

Living in our Shoes

Understanding the needs of UK
Armed Forces families



Report of a review commissioned by
the Ministry of Defence | June 2020

The Review Team



Andrew Selous MP, Lead Reviewer

Andrew Selous has been the MP for South West Bedfordshire since 2001. He served as a Territorial Army officer in the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers and formerly in the Honourable Artillery Company. He chairs the All Party Parliamentary Group on supporting couple relationships and has a long-term interest in strengthening family life. Andrew is the Second Church Estates Commissioner and the Prime Minister’s Trade Envoy to South Africa. He is a former Minister for Prisons and Probation.



Professor Janet Walker OBE, FAcSS, FRSA, Lead Adviser to the Review

Janet is Emeritus Professor of Family Policy at Newcastle University. She was previously the Director of the Newcastle Centre for Family Studies where she led over 50 multi-disciplinary studies relating to: family relationships and family support; family breakdown; domestic abuse; parenting; family law reform; policing and probation practice; children with a parent in prison; and services for looked-after children. Many studies were commissioned by government departments, including the Ministry of Defence. Janet has held public appointments in health, justice and social security and advised administrations overseas. In 2005 she received the Stanley Cohen Distinguished Research Award in the USA for her contribution to family policy internationally.



Dr Gabriela Misca, Research Adviser

Gabriela is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Worcester. Her current research focusses on understanding the complexity and diversity of military and veteran families, their support needs in coping with the demands of military life and transitions within and out of Service, and the visible and nonvisible combat injuries of the Serving family member. Gabriela’s research has international reach and, as a Fulbright Scholar in the USA, she collaborated with support agencies and research partners to identify best practices in supporting military and veteran families, and assessing their cultural transferability to the UK.

Our Approach to the Review

Andrew Selous and Janet Walker worked together on all aspects of the review, including: the Call for Evidence; meetings with key military and civilian personnel; visits to schools, naval bases, army garrisons/bases and air stations throughout the UK; liaison with the Chief of Defence People, MOD Ministers and officials; consideration of the data and the key findings and the formulation of recommendations.

Janet Walker was responsible for collating and analysing the information obtained during the review and contextualising the findings within the family policy and family studies literature. She was the lead author of the review report and the extended summary.

Gabriela Misca ensured that the review was informed by the latest national and international research on military families; participated in some meetings with key stakeholders; assisted in the thematic analysis of the responses to the Call for Evidence; supported the interpretation of findings leading to evidence-based recommendations; and contributed to the writing of the report.

Disclaimer

It has been a privilege and a pleasure to undertake this review. All the views expressed and the recommendations put forward in this report are those of the Review Team. Our views are completely independent of the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces, and the Governments of the UK. Any factual errors contained in the report are ours alone.

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Foreword

People continue to lie at the heart of our operational capability; attracting and retaining the right numbers of capable, motivated individuals to deliver Defence outputs is critical. In order to achieve this, our Armed Forces personnel must be confident that not only are they valued and will be treated fairly, but also that their families will be supported and treated properly in line with modern-day family life. I am grateful for the hard work and research that has gone into preparing this independent review which draws on the principles of our nation's promise under the Armed Forces Covenant. Our Service people provide a constant presence upon which we depend as a nation; whether it be overseas in times of conflict, building capacity or reassuring allies, or supporting our national effort at home in times of emergency. Knowing that your family is properly supported when you are away frees Service people to focus on the job in hand. I look forward to engaging with stakeholders to revise our Armed Forces Families Strategy for 2020.

Lieutenant General James Swift
Chief of Defence People
June, 2020

Introduction to the Review

The Remit

In January 2019, the then Defence Secretary, The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, commissioned Andrew Selous MP to conduct an independent review to **consider the diverse needs of Service families, assess whether the current support offer is meeting these needs, and make recommendations accordingly**. The terms of reference are described in Chapter 1.

The Review Team's Approach to the Review

Andrew Selous invited Professor Janet Walker OBE, Emeritus Professor of Family Policy at Newcastle University, to be his Lead Adviser. They worked together on all aspects of the study and the development and refinement of the recommendations in this report. Professor Walker was responsible for collating and analysing the information received during the review, and is lead author of this and the Summary reports. Both brought their personal understanding of military life to the review: Andrew as a former Territorial Army officer and Janet as the mother of a Serving Naval Officer.

Dr Gabriela Misca, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Worcester, was invited to join Andrew and Janet as the Research Adviser on military families. She assisted in various aspects of the review and ensured that the findings and recommendations are grounded in the most up-to-date research on Armed Forces families. Gabriela and Janet ensured that the review was evidence-based throughout and contextualised within the wider military and family studies literatures.

The review team was supported by Andrew Selous's parliamentary office staff and his Office Manager Christine Wallace. The Armed Forces People Support team at the MOD provided information and acted as the conduit to a range of stakeholders.

We invited as many members of the Serving community and their families as possible to contribute to the review and to tell us about their lived experiences of military life. We talked to the Chain of Command, welfare officers, and padres/chaplains in the Royal Navy, the Army, and the Royal Air Force. In addition, meetings were held with a wide range of stakeholders. During 2019, the review team gathered evidence to inform the study in a number of ways, including through:

- a Call for Evidence from Serving personnel and their families
- visits to three Naval bases; eight Army garrisons/bases; and three RAF stations
- conversations with a wide range of Serving and non-serving members of the Armed Forces community, families and children, at each of the military bases visited
- visits to four schools with Service children on their rolls
- a visit to the Co-Working Hub at Leuchars Station, Scotland
- meetings with key personnel and stakeholders, including: officials in the MOD and several other Government Departments; members of the three single Service Families Federations; Commanding Officers in each of the three single Services; head teachers; staff in Service charities and other charities offering support to Service families; Armed Forces Champions in several local authorities in England; and academic researchers in the UK and the USA.
- discussions with Rear Admiral Mike Bath; Air Commodore Alan Opie; Air Vice Marshall Chris Elliot; Major-General Sharon Nesmith; Major-General Ben Bathurst; and Brigadier Jon Swift
- liaison with the Army Inspectorate Review Team and the Royal Navy Family and People Support Chief of Staff
- attendance at sessions of the Defence Select Committee
- attendance at meetings of the MOD Partner Employment Steering Group and the Ministerial Meeting of The Families Federations, MOD

- attendance at the Service Pupils' Student Voice Conference, June 2019, at the Duke of York's Royal Military School, Dover
- literature reviews relating to military research and family studies.

More detail relating to our methodology and a list of those we spoke to individually are given in Annexe A.

We discussed the review with three successive Defence Secretaries: The Rt. Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE MP, The Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP, and The Rt. Hon. Ben Wallace MP, and other MOD Ministers. Towards the end of the review we shared our emerging findings informally with the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Anthony Radakin, and the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshall Michael Wigston.

Throughout the review, the Chief of Defence People, Lt General Richard Nugee, was supportive of our approach, offered his thoughts and advice on a number of occasions, and discussed the emerging findings and recommendations. We welcome the support of the new Chief of Defence People, Lt General James Swift in his Preface to this report.

We heard from and spoke to a wide range of Serving personnel of all ranks in all three Services, their spouses and partners, and children and young people. Our conversations have included members of the UK Armed Forces community from Commonwealth countries who are currently based in the UK. Everyone we have spoken to expressed support for the review and a willingness to help us to find ways to improve the support offer for families. We are aware that satisfaction with military family life is a major determinant of retention and commitment, and that serving in the Armed Forces is not just a job but a way of life for every Serving member and for their family.

Given the depth and quality of the information we were receiving it became clear that we were unlikely to complete the review by late summer 2019 as originally thought. We determined that we must do justice to the contributions made by Serving personnel and their families and ensure that we placed these within the context of the changes and improvements already underway within the MOD, other government departments, the Devolved Governments, and the Armed Forces themselves.

Key Themes

The responses to the Call for Evidence were extremely detailed and thoughtful, and concerns about various issues were tempered with positive comments about the exciting experiences and considerable opportunities that military life offers to members of the Armed Forces community. During the analysis of written submissions, face-to-face discussions, and our own observations at military bases, a number of key themes emerged about the challenges experienced by military families today. Across all three Services, the key issues raised were:

- accommodation
- mobility
- deployment and the amount of time Serving personnel spend apart from their families
- the impact of Service life on children and young people
- the employment and careers of spouses/partners
- the health and well-being of Serving personnel and family members
- the impact of military life on personal relationships.

Those planning to leave and those who had recently left the Armed Forces talked about their reasons for leaving. Many members of the Armed Forces and their families offered suggestions as to the measures that could be taken to address some of the aspects of Service life which are regarded as detrimental to or incompatible with family life and personal relationships in the twenty-first century and, ultimately, to retention. During the review, we examined the kinds of support being offered to Service families and considered ways in which these could be improved or extended in future.

All the contributions to the review from Serving personnel and their families demonstrate the strong bond that exists within the military community, recognising that each of the three Services has its own history, culture and core values. Members of the Armed Forces portray a great sense of pride in their work and acknowledge the sacrifices they and their families make. This has been very apparent when talking to spouses and partners, and especially to children and young people, all of whom have expressed their pride in being a member of the military community.

Our data are qualitative in nature and we have not attempted any quantitative analysis given our open-ended approach to data collection. We have drawn directly from the accounts given by Serving men and women and by family members to illustrate the emerging themes. In doing so, we have been careful to present a balanced view across the contributions from all three single Services. We have also protected everyone's confidentiality and all extracts are reported anonymously. This report documents the lived experiences of men, women and children within the Armed Forces community, and we have attempted to understand what it is like to **live in their shoes** and to shed light on the challenges they experience. The report is underpinned by our understanding and knowledge of wider societal and economic changes relating to all families in the UK today, and looks at the specific implications of these for Service families and the military way of life.

Recommendations

The findings from the review have led to 110 recommendations for change that could address some of the issues and challenges faced by military families. In our view, implementing the recommendations would serve to increase and enhance the support offered to them. The recommendations focus primarily on changes that the MOD and the Armed Forces need to consider. Some recommendations have implications for other government departments and local authorities in England, the Devolved Governments of the UK, and a range of organisations in the statutory, private and charitable sectors.

Some recommendations will require financial investment but many of them do not. We have grouped the recommendations together at the end of each chapter in three categories: short-term priorities; medium-term changes; and a few longer-term changes that are either aspirational in nature and/or require policy change and/or greater financial investment. The short and medium-term changes provide the building blocks for longer-term change and transformation. We believe that a change in one aspect of Service life will almost certainly produce a positive ripple effect on others.

Most recommendations, however, require a willingness and shared commitment to make changes to the ways in which the Armed Forces value and support their families in the twenty-first century. We are acutely aware that there are important distinctions between the different Services in respect of recruiting patterns, operational deployments, living arrangements and the support they offer, and that some concerns are specific to one Service rather than to all three.

Presentation of findings

The findings from the review are presented in two documents:

1. The Review Report

This report provides the evidence and rationale for the recommendations. This detailed report is presented in ten chapters as follows:

Chapter One sets the context in which the review has taken place. It refers to the Armed Forces Covenant, the Families' Strategy, and describes the focus of this review.

Chapter Two summarises the changes in family life in recent years, all of which have implications for both civilian and Service families and the support they need in the twenty-first century. It also looks specifically at the additional challenges facing military families due to the demands and expectations of Service life.

