volunteers will be affected by capacity issues and may be uneven. This can be mitigated by aligning a project with the key priorities of partners but, even then, involvement will likely be a lower priority than the demands of their core role. Awareness of and sensitivity towards partner capacity is crucial;
- o Those in settings with low numbers of young people from Armed Forces families are likely to be more isolated, and so have greater potential benefit from engaging with a remote resource. However, low cohort numbers reduce the potential benefit to be gained by the setting. This lack of alignment between the potential benefits for young people and those post-16 providers is a key challenge that must be navigated.

6. LEARNING CAPTURE CONCLUSIONS

The Connected Forces project provided useful learning relating to the running of future collaborative projects:

- o The project was characterised by a thoughtful design process that placed the perspectives of the target group at the centre;
- o Effective project management was enabled by the strong partnership built between the steering group and delivery team. Open collaboration ensured expertise was shared by all parties, and project partners were able to contribute specific practical support as and when this was needed;
- o Project management took a flexible, outcomes-focussed approach throughout the project. This facilitated communication and collaborative reflection throughout all phases, and enabled a positive solution-focussed dynamic that was viewed positively by all project partners.
- o The learning capture identified that both young people and partner organisations needed clear reasons to become involved with Connected Forces. These factors are likely to be applicable to future work. For young people, the activity needs to provide a tangible

short-term benefit, and ideally be linked to interests more than identity. For partners, engagement needs to capitalise on their existing resources, and support outcomes linked to current priorities.

Valuable insight was also identified relating to understanding and engaging the target cohort of young people aged 16-19 from Armed Forces families:

- Shifting psychosocial identity is characteristic of this age group. They are typically starting to forge an independent identity as young adults, which is increasingly separate from that of their families;
- Growing independence, coupled with the increased likelihood of being from a veteran family (rather than having a family member who is currently serving in the Armed Forces) may lead to the Armed Forces element of a young person's identity feeling ancillary or historical. This increases the likelihood of complex or conflicted feelings about engaging with activities or support promoted with the Armed Forces family perspective at its centre;
- This cohort, like their age-group peers who not from an Armed Forces family, are typically cautious about new commitments, opportunities and connections. They are more likely to engage with activities recommended by peers, trusted individuals from outside their family, or trusted organisations;
- Activities need to recognise the holistic identity of young people from Armed Forces families. The Armed Forces element of identity is likely to be of reducing prominence for this age group, despite being important for understanding the person as whole;
- There is considerable diversity within this cohort, both in terms of their experience as a member of an Armed Forces family and the impact of that experience. Some will share characteristics with recognised vulnerable groups; others will have strong social capital and clear aspirations as a result of their positive experiences. Others still will experience a complex combination of both of these types of impact. Projects working with this cohort will benefit from recognising this diversity, and from having clear mechanisms for engagement that take it into account;
- Former and current members of the cohort were keen to use their strengths and experience to support others, such as by undertaking community facilitation or sharing insights with the development team. It may be that such active involvement is more appealing to many young people than activities framed as 'help-seeking' or of 'receiving support'. Future projects targeted at this cohort may find value in exploring a 'double benefit' model, where activities are designed to provide opportunities and benefits to young people by enabling them to utilise their experience and skills to support or empower others.

Finally, the learning capture identified points for consideration when setting future strategic priorities:

- There is a need to raise awareness among post-16 providers of young people from Armed Forces families as a distinctive cohort, one that shares some characteristics with recognised vulnerable groups;
- There is a need for further research to understand the characteristics of 16-19 year olds from Armed Forces families, and work to identify an effective response to the opportunities for and needs of this group;
- Work with children and young people from Armed Forces families will benefit from recognising the 16-19 age group as a distinctive cohort, one with characteristics that differentiate them from younger age groups. This is likely to require a fundamentally different project design, rather than simply adapting approaches that have been shown to work successfully with primary or secondary age groups.