Chapters Three to Eight discuss in some detail the findings relating to each of the key issues facing Service families today. These include:

- accommodation (Chapter 3)
- the impacts of Service life on children living in a military family, with specific reference to their education and achievements (Chapter 4)
- partner employment, career opportunities and child care (Chapter 5)
- health, social care and well-being (Chapter 6)
- the transition to civilian life (Chapter 7)
- the impact on personal relationships and the provision of welfare support (Chapter 8).

In many ways, the issues raised in these chapters have been well-rehearsed before by the three Families Federations and through the various surveys completed by Serving personnel and by their partners in recent years. During the review process we have focused on exploring the changes that could be made to address the issues in more comprehensive ways than currently. As each of these issues is discussed, attention is given, where appropriate, to the factors which can adversely affect dual-serving families and those members of the Armed Forces recruited from overseas.

Chapter Nine looks at the support offered by Service charities and other agencies in the private and charitable sectors and considers some of the innovative programmes available in the UK and elsewhere.

Chapter Ten draws the evidence together, considers the role of the Armed Forces Covenant, and looks to the future. It summarises the challenges and opportunities for change which could provide greater support for Service families. It points to the need for wider cultural changes within and beyond the Armed Forces community, and the need within UK society for greater valuing of and a more open and collective expression of appreciation for Service men and women and their families.

Chapters Three to Ten contain direct and verbatim quotes from those who gave evidence to the review. We also include some case examples of good practice and promising initiatives designed to support Service families.

Annexe A provides a more detailed description of the methods used: a breakdown of the responses to the Call for Evidence; a list of individuals and representatives of a range of agencies and organisations who have provided evidence to the review; and a list of the Naval bases, Army garrisons/bases, RAF stations and schools visited.

2. Summary report

The review has covered a wide range of issues and concerns. Our aim has been to provide the evidence for the changes recommended. The extended Summary report highlights the issues covered in the main report and lists the recommendations chapter by chapter. It has been prepared as the 'go-to' document for policy-makers and practitioners as they take the recommendations forward.

Acknowledgements

It is not possible to undertake a wide-ranging review of this kind without the help and support of a large number of people. We were dependent on the MOD, the three Families Federations, and the Chain of Command in all three Services to circulate our Call for Evidence. We know that this is not a perfect way to gain information but, since there was no way by which we could contact Service personnel and their families directly ourselves, we are extremely grateful to all those who brought the review to their attention.

We are extremely grateful to Lt Gen Richard Nugee, Chief of Defence People until March 2020, for his continued interest in the review and his encouragement throughout. We offer our thanks also to the First Sea Lord, Admiral Anthony Radakin; the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith; and the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshall Michael Wigston. Their contributions were invaluable and we much appreciate their willingness to be challenged about concerns that need to be addressed in order to improve the well-being of military families in particular, and the Armed Forces as a whole.

We received valuable advice and information from Rear Admiral Mike Bath and Air Commodore Alan Opie about current issues within their specific Services, and they pointed us towards the people we should meet. They assisted us in planning visits to naval bases and air stations respectively, and ensured that we received a very warm welcome at all those we visited. Lt Col Jeremy Lamb in the Army Strategic Engagement Team at the MOD provided very valuable assistance throughout. He organised our visits and accompanied us to Army bases, allowed us to bounce ideas off him and answered many of our questions during a number of train journeys, and ensured that we had appropriate access to a range of Army personnel and relevant policy information. To all those who opened doors and made it possible to have access to key military personnel, families and policy documents we offer our most sincere thanks.

Throughout the review, members of the Armed Forces People Support Team in the MOD have ensured that we have access to appropriate information and various committees and, in the latter months, provided valuable feedback on emerging recommendations. We are grateful to David Adams, Billy King and Capt Simon Joll RN for their interest, support, and guidance. They have been careful during all our discussions to maintain the integrity of the independence of the review, as have the successive Defence Secretaries and MOD Ministers who have supported it.

We would like to express our thanks to the policy officials in a number of other government departments in England and in the Devolved Governments of the UK who informally checked relevant sections of the draft report for accuracy. As Annexe A demonstrates, there are far too many people who contributed to the review to be able to thank them each individually. We are enormously grateful to all of them.

Most importantly, we would especially like to offer our heartfelt thanks to all the Serving and non-serving members of military families, especially the children and young people, all of whom spoke openly and honestly about their lived experiences of Service life, the challenges they face, the kinds of support they have received and the changes they would like to see. This is their report and it is their words that tell the story in the chapters that follow, and which have helped to shape many of our recommendations. We hope that we have done justice to their contributions and reflected their conversations accurately. We sincerely hope that their contributions will assist in bringing about changes that will offer improved and more targeted support in future and, ultimately, aid the retention of committed and dedicated members of the UK Armed Forces.

Finally, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Ray Lock, CEO of the Forces in Mind Trust, for supporting the review from the beginning to the end.

Chapter 1

Supporting Military Families: The Nation's Commitment



PROUDLY
SUPPORTING
THOSE WHO
SERVE.

The Armed Forces Covenant was introduced in 2012 under the provisions of the Armed Forces Act 2011. The Covenant constitutes an enduring contract between the people of the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government and all those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their families. It is a promise by the nation to ensure that those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives.

Importantly, the Covenant explicitly states that members of the Armed Forces

should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.¹

Moreover, it states that:

Special consideration is appropriate in some cases especially for those who have given the most.²

The Covenant recognises that the Armed Forces face danger and, sometimes, suffer serious injury or death, and sacrifice some of their freedoms as a result of their duty. It provides tangible recognition that members of the Armed Forces community and their families are required to live their lives within a culture where operational effectiveness must be the number one priority and duty comes first. Joining the military means accepting a range of values which include a commitment to serve one's country and put Service before self.

¹ www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk

² *Ibid.* p1.

The Covenant also explicitly acknowledges that military families play a vital role in supporting operational effectiveness. While military families experience the same stressors in family life that all families face, they also experience the additional stressors associated with frequent moves, long deployments, periods of separation, dangerous work settings and combat-related activities. Growing understanding of the impacts of these additional challenges has resulted in an increased focus on ensuring that the appropriate supports are in place to assist Serving members and their families to adapt and thrive. The Covenant makes it clear that the whole nation has a moral obligation to members of the Armed Forces and their families to ensure respect, support and fair treatment.

The Covenant was designed to increase awareness of the challenges military families face and to ensure that everyone in society does their best to meet them.

The Armed Forces Families' Strategy

The Armed Forces Families' Strategy 2016–2020 developed the commitment articulated in the Armed Forces Covenant. The then Chief of Defence People, Lt General Andrew Gregory, published the first UK Armed Forces Families' Strategy following the Defence and Security Review which emphasised the recruitment and retention of Armed Forces personnel as a priority for Defence. In his Foreword to the new Families Strategy, Lt General Gregory acknowledged that

Our personnel can only fully deliver their Defence task if they have the support of their families as well as the confidence that their loved ones will be able to access the right support when required. So doing more to listen, talk to and empower those families is vital if we are to continue attracting and retaining capable and motivated Service personnel.³

The Families' Strategy was designed to provide direction to officials who are responsible for policy development in the areas that constitute the 'offer' to Service families. The vision was expressed as being to promote:

Resilient, empowered, thriving Service families who are treated fairly, have increased choice and who are valued by the Nation'.⁴

This important vision remains at the heart of policy-making which focuses on supporting Serving personnel and their families.

The intent of the Families' Strategy is to operationalise the Covenant by removing disadvantage, whether real or perceived, and creating choice, thereby enabling families to make informed decisions and ensuring a credible and realistic offer of support. The priorities are listed as being:

- partner employment
- accommodation
- children's education and childcare
- community support
- specialist support
- health and wellbeing
- transition.

The subsequent Action Plan set out the priorities for 2018–2020 with a number of key targets and timelines for achieving them. These priorities have been considered carefully during this review. The Plan is owned by the Chief of Defence People and was informed by wide stakeholder engagement and by the annual UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FamCAS) and the UK Tri-Service Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS). These two surveys have consistently highlighted a range of concerns about the impact of Service life on families and revealed considerable dissatisfaction with the welfare support provided to families, especially during deployments.

³ UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016–2020, p1.

⁴ Ibid p2.

We are aware that the MOD, the Royal Navy, the Army, and the Royal Air Force are working continuously in partnership with other government departments in England, the Devolved Governments of the UK, the three single Service Family Federations, the military charities, other third sector organisations and the business community, to address the concerns raised by Serving personnel and their families. They also ensure that the promises made in the Armed Forces Covenant are realised, and hold to account those organisations that have signed it.

The Armed Forces Covenant in 2020

The Annual Report of the Armed Forces Covenant is intended to ensure that Parliament, on behalf of the people of the UK, can understand how the Covenant is being delivered, and is directed at two key audiences: the Armed Forces Community; and all those who work and support them, including members of the wider public.

Considerable progress has been made since the Covenant was introduced and, in recent years, considerable steps have been taken to improve the offer and support for veterans and their families. The 2019 Annual Report indicates that the Covenant has well over 4,000 signatories and this is expected to reach 5,000 during 2020. Since its inception, a myriad of initiatives have been established to support the Armed Forces community, and the Covenant is a key element in government policy in the UK and across a wide range of governments departments. The Office for Veterans' Affairs was set up in the Cabinet Office in 2019 to coordinate support for veterans across all parts of government.

The focus on veterans has been excellent and, in many ways, the work undertaken with veterans and their families provides a blueprint for increasing and coordinating the support offered to currently Serving Armed Forces personnel and their families. This would greatly enhance the Covenant commitment. The Government has committed to incorporating the Armed Forces Covenant into law and to continuing to remove disadvantage faced by the Armed Forces community. These commitments are very welcome, and the commissioning of this review is further evidence of the Government's determination to ensure that the support needs of Serving families are understood, and that a more robust Families' Strategy is developed going forward.

The Current Review

The current independent review was commissioned in January 2019 by the then Defence Secretary, The Rt. Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE MP to understand the impact of the current and likely future structures and the needs of Service families in the modern day Armed Forces, and to assess if Defence is equipped to respond to their needs. The review was designed to consider the diverse needs of currently Serving military families and to make evidence-based recommendations on how Defence, in the light of identified issues, can improve its support to Service families. The review was expected to take special consideration of how MOD policy reflects the varied make-up of a range of family models and to understand the different experiences of Service family members, in particular spouses, civil partners, long-term cohabiting partners, and their children. The review was required to provide context to MOD policy through consideration of existing literature and up-to-date research relating to military families. This is the first independent review of its kind to be undertaken in the UK.

Given the current concerns about both recruitment to and retention in the Armed Forces, and specifically in the Army, which is by far the largest of the three single Services, the Government committed to undertake this review to explore in greater depth the issues raised by Serving men and women and their families in the annual surveys, and to make a number of recommendations which seek to ameliorate them.

In launching the review, the Defence Secretary commented that:

“ *The success of our Armed Forces would not be possible without the constant support of the Service families, who are often the unsung heroes of the military community...I'm always inspired by their unfaltering fortitude, and the pride they take in their loved ones' Service. I'm delighted that Andrew will be considering how we can best support them, as they support those who are keeping this country safe.* ”

The review team⁵ engaged with key stakeholders, including the three single Service Families' Federations, military and other charities delivering support to Service families, and the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust which makes grants to support the Armed Forces community. The Service community includes:

- serving personnel in the three single Services
- volunteer and regular reservists in all three Services
- veterans
- families of all the above groups (spouses, civil partners, children and, where appropriate, parents and other family members)
- family members of Service personnel and veterans who are deceased.

The focus of this review was on currently Serving personnel, including those preparing to leave the Armed Forces, and their families. Although during the review evidence was received from some bereaved family members and veterans, in this report we have not been in a position to address the specific concerns they raised.

Many of the issues raised by Serving personnel and their families are pertinent to all three Services, but some have more resonance for one or other of the Services rather than all three due to their varying recruitment patterns and modus operandi. In this report, the review team aim to:

- offer insights that will assist the work already taking place within the MOD and the Armed Forces to support families
- encourage scrutiny and evaluation of new initiatives being developed
- suggest changes that could be made to strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant
- strengthen the Nation's resolve to promote and foster resilient, thriving Service families who are treated fairly, have increased choice and are valued.

This report documents the lived experiences of men, women and children within the Armed Forces community. All three Services have, at their heart, similar values and a determination and commitment to support military families as best they can, while maintaining operational efficiency and effectiveness as their primary objective at all times. It is very clear from the evidence obtained for this review that providing support for military personnel and their families should be high on the wider agendas of the UK governments. We regard the Armed Forces Covenant and the Families' Strategy as key vehicles for taking our recommendations forward.

The report is underpinned by our understanding and knowledge of wider societal, cultural and economic issues relating to all families in the UK, and by research undertaken here and elsewhere on the support needs of military families. In Chapter 2 we consider the societal changes that have taken place since the Second World War and the implications of these for Service families and the military way of life today.

⁵ Members of the review team are identified at the beginning of this report and in the introduction.

Chapter 2

Changes in Family Life: Expectations and Transitions

The Armed Forces in Britain have a long and distinguished history. Even the youngest Service, the Royal Air Force, is now 100 years old. Traditionally, Army families, including spouses and children, have always moved around with the Serving person, and it is still the case that whole units tend to move together, unlike in the Royal Navy and the RAF. In times past Army spouses and children regularly moved around the world, including going into conflict zones, and spouses followed their husbands wherever they went. The term 'following the flag' has had a very specific meaning in military family life. But long gone are the days when Army families can be described merely as 'camp followers'. Times have changed, and while many military families still move around and accompany the Serving partner on assignments across the globe, the unprecedented changes in family life in Western society, especially since the middle of the last century following the Second World War, have inevitably impacted the ways in which military families wish to live their lives in the twenty-first century.

Changing couple relationships

Family life in the twenty-first century is fluid and diverse, and families today reflect the fundamental changes that have occurred in the way adults manage their personal relationships. Although married couples still constitute the main type of adult couple relationship, and most young people expect to marry at some time in their lives, choice about the nature of the adult partnership has greatly increased. For most couples today, moving in and setting up home together marks an important step in the formation of a couple relationship. Moving in together is in itself a key point at which the couple is formally recognised as a unit, even though there may be no legal status to their relationship. Importantly, long-term cohabitation has increased substantially, not just as a prelude to marriage but as a lifestyle choice, and it continues to be the fastest growing family type in the UK.⁶ The long-term cohabiting couple family, including both opposite-and same-sex couples with dependent children, accounted for an average of 16.6 per cent of children across the OECD countries in 2017, up from 9.5 per cent in 2005.⁷ Low public awareness of the limited legal rights of cohabiting couples compared to the rights of married couples and those in civil partnerships poses a clear challenge to society and has led to increased calls for legal recognition of these relationships.⁸

The Civil Partnership Act 2004 in England and Wales allowed same-sex couples to enter a civil partnership with the same rights and responsibilities as a civil marriage, and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2014 in England and Wales legalised same-sex marriage in England and Wales. A similar law was passed in Scotland in 2014. In 2018 the English and Scottish governments began to review civil partnerships with a view to enabling opposite-sex couples to register a civil partnership, and legislation came into effect in May 2019. Heterosexual couples have been able to enter into a civil partnership in England and Wales since 2 December 2019 and in Northern Ireland since 13 January 2020. In Scotland, legislation is currently being considered in the Scottish Parliament. As a result, some long-term opposite-sex cohabiting couples may decide to enter a civil partnership and achieve the legal rights afforded to same-sex couples. Nevertheless, it is likely that many couples will still choose to live together and have children without formalising their relationship in any way. This is especially the case when one or both partners has been married previously and has no wish to marry or enter a formal relationship again.

⁶ Office for National Statistics (2017, November 8) *Families and Households 2017*.

⁷ OECS (2017) OECD Family Database SF1.2, *Children in Families*.

⁸ Marjoribanks, D. and Walker, J. (2019) *Family Relationships and Family Justice in Europe*, Family Court Review, Vol 57, 3 p213–326.

While the Armed Forces recognise marriage and civil partnerships, until recently they have not recognised cohabiting partnerships, so there are scant data available about the number of Serving personnel in cohabiting relationships. The Joint Personnel Administration System (JPA) in April 2019 indicated that some 64,000 regular trained personnel were married or in a civil partnership. Since these data derive from self-reports it is almost certainly an under-estimate. The AFCAS 2019 survey estimated that the figure is probably over 70,000, (54% of Service personnel are married and 21% are described as being in a long-term relationship, although it is unclear how the latter figure is defined). Good quality data about the number and nature of cohabiting partnerships are essential if Armed Forces policies are to reflect the reality of couple relationships in all their forms. The JPA system needs to capture all kinds of family constellations, especially as cohabitation may continue to be the arrangement of choice for increasing numbers of Serving personnel in the years to come, especially those establishing committed relationships second or third time around.

Changes have taken place in the Armed Forces in the last year which recognise long-term cohabiting partnerships if specific evidence can be produced, but there are significant issues in defining and proving what is meant by 'long-term'. Without accurate data about all family living arrangements the MOD will not be able to develop policies that appropriately reflect modern family life nor to support military families irrespective of marital status. This creates a significant disconnect between the ways in which all forms of couple relationship are recognised in civilian life and their recognition within the military. This sets some Service families at a disadvantage if one or both partners serves in the Armed Forces. This issue has been raised during all our visits to bases, garrisons and air stations and in the responses to the Call for Evidence, and we return to it in respect of Defence accommodation in Chapter 3.

Separation, divorce and re-partnering

Just as the choices about the kind of partnership couples enter into have increased, so too have the choices about ending a relationship. Although more marriages survive than end in divorce, large numbers of children experience the separation and divorce of their parents. A study in 2014 found that almost 25 per cent of UK adults had experienced the breakdown of their parent's relationship,⁹ Over 40 per cent of marriages end in divorce in England and Wales. Cohabitations also break down but there is no clear way to collect data about who is affected. But we know that by age 18, 27 per cent of children in the UK live in households with just one of their birth parents.¹⁰ Many of these children will have experienced the remarriage or re-partnering of one or both of their parents, and the consequent multiple transitions in family living arrangements. Repeated disruptions increase children's vulnerability and these children are most likely to be negatively affected by the breakup of their parents' relationship.

There is abundant research evidence documenting the potentially detrimental impacts of family breakdown on children and on their parents.¹¹ There appear to be no accurate statistics about the number of Service personnel who are separated or divorced, but it is known that military life places many stressors on relationships, and Welfare Officers have reported frequent issues relating to family breakdown. Parental divorce increases the risk factors contributing to poor outcomes for children and young people and it has become increasingly essential to understand the factors that promote positive child development and the ways in which children's best interests can be met.¹²

The quality of the child's home and family environment, and the quality of the relationship between the child and each parent are crucial factors influencing child development. Continued conflict between the parents has been shown to have detrimental impacts on children. Reducing conflict between separated parents and ensuring that their children can enjoy a continuing, loving relationship with each of them are essential ingredients in supporting children's well-being and facilitating positive child development, and this has become an important policy goal for successive governments in the UK. The overriding conclusion

9 Kneale, D., Marjoribanks, D. and Sherwood, C. (2014) *Relationships, recession and recovery: the role of relationships in generating social recovery*, Relate.

10 Department for Work and Pensions, (2018) *Improving Lives: Helping workless families Indicators and evidence base*.

11 Walker, J. and Abela, A. (2014) *Partnership, parenting and protecting children's best interests* in Abela and Walker (eds), *Contemporary Issues in Family Studies: Global Perspectives on Partnerships, Parenting and Support in a Changing World*, Wiley Blackwell, p382–392.

12 Misca, G. and Smith, J. (2014) *Mothers, fathers, families and child development* in Abela and Walker (eds) op.cit. p151–165.

from a range of research is that children thrive best when they are brought up in families characterised by predictable and consistent care, and such care is strongly associated with there being a stable and harmonious relationship between the parents.¹³

Research undertaken world-wide indicates the importance of supporting couples to sustain a positive relationship and of ensuring access to information and professional interventions that can assist them to repair a relationship under strain. Relationship counselling has been shown to assist couples to rebuild their relationship and cope with the stressors that are threatening breakdown.¹⁴ The ability to access Relate counselling directly has been shown to have very positive impacts for members of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines and the RAF. This programme is explored in more depth in Chapter 9.

If a relationship cannot be repaired and if separation and divorce are inevitable, assisting parents to reduce conflict between them and maintain a positive co-parenting relationship is an important predictor of how well children can adjust to family breakdown. Unresolved conflict can seriously undermine parents' ability to parent effectively. Parents and children are rarely well-prepared for the enormity of the changes and challenges they will face when the family splits up, and one of the most difficult tasks is working out how they will live separately and continue to parent.¹⁵ This is hugely demanding for all couples when they separate and even more challenging for Service families where the Serving parent is male and the family is living in Defence Service Family Accommodation (SFA) and does not have a privately owned or rented family home in which at least one parent can normally remain living with any dependent children after the family has broken up.

Although we no longer use terms such as 'custody' and 'access' and both parents are expected to share parental responsibility following separation, the majority of children continue to live with their mother most of the time. This usually means that, wherever possible, civilian children will continue to live in the marital home. This is not possible if the military family has been living in SFA and only the father is a member of the military. When the family splits up, the likelihood is that the Serving person, usually the father, will leave the SFA family home and move into Single Living Accommodation (SLA), and that the non-serving partner, usually the mother, and the children will be required to leave SFA within 90 days. As a consequence, both parents and their children are obliged to move to live in a different environment and, possibly, location, and children may well have to change schools and leave their friends behind. This level of upheaval is not necessarily experienced in civilian life or by Service families who do not occupy SFA or where the mother is the Serving partner, but it presents additional challenges and transitions for many families who are dependent on MOD accommodation. There are also very important and worrying consequences for families experiencing domestic abuse or intimate-partner violence, and we look in more detail at this issue in Chapter 8.

Moreover, maintaining post-separation/divorce contact with children can be an enormous task for the parent who is not living with them on a day-to-day basis, and requires considerable commitment, flexibility and continued cooperation between the parents which not all civilian couples manage to achieve. This task can be even more daunting for a military father, particularly if he moves into SLA, none of which can accommodate children visiting. Having somewhere to spend time with their children becomes a priority for military fathers who want to maintain contact and play an active role in their children's life. We know that in civilian life, many fathers have to travel long distances to spend time with their children and, in the worst case scenario, a parent may lose touch with their children, with potentially serious negative consequences for everyone concerned. This can be exacerbated for military fathers if their children move away from the area in order to secure accommodation, or when they themselves are posted to another location. During the review we have been told that being able to occupy spare SFA so that fathers and children can spend time together provides a lifeline for Serving fathers, enabling them to continue to execute their parenting responsibilities when they are not away from their home base or on operational deployment. We were told that ensuring 'contact' houses are available on or near the base is a policy in most military bases, but it sometimes depends on whether spare SFA is available. Ensuring that there is available SFA in all military locations that fathers can use, irrespective of their home base, is an important policy objective which we discuss further in Chapter 3.

13 Coleman, J. and Glenn, F. (2009) *When Couples Part: understanding the consequences for adults and children*, One Plus One.

14 Spielhofer, T., Corlyon, J., Durbin, B., Smith, M., Stock, I. and Gieve, M. (2014) *Relationship support interventions evaluation*, Department for Education.

15 Walker J., McCarthy, P., Stark, K. and Laing, K. (2004) *Picking up the Pieces: Marriage and Divorce Two Years after Information Provision*, Crown Copyright.

Family breakdown presents a series of challenges for all families but it presents even more challenges for those in the military where any sense of stability is under threat. Of course, many couples who split up move into new relationships and new step-parent families are formed, often fairly quickly. As these transitions are repeated, everyday life can become increasingly complex, particularly as newly-formed re-constituted families are likely to include children from multiple parental combinations. Step-family life can be very demanding and it is no surprise that many subsequent couple relationships also break down, heralding more disruption and further family transitions for children.

Evidence from the UK and internationally has highlighted an unequivocal association between relationship breakdown and adult ill-health and mortality¹⁶ and poorer mental health. Children are also more likely to experience negative health outcomes.¹⁷ On the other hand, research has shown that children living in strong, stable families tend to enjoy the best health.¹⁸ Moreover, multiple transitions are particularly detrimental when children experience repeated disruptions, the negative effects of which may be accumulative.¹⁹ This evidence has particular implications for Service children who experience other disruptions and transitions as a result of military life.

Changing gender roles

Other significant changes in family life impact on all families and disproportionately on Service families. Traditional gender roles in which fathers work while mothers stay at home to raise their children have long been challenged. The move towards gender equality has seen a dramatic shift in working patterns and expectations in the home. Today, both men and women are likely to seek meaningful employment and both partners may wish to build a career, even though the majority of household tasks and caring responsibilities tend to fall on one partner, usually the mother.²⁰

Furthermore, there is increased societal pressure on both partners to contribute to the household income, and for families to be economically self-sufficient, such that the number of dual-earner families continues to increase. Family life today is frequently characterised by both partners, whether they be in same- or opposite-sex partnerships working outside the home, and sharing child care responsibilities. Serving personnel who are frequently deployed, training or working away from their home base, or who are 'weekending' can find the expectations of gender equality in the home difficult to fulfil and this can cause increased tensions in the family, as we have seen during the review.

Family stressors

All families experience a number of life events that create stress on couple relationships and which can easily destabilise the family. One of the life transitions which is known to challenge many couple relationships is the transition to parenthood. This has been shown to be a significant stressor for most couples and a life event which can easily destabilise the couple relationship.²¹ It heralds a considerable change in roles and responsibilities for both partners, and challenges traditional gender roles in heterosexual households. There is increased societal expectation that fathers will contribute significantly to child care and household tasks. Qualitative research²² that sought to understand the stressors on relationships in order to help policy-makers find better ways to support family relationships highlighted the often unacknowledged difficulties faced by new parents. The transition to parenthood emerged as the most frequently cited stressor on relationships and one which could signal a decline in relationship quality.

16 Coleman and Glenn (2009) op.cit.

17 Strohschein, L. (2005) *Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories*, Journal of Marriage and the Family, vol 67 p286–300.

18 Rodgers, B. and Pryor, J. (1998) *Divorce and Separation: the outcomes for children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

19 Amato P. R. (2000) *The consequences of divorce for adults and children*, Journal of Marriage and Family, vol 62 no 4. p269–87.

20 Burnett, S. B., Swan, J. and Cooper, C. (2014) *Working Families: Who Cares?* in Abela and Walker (eds) op.cit. p215–226.

21 Walker, J. (2014) *The Transition to Parenthood: Choices and responsibilities*, in Abela and Walker (eds) op.cit. p120–135.

22 Walker, J., Barrett, H., Wilson, G. and Chang, Y-S. (2010) *Relationships Matter: Understanding the needs of adults (particularly parents) regarding relationship support*, Research Report RR33, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

This transition is likely to have an even greater impact on Service families, and this is particularly acute if one parent is away on deployment or other activity and not at home to share in child care responsibilities. In effect, the non-serving parent becomes a de facto single parent much of the time. In addition to the impact on the non-serving parent, periods of prolonged separation can have an enormous impact on the parenting skills of the Serving parent who can easily feel marginalised while away and uncertain how to pick up the parenting role on return.²³ We explore these challenges further in Chapters 4 and 8.

Research shows that in society generally, most couples do not seek or receive the kind of information and support that would help them to adjust their respective roles, develop their parenting skills and adapt to the changed home situation, and this is salient for military parents too.²⁴ Research shows that positive, consistent, supportive parenting predicts low levels of child problem behaviour and child abuse, enhanced cognitive development, and good outcomes for children.²⁵

Other transitions such as children leaving home, ill-health and death in the family can be very stressful and can destabilise families. Military families often live with the possibility of injury and death more than other families. When any life transition/major change occurs individuals and couples have to manage their emotional responses and changes in their roles, responsibilities, relationships with each other and with other people, including work colleagues. How they do this will shape and influence the probability of promoting negative or positive outcomes for them and their children.

Changing technology

Perhaps the most significant change impinging on partnerships, parenting and family life in the past 20 years has been the rapid development of electronic communication and the centrality of social media. Digital technology has changed working patterns and family relationships. Social networking is a central and ever-present feature in the lives of children, young people and their parents. It changes the way in which relationships are formed and maintained, and technological advances continue at an extraordinary rate.

The opportunities afforded by modern media communication are enormous and the use of Apps to ensure rapid information flow and the availability of instant messaging can open up new avenues of support for all families. While the benefits are considerable there are also risks. Concerns are increasing about cyber-bullying, on-line child sexual grooming and exploitation, and drug trafficking through county-lines.²⁶ Helping parents and children to mitigate these risks is essential, especially as it is a harder task for parents bringing up children without the constant support of the other parent.

Nevertheless the availability of social media has given the majority of families whose daily lives keep them apart the opportunity to stay in touch. This has had important benefits for Service families who no longer have to rely on sending and receiving 'blueys'²⁷ while the Serving partner is away from home. Nevertheless, there are circumstances in which contact is limited. This can be especially challenging for submariners and their families, and those Serving personnel on deployment to conflict zones or in theatre, or on special operations. Helping these families to cope during long periods of separation with very little or no contact is a key challenge in a world of fast social media and instant messaging. It requires careful communication with and regular support for families. Nevertheless, the increasing sophistication of technology should be a major benefit in ensuring good communication with and between military families, and we explore the opportunities in Chapter 10.

23 Nolan, M. and Misca, G. (2018) *A Review of Coping Strategies, Parenting Programmes and Psychological Therapies Available to Military Parents with Children under 5*, International Journal of Birth and Parent Education, 5, p10–14.

24 Nolan, M. and Misca, G. (2018) *The Impact of Military Life on Young Children: A call for early intervention* Journal of Health Visiting, 6 (10) p494–498.

25 Department for Education and Skills (2007), *Every Parent Matters*. DFES; Hoeve, M., Dubas, J. S., Gerris, J.R.M., van de Laan, P. H. and Smeenk, W. (2011), *Maternal and Paternal; Parenting Styles: unique and combined links to adolescent and early adult delinquency*, Journal of Adolescence, 34 (5) p 913–827.

26 Whitty, M., (2014) *The Internet and its Implications for Children, Parents and Family Relationships*, In Abela and Walker (eds), op.cit. p262–274.

27 The traditional way in which Service families have communicated in the past via 'air mail' type letters written on flimsy blue paper.

Why the changes in family life and society matter

The changes associated with new household structures and modern family life have important consequences for families, all of whom have to navigate the various pressures and stressors to take advantage of the opportunities that exist. We know that pressures on adult couple relationships can have an adverse effect on adults and children and can ultimately result in family breakdown, and diminish each partner's ability to work effectively and care for their children appropriately.

Studies also point to links between relationship distress and alcohol misuse, substance abuse, financial difficulties, depression, anxiety, and poor health. There is an unequivocal link between relationship breakdown and general adult ill-health, as well as specific conditions such as heart disease and raised blood pressure.²⁸ Children also experience adverse outcomes if parents are in continued conflict and distress, such as poor educational achievement, behavioural problems, physical and emotional ill-health.²⁹

By contrast, strong, supportive family relationships are central to promoting the psychological, social, and economic well-being of adults and children living in all types of household. Almost every study examining the association between parental relationships and parenting has found that the quality of the parental relationship between a parent and child is influenced by the quality of the relationship between the parents.³⁰ Strong, stable, relationships are vitally important in promoting strong, stable families and a strong, stable society. Stability in family life is of utmost benefit for Serving men and women and for the Armed Forces in general. The Department for Work and Pensions reported in 2017 that 11 per cent of children living in two-parent households in the UK had parents whose relationships were under stress.³¹ Undoubtedly this will include military families.

Issues relating to family relationships were the most frequent presenting problem in a sample of over 42,000 children seeking support for mental health difficulties.³² It is abundantly evident from the responses to our Call for Evidence that military life and, in particular, frequent separations, deployment and mobility, put a strain on couple relationships. We examine this evidence in Chapter 8. A research study undertaken after operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, suggested that marital difficulties could ensue as a consequence of military deployments for more than 13 months in a three year period.³³ We noted during the review that frequent deployments and times away from home are a major source of discontent and stress amongst partners and spouses.

While supporting families to cope with the extra strains of military life is a key objective, it is important to be able to target those couples who are the most vulnerable to family breakdown and the outcomes that flow from it. A study by Keeling et al³⁴ found that compared with the general population, Service personnel in the UK are more likely to be married, especially those aged under 30, and Service personnel aged under 30 are more likely to be divorced. This indicates a target group for support. Serving personnel over 30 are less likely than those in the general population to be divorced. These findings are consistent with research in the US which indicates that, compared with civilians, military personnel are more likely to be married, to marry at a younger age, to divorce at a younger age, and that female Serving personnel are more likely to have difficulties forming and maintaining romantic relationships.³⁵ It would appear that young, married military families are the most vulnerable in respect of family breakdown.

28 Coleman, J. and Glenn, F. (2009) op.cit.

29 Ibid. See also Harold, G. T. and Sellers, R. (2018) *Annual Research Review: Interparental conflict and youth psychopathology: an evidence review and practice focused update*, The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry vol 59, Issue 4, p374–402.

30 Marjoribanks D. and Walker J. (2019) op.cit.

31 Department for Work and Pensions (2017) *Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families*, Analysis and research pack.

32 Wolpert, M. (2017) *Outcomes for Children and Young People seen in specialist mental health services*.

33 Rona, R., Jones, M., Keeling M., Hull, I., Wessely, S. and Fear, N. T. (2014) *Mental Health Consequences of overstretch in the UK Armed Forces 2007–9, A population-based cohort study*. Lancet Psychiatry, 1(7), p531–538.

34 Keeling, M., Wessely, S. and Fear N. T., (2016) *Marital Status Distribution of the UK Military: Does it differ from the general population?* Military Behavioural Health.

35 Karney, B. R., Loughran, D. S. and Pollard, M. S. (2012) *Comparing Marital Status and Divorce Status in Civilian and Military Populations*, Journal of Family Issues, 22(12). P1572–1594.

The specific challenges for military families today

Military families, with one or both partners in the Armed Forces constitute a diverse population and we understand that the socio-demographic and cultural profiles of each of the three single Services varies considerably. Military families face all the challenges and transitions that civilian families face but they also experience a range of unique stressors due to military life. It is often said that **'when one family member serves, every family member serves'**. Several spouses told us during the course of the review that they feel 'wedded' to the military:

“ *When I married my partner, I married the Army.* ”
(Army non-serving partner)

For the vast majority of Army spouses and partners we heard from during the review, this was a conscious decision at the time, but not all were aware of just exactly what that would mean for their way of life. Over the years, being wedded to the Army (or indeed one of the other Services) was perceived variously as being a positive position and for others it had become negative as a result of feeling 'second best' and the demands of military life taking precedence. Understanding and then promoting ways to address the potential impacts of the additional challenges that Serving personnel and their families face is essential to maintaining the well-being of our Armed Forces and is a moral obligation on society.

In the following chapters we explore the evidence relating to these challenges, looking specifically at: the balance between the obligations of Service-life, family expectations and managing healthy couple relationships; the role of women in the military; the demands placed on dual-serving households; the task of bringing up children; the impacts of Service life on health and wellbeing; and the support needed at all stages and transitions. The term 'greedy institution'³⁶ has been associated with both the military and the modern family, resulting in a clear tension between meeting the demands of both. When families find it too difficult to balance these often competing demands and the ensuing conflicts are too difficult to resolve, the outcome may be either family breakdown or the Service person transitioning out of the military, or both. In order to avoid either of these fairly dramatic consequences, the Armed Forces will need to find ways of bringing the demands of military life and the demands of family life into closer harmony, reducing the tensions between the two so that neither one institution emerges as the 'winner'. A satisfying and stable family life is much more likely to support a satisfying and strong commitment to the military. The demands of both can be met providing there is clear recognition of the tensions and supportive ways in place to manage them.

The 'greedy' demands of military life and family obligations are seen in high relief in many dual-serving households and specifically for women engaged in active Service. The mantra of 'Duty First' can be particularly difficult to fulfil when both partners are Serving and have children to care for. 'Duty First' always refers to the military rather than the family. Again, when the competing demands become untenable the outcome may also be for the family to break up or for one or both partners to leave the military, or both. A difficult decision taken by some dual-serving couples is not to have children, and those who do have children have very difficult decisions to make on occasion. We heard from couples in this position who had to consider placing their children into foster care when they both needed to be away from home simultaneously and there were no other family members to take on childcare. This can be the case for single Serving personnel with children also. We return to this issue in Chapter 10.

In the following chapters we look in some depth at the challenges relating to parenting in military families, the pros and cons of 'weekending' and the fluctuating dynamics between parents as they negotiate and renegotiate their respective parenting roles before, during and after deployments. The emotional cycle of deployment, described in Chapter 4, brings different pressures and stressors for parents and for children. As family members struggle to adjust, the pressures may again become just too great and negative outcomes can result.

36 Segal, M. W. (1986) *The military and the family as greedy institutions*, Armed Forces & Society, 13(1), 9–38.

Understanding military family life: A story of multiple transitions

It is important to remember that very many military families flourish and it is often too easy to take a deficit approach which highlights vulnerabilities and poor outcomes. There is a clear need to understand how resilience is fostered and how families can be helped to find strong coping mechanisms so that they can thrive and overcome any adverse challenges.³⁷ It has been our intent to provide a balanced view, to weigh up the available evidence carefully, and to consider initiatives which are designed to offer better support to family members. In so doing, we have considered the ways in which other countries have sought to strengthen their military in a positive and constructive manner.

In order to take a balanced approach, the evidence from the review suggests that it is helpful to see military life as a series of changes or transitions as they are described in the family studies literature. Better understanding of these transitions and how each Service family can be better supported to manage them and to foster, enhance and strengthen their family life, has been a key focus in analysing the data. We acknowledge that the term 'transition' has a very specific meaning in the Armed Forces, and that it is generally used to describe the move out of military life into civilian life. It is clearly a very significant life event for a military family, but there are multiple and significant other transitions throughout military life as families cope with and adjust to a myriad of life-changing events as a matter of course.

A report by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ)³⁸ in 2016 begins by stating that for a significant minority of families, the transition from military to civilian life can be a difficult time that places stress on employment, health and relationships. The report emphasises that strong and stable families are important in helping couples and children through difficult times. The CSJ research indicates that:

- ☞ the Armed Forces need to make a stronger commitment to supporting Service families to stay together both throughout Service and as they transition into civilian life'.³⁹ ☞

The report goes on to say that the

- ☞ MOD and the Armed Forces should include treatment of personal and family issues as part of their overriding goals ☞

and in practice this means ensuring

- ☞ a greater willingness to provide support for relationships and ensuring family members know where to access support ...⁴⁰ ☞

The report advised the MOD and the Armed Forces to:

- ☞ think about how Forces families can prepare themselves for the additional challenges their marriages, partnerships and parenting will face as a result of military life, and how they can get the help they need if difficulties arise.⁴¹ ☞

The transition out of the military is the ultimate transition in a whole series of transitions which have to be managed throughout Service life. Our review supports the CSJ findings and argues that viewing military life as a continuous set of transitions will allow members of the Armed Forces and policy makers to challenge some of the more traditional military models which continue to dominate, consider their fitness for purpose in the light of the changes in everyday life, and promote new ways of supporting families throughout a Service career. In other words, transition should not be regarded as just a process to be

37 Misca, G. (2014) *Parenting Under Fire: An Ecological Perspective on Understanding Child Maltreatment in Military Families*. In: 3rd Military Psychology Conference 2014: *The Psychological Well-being of the Military in Transition*, 5th – 6th November 2014, The Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Shrivenham.

38 Centre for Social Justice (2016) *Military Families and Transition*, CSJ.

39 Ibid. p23.

40 Ibid. p23.

41 Ibid. p33.

managed when a member of the Armed Forces moves from military to civilian life but as a core feature of Service life from the moment of entry. For many military families, these transitions may include:

- becoming a member of the Armed Forces and taking on a specific set of values, behaviours and expectations
- living in accommodation provided by the military and adapting to life behind the wire
- forming a partnership and moving into family accommodation, still frequently referred to as 'married quarters' provided by the military either inside or outside the wire
- managing many house moves as individuals and/or units are posted around the UK and overseas
- becoming parents and bringing up children who will almost certainly experience several changes of school during their childhood
- enduring frequent and sometimes prolonged periods of separation and deployments
- frequently changing doctors, dentists and health systems
- coping with the challenges for non-serving partners associated with finding and maintaining employment
- possibly deciding to move from SFA into private accommodation and 'weekending'
- making decisions about where to live and whether to send children to boarding school
- coping with the daily and often unpredictable demands of military life.

Civilian families also experience some of these transitions but they are likely to have more choice about how, when and where to make them. Military families invariably have frequent changes imposed on them: they move around more often than the vast majority of civilian families, and have little or no real choice about doing so. While the assignments can open up new opportunities for families and can be exciting, they nevertheless pose certain challenges every time. Recognising the additional stressors as well as the opportunities constant transition can bring, helping families to manage the transitions specific to military life, and ensuring that support is available will enable Serving personnel and their families to be stronger and more stable, thereby promoting resilience and aiding retention.

The 2019 FamCAS survey indicates that about half of non-serving partners feel disadvantaged by Service life and do not feel valued by the Armed Forces, while almost 40 per cent would feel happier if their partner left the Service community. There is some evidence that female partners of Serving personnel rate their well-being as lower than a comparative sample of female partners in the general population.^{42 43} Furthermore, the 2019 AFCAS survey indicates that the impact of Service life on family and personal life remains the top factor influencing decisions about whether to leave the military. Understanding the drivers behind these somewhat alarming statistics and considering the policies and practices which can ameliorate them, has provided a focus for the analysis of the data obtained during this review and the emerging recommendations for change.

The responsibility for supporting Service families goes well beyond the Armed Forces themselves and the MOD, and requires joined-up support and commitment from across central and local government, the Devolved Governments, military charities, businesses, and society in general. The Armed Forces Covenant is a key vehicle for driving this forward and making it happen.

At no time would we or those who gave evidence to the review wish to plead a special case in respect of Service families, but it is a fact that the majority of Service personnel are required to move more frequently, spend more time apart from their spouses/partners and children, and face more danger during their careers than anyone else in public service or civilian life. The specific demands of a military career can have a significant impact on family life, functioning and well-being. The Armed Forces Covenant is designed to ensure that Service families are not disadvantaged by these impacts.

42 Misca, G. (2018) *From the War Zone to the Home Front: Risk and Resilience in Military Families*, International Journal of Birth and Parent Education, 5(4), 3–3.

43 FamCAS Survey (2019) op.cit.

During the review we have been repeatedly struck by the enormous sense of pride in being a member of the Armed Forces community. Serving and non-serving partners in all three of the single Services stressed this in their responses to the Call for Evidence, and during all our meetings with Serving personnel of all ranks and conversations with their families. The children and young people who spoke to us about their lived experience of growing up in a military family were equally keen to stress how proud they are of their Serving parent(s) irrespective of some of the downsides of military life. Family members fully appreciate that they have to make sacrifices in order to support the Serving partner, but occasionally these can have an unacceptable negative and cumulative impact on the health and well-being of everyone involved.

It is the sense of pride and commitment that enables the majority of families to cope with the transitions they face and build their resilience, but the sacrifices they make are not always obviously appreciated in wider society. The changes and reforms recommended from this review can build on this sense of pride and help to mitigate the negative impacts of Service life which can lead to family breakdown and, ultimately for some, the choice to leave the military when the stresses and demands just get too much and are perceived to be undermining family life. We fully recognise the need to maintain operational efficiency at all times, as do Serving and non-serving personnel, but to sustain operational efficiency there must be a national commitment to ensuring that Service families are appropriately valued and supported. This goes to the heart of the Families Strategy referred to in Chapter 1, and we return to the importance of there being a strong national commitment throughout the report.

In the following chapters we examine each of the key issues that have the capacity to adversely affect military families in the UK today and make a number of recommendations for change. We look first at accommodation and the proposals for offering greater choice for families.

Chapter 3

A Place to call Home: Increasing Choice

When we asked one group of non-serving partners about the issue that concerned them most their response was a chorus of ‘accommodation, accommodation, accommodation.’ This refrain was echoed repeatedly in meetings with Serving and non-serving partners around the UK and in the responses to the Call for Evidence by families living in Service Family Accommodation (SFA). In this chapter we examine the evidence relating to the state of and demand for military accommodation, consider the Future Accommodation Model (FAM), and the changes that need to take place in the choices offered to Service families if the widespread dissatisfactions with Service accommodation is to be fully addressed.

It has been traditional for Serving personnel to move into accommodation provided by the MOD at a reduced rent. Men and women who are single most often live in a mess on the base where they work in Single Living Accommodation (SLA), although single Serving women and men with parental responsibility for dependent children may well occupy Service Family Accommodation (SFA). The 2019 AFCAS⁴⁴ survey indicates that about 39 per cent of Serving personnel live in SLA during the week and a considerable number of these travel home to their family at weekends. Some 57 per cent of families live in SFA during the week, a proportion we understand that has not changed since 2014, and 37 per cent of families live in a privately owned home during the working week.⁴⁵ Army families have the highest take up of SFA of the three Services, and so are the most likely to occupy SFA.

These statistics indicate clearly that not all military families live in houses provided by the MOD. Whereas in the past the majority of married couples would probably choose to live in what is often referred to as ‘married quarters’, increasingly, in recent years, families have opted to find alternative accommodation which they either own or rent, in an area of their choosing, and often some distance away from the Serving partner’s home base. The 2019 FamCAS survey indicates that 60 per cent of families now own their own home, with officer ranks having a higher home ownership rate (81%) than other ranks (53%). We note that the FamCAS survey is circulated annually to Service personnel to pass to spouses/partners to complete. Unfortunately it is characterised by a fairly low response rate (25% in 2019) and therefore may not be representative of the large proportion of Service families. It is possible that many spouses/partners never receive the survey because it is not distributed directly to them, and we discuss the issue of communication with spouses/partners more fully in Chapter 10.

Nevertheless, the FamCAS survey provides an important indicator each year allowing data trends to be calculated. The 2019 survey shows a marked difference between the three Services in respect of living arrangements: with 68 per cent of Army families, 53 per cent of RAF families and 34 per cent of RN/RM families choosing to live in SFA. The survey shows that 81 per cent of RN/RM families would prefer to find their own accommodation, either rented or owned privately, compared with 72 per cent of RAF families and 51 per cent of Army families. The demand for SFA remains highest amongst Army families, as we noted above. These patterns mirror the home ownership percentages in the three Services: RN/RM 75 per cent; RAF 66 per cent; and Army 52 per cent. There are some 40,000 occupants currently residing in SFA.⁴⁶ Obviously we did not attempt to survey all these occupants but we did meet families living in SFA at all of the military bases we visited, and we received a good deal of information about families’ experiences of their housing situation through the Call for Evidence. We reflect their lived experiences in this chapter.

⁴⁴ UK Tri-Service AFCAS Survey 2019.

⁴⁵ UK Tri-Service FamCAS Survey 2019.

⁴⁶ Information provided by Defence Infrastructure Organisation, December 2019.

Service Family Accommodation (SFA)

Moving into Service Family Accommodation is a major transition for couples and families who have not lived in military accommodation before, especially if they have never lived in rented accommodation. Inevitably expectations will vary.

The Armed Forces Covenant 2011 states that

- 6 Where Serving personnel are entitled to publicly provided accommodation, it should be of good quality, affordable and suitably located.⁴⁷ 9

Nevertheless, the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report for 2018 reported that accommodation is the most highly reported concern to the three single Service Families Federations.⁴⁸ The Annual Report stated that:

- 6 Providing decent living standards and quality customer service is essential to maintaining the stability of family life and therefore, the morale on the front line. The MOD recognises that further work needs to be done to support Service personnel and their families.⁴⁹ 9

The Families Federations state in the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019⁵⁰ that there has been a welcome decrease in the enquiries regarding repairs and maintenance. Nevertheless, they cite ongoing difficulties in respect of complex housing issues and those that require multiple trade appointments. The Army Families Federation⁵¹ has indicated that repairs and maintenance constituted the largest area of enquiries between January and June 2019. Clearly, the MOD is well aware of the need to improve the housing conditions and we have been told that providing ‘safe, good quality and well-maintained homes is essential to supporting operational capability...’⁵² and one of the MOD’s top priorities. Over the last four years more than £530 million has been invested in improvements to SFA including

- 6 fitting external wall insulation and replacing windows, doors, roofs and boilers to improve thermal efficiency; installing new kitchens and bathrooms to maintain modern standards; and general refurbishment to ensure an improved quality of accommodation...⁵³ 9

In the Covenant Annual Report 2019, the investment reported in the financial year 2018–9 of £116 million was invested in improving and modernising SFA, a 40 per cent increase on the previous year. A further £123 million was being invested in the financial year 2019–20. These investments into SFA are very much welcomed but they are not likely to be sufficient to remedy the poor state that much SFA has fallen into over the years. The Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body’s 48th Report 2019⁵⁴ drew attention to the age of the housing stock and the limited past investment, and commented:

- 6 ... without the required level of funding available to maintain the entire SFA estate at Decent Homes Standard, the backlog of Life Cycle Expired assets will continue to increase, which MOD said may negatively impact the lived experience of the families it supports.⁵⁵ 9

There was recognition in all the bases we visited that much more significant investment is required if the older SFA properties are to reach a reputable standard and if Serving personnel and their families are to believe that they are appreciated and valued.

The evidence from our review, undertaken during 2019, is stark and points to the discomfort and misery felt by very many of the families who contributed to the review, and which was emphasised in the information given to us by the Chain of Command and welfare staff on the military bases we visited. While

47 Armed Forces Covenant (2011).

48 Armed Forces Covenant (2018) *The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report*, p18.

49 Ibid. p69.

50 Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2020, Crown Copyright.

51 Army Families Federation (2019) *Army – Concerns: Jan to June 2019*, AFF.

52 Communication from Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), July 2019.

53 Ibid.

54 Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body Forty-Eighth Report 2019, Crown Copyright.

55 Ibid. p64.

most Service personnel acknowledge that SFA offers a relatively inexpensive way to live, in their view there is no excuse for houses being damp and mouldy and for repairs to take months to be undertaken. We highlight the kinds of concerns that have been raised throughout the review while acknowledging that the MOD are fully aware of the challenge and determined to address it. The concerns about SFA centre primarily on the state of the housing stock and the response to and quality of the maintenance and repairs. We look at each in turn.

The poor state of the housing stock

Although over 1,000 new military houses are being built and the first tranche of houses on Salisbury Plain have been handed over, primarily to cope with the drawdown of troops from Germany, vast swathes of the SFA housing stock have suffered from little or no investment for several decades. The recent investment has obviously been helpful but has not been sufficient to make up for the under-investment in previous years. We note that the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee in 2016 concluded that Service families were being let down by the MOD because of the poor accommodation:

- 6 often leaving them for too long without basic living requirements such as heating, hot water or cooking facilities.⁵⁶ 9

Similar criticism is recorded in the most recent Public Accounts Committee report on military homes 2017–2019.⁵⁷ In the Defence Select Committee hearing in February 2019, the state of the SFA stock was described as ‘shameful’. Despite recognition of the problem over several years, we received many hundreds of comments about the poor state of SFA, of which the following is typical:⁵⁸

- 66 *Accommodation – POOR! The family’s most recent move has been such a farce as to be almost unbelievable.* 99
(Army/RAF dual-serving partners)

This dual-serving couple explained that they had moved four times in the previous eight years, and another four times before that. They pointed to the poor understanding of their family’s requirements. They reported numerous problems with SFA and detailed ‘poor treatment, bureaucracy, and general poor provision’ which they felt had been to the detriment of the family and to the Services in general:

- 66 *The process of moving and running a dual military family home is complicated enough but the stress we have continually faced is unacceptable.* 99

There is little doubt that the problems with SFA are hugely stressful for families. We record just a few of them below:

- 66 *I have had a hole in my roof for four months which means when it rains I have to have a bucket in my hallway to collect the rainwater It results in a damp and mouldy house and with an 8 month old, a 4 and a 6 year-old this is unacceptable.* 99
(RN Serving partner)

- 66 *While I have been deployed my family have had to deal with a house that has some broken tiles on the roof...resulting in the roof leaking every time it rains. It destroyed my son’s bed and resulted in all three of my children having to go to the doctor’s to receive treatment for sleeping in the damp upstairs.* 99
(Army Serving partner)

- 66 *We have had a number of quarters with no or sporadic heating over the winter months, and damp, mould, leaks etc. Workmen did not always turn up on time, came with the wrong materials, or the wrong type of workmen were sent in error...When the non-military partner is working (against all the odds) and has to take days off or arrange to work from home this is very frustrating and adds a lot of stress to busy families who have moved to a new area with a husband about to deploy.* 99
(Army non-serving partner)

56 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *Service Family Accommodation*, Ninth Report of Session 2016–2017.

57 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *Military Homes*, 102nd Report of Session 2017–2019.

58 In the direct quotes we indicate the Service represented and whether the responded is the Serving or the non-serving partner.

“ I will not put my family through an upheaval of this magnitude only to move them into a hovel because, quite frankly, after twenty-two years in the Service I deserve better.
(RAF Serving partner)

“ An adequate supply of married quarters needs to be the cornerstone of any military housing option but, critically, it needs to be maintained at an appropriate standard. Amey, and just as important, DIO [Defence Infrastructure Organisation] have been an absolutely, complete and utter failure in maintaining married quarters in recent years. I have lived in a house with no heating, the roof falling off and holes in the wall all the way through to the outside, with a new-born, and been told the house is acceptable. I have seen people fall through the ceiling of the living room after being ignored that it was structurally unsound. These sort of disasters effect morale and retention. ”
(Army Serving partner)

“ I would like to start by saying that there are many things I love about the military lifestyle. I have had some incredible opportunities and lived in wonderful places while following my husband and his career around.... [But] how can you ask a Serving family to support the Army, support their husband, live in a dump and be happy about it because it's cheaper than on civvy street. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

This Army wife felt that the Army community is

“ vastly underestimated and undervalued. I would not have made it through deployments, or even just some postings, without having like-minded people around me...I think the idea of FAM [Future Accommodation Model] is excellent, however, I would be devastated to see the end of patch life. ”

For these reasons she felt strongly that SFA must be up to standard and repairs must be undertaken as speedily as possible. We are told by the MOD that, according to their statistics, 97 per cent of SFA are meeting Decent Homes Standard as a minimum; 86 per cent reach Decent Homes Plus; and 95 per cent of response key performance indicators are being met. The statistics would appear to belie the lived experiences of those families who have evidenced mould and damp and other problems in their houses, and the comments from military personnel in the Chain of Command at various bases who regard the accommodation problems as one of their biggest issues. There is clearly more work to be done on some houses before families we spoke to will regard the home in which they live as being up to standard.

Many respondents to the Call for Evidence pointed to the mould and damp in their houses and lack of heating, with several sending photographs of mouldy kitchens and bathrooms. It was also clear that the poor state of housing was seen by some families as the last straw:

“ We decided to move into SFA two days before Christmas to a house with no heating, insecure lounge windows, a tree growing into the bedroom, a rat infestation. Two years of upset.....seven months with no heating on two separate occasions. As a result of over 350 workmen visits over a two year period I couldn't return to work, causing a loss of income for myself...he [my husband] decided to leave [the RM] rather than put us as a family through any further stress and anxiety. ”
(RM non-serving partner)

One long-Serving person in the Army compared the good state of military houses overseas, which he and his family had much appreciated, with the poor accommodation in the UK while living in 22 different SFA properties. He summarised the experience as follows:

“ We have encountered rooms without ceilings...mould, damp, fungus, where drains, sewers or gutters have been ignored by the property managers. ”
(Army Serving partner)

Mould was a relatively common complaint. While we understand that there is a clear escalation and resolution process in place to deal with damp and mould, we heard of numerous examples of how the problem had impacted on families and especially on children's health. We received several examples of detrimental impacts on children's breathing and the health of family members. As one long-Serving family who had lived in several SFA houses in the UK and overseas told us:

“ We suffered greatly with illness whilst in the [last] property, which we put down to both the mouldy bathroom and damp in the house... Had this house been offered to council tenants it would have been deemed unfit for human habitation. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

By contrast, this family had been allocated an ex-US Navy quarter when they had returned from an overseas posting, which they described as follows:

“ This had all modern appliances from dishwasher, fridge-freezer, washing machine and microwave already included. Without doubt, one of the best quarters we have lived in. ”

In common with many other families, this family told us that the SFA accommodation overseas was always of a higher quality than that in the UK:

“ The best house we had was in New Zealand...it was prestigious to match the appointment...Quarters in Germany were always pleasant and well-maintained. ”
(Army Serving partner)

While not all respondents to the Call for Evidence were unhappy with SFA in the UK and some described their houses as perfectly adequate, the standard of housing emerged as a clear and serious concern, and significant and sustained improvement will be needed if more families are to feel satisfied with the home in which they live:

“ I am seriously appalled at the quality of the SFA within the UK and the poor/lack of maintenance on them that we have to endure. ”
(Army senior Serving officer)

Those who reported satisfaction with SFA tended to feel that they had been 'lucky' compared to other colleagues, housing allocation regarded as being 'the luck of the draw':

“ We are in married quarters down here, and have been very lucky to find ourselves in a good quality, well-maintained property on a friendly and well-located estate. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ We were lucky enough to live in one of the newer houses that had central heating. However, colleagues of mine were unfortunate to live in houses that had no heating and relied heavily on gas heaters during the winter. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

“ ...we were extremely lucky to be given our current accommodation. It is our first Army house and we have a decent size garden, an option of a garage. The house is in relatively good condition, new boiler, old kitchen with an oven that continues to trip out our electricity. We have been told that it will not be replaced but we must continue to keep on calling the engineers out. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

Despite there being ongoing problems in the house, this family still described themselves as being 'lucky' compared to others. This may be due in part to the fact that families do not choose their own properties in the way most civilian families do. 'Basic' Information is provided online when an application for SFA is made, with photographs if they are available, and the family can express a preference for up to three of them, although there is no guarantee that a family will be offered one of the properties selected. One Navy wife said:

“ The process of allocating quarters is very difficult, you are issued with the details of available properties but this includes the most miniature photographs and is often useless, you aren't able to 'view' properties and you can't discuss with a local housing officer what each property is. This means you essentially pick a house blind and hope it was a good choice, in my opinion viewing a potential home should be permitted as you would in any other housing situation from local authority housing, private letting or buying. ”
(Navy non-serving partner).

This inability to view a property means that some families choose a house that looks good only to find that it may not be in an area that is suitable to their needs or is some distance from the base. We were told by the Chain of Command on one base that there are certain SFA properties located in an area where transport is poor, and schools, shops and other facilities are some distance away, and this can be difficult if partners do not have their own transport. Some SFA houses are also in areas with very limited Wi-Fi connectivity. There would seem to be a strong case for there being fuller information about the choice of properties on offer, so that preferences are better informed, and allocation is more about judgement than luck. We note that with some 16,000 SFA moves each year there is a real challenge in ensuring that choices are met and that it may not always be possible to meet a Service person's aspirations in terms of location, size and modernity. We understand that the Future Defence Infrastructure Service Housing Contract Statement of Requirement contains provision for 'Estate Agent' information for each SFA.

Many non-serving partners also suggested that they should be able to get on with applying for SFA while their partner is away on deployment in order to smooth the transition from one SFA to another:

“ Access to the system to apply for housing by the non-serving member of the family would be beneficial. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

Others commented on the fact that because they had to wait for their Serving partner to make the application this meant that they often did not have an address in good time to register children in local schools before the start of the school year. One Army wife explained that because her husband had been changing jobs he had little time to deal with organising SFA in the new area. As a result they moved into a property which was described by the non-serving partner as 'totally unsuitable for our young family'. In her view and that of many others we spoke to, it would make much more sense for the non-serving partner to arrange the house move. We understand that this change will be made in the new contract which will greatly assist families in making applications for and selecting suitable accommodation. A web-based system will make the whole process much simpler and will be widely welcomed.

We are aware that a number of positive changes are being made by the MOD and DIO which will improve the experience for families living in SFA, and it is important that continuous improvement is a key goal going forward.

Maintenance and repairs

The concerns about SFA focus primarily on the state of the housing stock and the response to and quality of maintenance and repairs. The 2019 FamCAS survey indicates that levels of satisfaction with the response to and quality of SFA maintenance and repair work had both increased by six percentage points, with 54 per cent of families living in England saying they were satisfied. With reference to the 2018 FamCAS survey, while commenting in the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Review 2018, Cobseo (The Confederation of Service Charities) wrote:

“ The satisfaction percentages in relation to maintenance are, it would seem, also at the lowest for at least 8 years with over 70 per cent of those Serving personnel surveyed [for the FamCAS survey 2018] reporting that they are dissatisfied. This is a shocking figure. The problem is one of underinvestment over many years and it would be helpful if the Report acknowledged this reality with greater openness and clarity⁵⁹ ”

Openness and clarity characterises the responses we have received from families across all three Services. This review received many very clear messages about the problems associated with maintenance and repairs to SFA. Despite an increase in satisfaction levels reported in the 2019 FamCAS survey, it would be easy to fill a volume with direct quotes about the concerns expressed to us. The major issues are with the length of time it takes for Amey (previously Carillion Amey) to deal with repairs and the seeming lack of concern expressed by them when families are without heating or hot water for periods of time. There were comments such as:

“ • you have to fight for everything;
• Amey do not value families;
• you get fobbed off and the wrong people come;
• we are supposed to put up and make do;
• the Call Centre just read off a script;
• there's a local Amey office but you still have to ring the remote Call Centre... they can't do anything locally. ”

These kinds of comments were heard on all our visits to bases, garrisons and stations across the UK. The following quotes illustrate the concerns expressed most frequently and they are representative of the comments we received from a large majority of the families who contributed to the review:

“ Within seven years of marriage we have lived in four married quarters, all of which have come with maintenance issues with poor resolution with Modern Housing Solutions/Carillion/ Amey...The last move was disastrous with a six-month year old baby, a three year old, a husband on his R and R from deployment and no working boiler. We felt abandoned by Carillion Amey who could not send an engineer and there was a long delay...three complaints had to be raised with regards to jobs incomplete, appointments missed and wrong replacement parts ordered. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

“ Our boiler was condemned three times but not replaced. We were without heating for months. ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

“ Emergency problems are often shrugged off and allocated a routine appointment weeks later. Getting the attention of a housing officer, or getting a housing officer to step up and help can be a very frustrating process...poor quality work is being carried out which then needs repeat visits to correct. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

We note that the RAF Survey Report 2016 included the following quote about living in SLA: 'I work on 5th generation aircraft but live in 1st generation accommodation'.⁶⁰ This was a feeling echoed endlessly about SFA in our study in 2019 as well. While we are told that improvements have been made since 2016 there were reports of poor accommodation from Service personnel, commanding officers and welfare staff at military bases.

One of the biggest frustrations for families is the fact that the wrong trade is sent time after time: for, example, an electrician comes instead of a plumber and has to go away again, and when the right person comes he may not have the correct spare parts with him so has to make another visit. We were given numerous examples of this kind of experience. The examples echoed the findings of the 2018 Future Defence Infrastructure Services (FDIS) Housing Survey of RAF personnel and family members.⁶¹ The respondents argued that a fully stocked van should arrive first time and fix the problem there and then to a high quality rather than doing 'a botched job, simply painting over the cracks'. These frustrations were echoed during our visits to military bases in 2019. Being able to report problems online would enable the repair process to be properly monitored. We were told that too many errors occur when the report is made by telephone to a remote call centre which may explain why the wrong trade is sent out.

We understand that Amey has a dedicated Continuous Improvement Team and that their recent focus has been on missed appointments and multi-trade events that contribute to the low levels of satisfaction. Over the last 12 months satisfaction rates have varied and the 2019 FamCAS survey clearly shows some increase in satisfaction, but there is still a way to go. The CEO of DIO has agreed an incremental approach to improve satisfaction levels by 4 per cent to reach 68 per cent by March 2020 and 72 per cent by 2021. It is fair to say that satisfaction varies between areas of the country and bases, rendering it important to target those areas where the quality of SFA remains a serious problem for families.

59 The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, 2018, op.cit. p 22.

60 RAF Families Federation (2016) *Living In*, RAF FF Survey Report.

61 RAF Families Federation (2018) FDIS Housing Survey.

We also heard many comments about Amey staff being 'rude' on the phone when families chase up repairs:

“ The standard of customer service, mostly passive-aggressive in tone and service has occasionally left my wife in tears. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

“ Amey are still carrying out insufficient repairs or failing to attend appointments and blaming the occupiers for not being at home. I personally witnessed one of the workmen stop outside, go ring the doorbell, and then get back into his van and drive away without waiting for the door to be answered...When you speak with some of the phone operators they are often rude and unhelpful and the only way to get things progressed is to stick in a complaint, which shouldn't be the case. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

Such comments were not uncommon. One senior Army Officer described Amey as 'a damaged brand'. This view was echoed by a number of welfare officers who often had to pick up the pieces when families were very distressed about the lack of response from Amey and desperate to get repairs done. Other Commanding Officers expressed the view that it would make sense for minor repairs to be done locally and for families to be allowed to get quotes from a List of Approved Local Contractors so that repairs can be executed speedily. Amey could approve the contractors and the repairs signed off locally by Amey representatives or the Commanding Officer. We understand that local repairs are allowed in Canada ensuring a more efficient service for military families. A RAF family who had experienced an assignment to Canada explained:

“ I found their maintenance regime to be more robust with much more emphasis on preventative works during the summer to ensure the homes are in good all round condition for the, admittedly, harsher winter months. Also, on completion of any work, which was often carried out by locally employed specialist contractors, we were visited by a representative of the CFHA [Canadian Forces Housing Association] to ensure the works were completed to the required standards and to our satisfaction. It was only after this process that the inspector would sign off the work and the contractor would be paid. We had less incidents of contractors not showing up at the appointed time and the works/disruption as a result of this very proactive management of the process. They still employ a similar call centre and prioritisation system to ours but the use of locally based companies ensured assistance arrived at the home much more expediently. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

During the course of the review we have been made aware of the difficulties experienced by families with special needs, particularly when a non-serving partner has a long-term illness or disability. For example, one non-serving partner who is disabled told us about the problems the family faced securing appropriate SFA and the long delays in ensuring that houses are suitably adapted to meet her needs. This had impacted on her husband's ability to do his job in the Army. Families with disabled children had faced similar difficulties. Welfare Officers told us that, in their view, houses tend to be allocated

“ without taking account of the welfare or the social needs of the family. ”

The recent survey, completed by 255 military families with a member with additional needs or disabilities, undertaken by the Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum (FANDF)⁶² has highlighted a 'lack of consistency in consideration given to additional needs or disabilities during both the personal assignment and housing allocation policies'.⁶³ Moreover, the survey points to issues with the time taken for housing adaptations to be undertaken. FANDF has made three key recommendations: first, that additional needs and disabilities must be taken into account in the allocation and retention of SFA to support consistent application; second, improvement of the DIO database to flag adapted SFA properties, and to flag properties housing families with additional needs or disabilities; and third, a study to investigate ways to best support, both financially and workwise, those who choose to buy their own home in order to ensure continuity of care for a family member with additional needs or disabilities.

62 FANDF (2020) *Giving a voice to Forces Families with additional needs and disabilities*, 30th Anniversary Report: Families Fighting On, SSAFA.

63 Ibid. p6.

Complaints

There were consistent concerns expressed about the complaints process in respect of repairs and maintenance. We were told that the three stage process is flawed as Amey seems to fail to log all complaints as 'complaints' (Stage 1), and a Stage 2 complaint can only be logged when Amey has not been able to resolve the complaint to the complainant's satisfaction, so that there is no way of escalating a complaint to Stage 2 if the complaint has not been logged as such in the first place.. We understand that many people who believe that they have a grievance simply give up when the process makes escalation impossible. The following is one example we were given along with the accompanying complaint forms and responses:

“ In one week I submitted three complaints and only received a complaint reference for one. This not only allows Amey to provide a sub-standard service without any way of occupants holding the company to account, but also supports a narrative of improving performance (both to customers and when submitting key performance indicators with respect to contractual obligations). ”
(RAF Serving partner)

The concerns expressed by families were endorsed by many welfare officers we spoke with. For example, one told us:

“ We really want families to feel valued, but Amey doesn't value them. The service is poor, there is very little maintenance, and the complaints process is shocking. ”
(RAF Welfare Officer)

Several respondents suggested that the complaints process would be far more efficient if complaints could be registered online and given a complaint number for easy tracking online of actions taken to resolve the complaint. This would promote greater accountability and transparency as well as making it easier and quicker to engage with the complaints process. We understand that changes are being made and we urge that complaints should be logged online and dealt with via a simple-to-use web-based system to ensure greater transparency and timeliness in responding to complaints.

Home improvements

A number of families expressed the view that it is important to be able make an SFA property feel like home, particularly if it is not in good condition when moving in. However, they feel very disheartened by rules which require them to return the property to its original state when vacating the property, even if that means undoing obvious improvements such as applying a fresh coat of paint, putting new tiles in the bathroom, hanging fresh curtains, repairing broken taps and creating flower beds in the garden:

“ Married quarters are very affordable and enable great flexibility however they are institutional in presentation (decoration) and have to be returned as they were when you moved in, therefore future families don't benefit from any modernisation you make to the property and they never really feel like home. We have lived in 2 quarters and both properties had features like fire safety stickers on doors and noticeboards, this means you always feel like you are 'in the Navy'. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

We visited one quarter where the couple had decorated the property to high standards and had been told they must undo the improvements before vacating it. When we asked DIO (Defence Infrastructure Organisation) about this we were assured that this is not the case providing that the improvements are suitable and acceptable. We understand that more flexible rules are being circulated to the Services and to welfare staff. It is to be hoped that these will be designed so as to encourage families to regard SFA as their 'home', not simply a house to live in for the period of a posting. Families told us that they want to be proud of the home they live in and be allowed to personalise and improve it.

We understand from DIO that provided permission is sought in advance of making changes to the property, families are generally permitted to carry out minor 'encroachments' either outside or inside of their SFA, including erecting a greenhouse or garden shed, adding security lights or alarms. These

changes are then examined when the family moves out and if it is decided that they do not add value to the property the family must remove them and make good. The rules about living in SFA are written in the welcome guides issued on the bases, which families around the UK showed us and, despite the assurances given by DIO that some changes are permitted, the guidelines nevertheless currently appear to discourage families from making improvements to the property. The list of things that must be removed, such as raised garden beds, garden awnings, vegetable patches and compost bins is fairly extensive. Given the general understanding that improvements are not encouraged or allowed we believe that the policy should be rewritten and greater clarity offered to families.

Remaining in a SFA property

Several families spoke about the difficulties they have experienced as a result of having to move home every two years or so. These difficulties fall into three specific categories: effective management of children's education and partner employment; family breakdown and the consequences of this in respect of parenting responsibilities; and the impact on family stability. We look at each in turn.

Protecting children's education and partner employment

A number of families spoke about the difficulties they face when required to move fairly quickly when the Serving partner is assigned elsewhere. This can be especially acute when assignments require the Serving partner to move at short notice or during a school year. We return to this issue in the discussions about children's education and partner employment. However, the current three month moving rule on assignment can be extremely disruptive to children's education and spousal employment. One Army wife described this situation as follows:

“ My husband's assignment is not due to finish until February 2020, but to keep the school disruption to a minimum we would like to move between academic years. Having accompanied him for most of his current assignment I am now planning to move this August 2019...Because I am moving in August [from SFA to own property elsewhere] but my husband is not assigned until February we will not be entitled to paid removals as we are not moving within the three months of his assignment. Even though I am moving to fit in with school years and avoid a February school move and my husband is going to be deployed overseas from September to February anyway...Changing the time frame to six months would be a real help and would probably not cost the MOD much more money, but would really help families. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

We heard many similar stories from families choosing to move in the summer holidays to avoid in-year disruption for children's education and finding themselves unable to claim any removal expenses.

The MOD recognise that children who are reaching critical examination periods may need to continue to attend a particular school. In these circumstances, SFA/SSFA can be retained for up to 4 months (e.g. one academic term). If it is not possible for a child to transfer to another school when public exams are due to be taken because of things such as the availability of a school in the new location; differences in exam syllabus; or the requirements of continuous assessment work, it is possible for families to retain their SFA up to the time when the relevant exams are taken. This includes: GCSE, A level and first degree. Furthermore, in cases where a child who has special educational needs is undergoing statutory assessment at their current school, SFA may be retained for two academic terms or until the end of the academic year. We understand that in other countries, such as France, moves take place in the summer school holidays as a matter of course. This ensures that there are no mid-year moves.

We are unsure as to whether families understand the concessions about retaining SFA and it may well be that the appropriate information is not reaching them. There seems to be a generally held belief that moves must be made within a three month time period. We understand that there is an established process whereby the Serving person can apply for a mid-assignment move outside of the usual timeframes and be eligible to receive removal expenses, for example, where there are compelling welfare, medical or compassionate reasons for a mid-assignment move.

Partners also told us about the need to ensure that they have sufficient time in which to make arrangements in respect of their employment, either being able to complete a specific work task, or being able to transfer to another company without facing a gap in employment and the consequent loss of income. Since partners are often in the position of not being able to build their own careers because of the demands of Service life, it is important that those in work are given sufficient consideration when their partner is posted elsewhere:

“ My husband's squadron moved location mid-way through a tour, which meant uprooting my career...I recently found out that he is likely to move again soon. This makes career progression very difficult as companies tend not to promote people to managerial roles if they leave a job every two years...My ideal solution would be to be permitted to stay in a quarter if my husband were to go on a tour that required him to be away a lot of the time as I would not see him even if I moved and I would have to uproot my career again...The military only care that their employees are in the right place at the right time...A lot of this feels like it's rooted in the outdated idea that military wives don't work and are purely there to support their husbands and children, but plenty of us are very well-educated and are already working in successful careers. ...It feels like I'm being asked to choose between my marriage and my career. ”

(RAF non-serving partner)

“ I believe that the MOD's ability to provide housing for us is extremely helpful and reduces a lot of stress. However, I do feel that, where possible there should be the option for military families to remain in their current married quarters if the Serving person is relocated elsewhere. This opportunity is there when a partner is deployed. ”

(Army, non-serving partner)

This partner explained that they had recently moved across the country and she had just managed to secure professional employment following training. However, her husband had been posted within six months of her gaining specialist work and she would not be able to secure this kind of employment if she moved with him. Being able to stay put was a sensible option as he was due to return to their current location within a year and would be moving back again. She went on to say:

“ I feel that securing an MOD property in one area during uncertain transition periods would hugely ease the stress of military life...I don't mind deployments but the dates constantly being changed and postings always being a different time length means we can never long-term plan or emotionally prepare...This is something I massively struggle with. ”

“ I have recently been informed that I will be required to move house on my next assignment. I am moving 25 miles up the road. This means an upheaval for my family and in my children's education. I am fighting this but I shouldn't have to. There is plenty of empty accommodation at my current location so I am not blocking the system. ”

(Army Serving partner)

Separation and divorce

We received a number of submissions from non-serving partners whose marriage had ended and they were in the process of obtaining a divorce. The following submission from an RAF family illustrates the difficulties partners may experience when attempting to apply for local authority housing. The family separated and the Serving partner left the SFA. His wife was given the standard three months to vacate the property. Having lived in SFA for over 20 years as the family moved around, she found that she was not eligible to apply for local authority housing as she had not lived in the area for two years so did not qualify. Her seeming lack of connection to any one area made her quest for housing very difficult. She said that she sought help from a range of military charities with little success and eventually the local council designated her as 'homeless' so that she could get on to the housing list. Because there was a waiting list for a house she had not yet been offered a property when the three month grace period was up and she asked to stay in the SFA property and pay the rent until a house was available.

This RAF non-serving partner was given an eviction notice to leave the SFA although there was no-one waiting to move in to the property. She was still married as the divorce proceedings were not finalised but appeals to DIO to stay in the SFA until she could be housed by the local authority were refused. She told us:

“ I was made to feel like a criminal, not only was I going through a divorce, working every day and taking care of my daughter, I was having to fight with an organisation that had housed me all my married life...I was asking DIO for consideration to allow me a place to live and raise my daughter without the fear of eviction. ...There was a lack of support bordering on malicious disregard. ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

We understand that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) went out to consultation in 2019 on new comprehensive statutory guidance for local authorities covering the Armed Forces Community and social housing. This included the suggestion that the local connection test should be waived for divorced and separated spouses and partners of Serving personnel. The feedback from the consultation is being analysed. We very much hope that changes will be made as a result of the consultation.

It is well documented in numerous research studies that separation and divorce are the second most stressful life event that people can face (death of a partner/child being the most stressful) and many people are totally unprepared for the changes and decisions they have to face.⁶⁴ Service families who move about are undoubtedly disadvantaged when it comes to applying for social housing because of the lack of being able to prove any local connection, and are expected to vacate their home fairly quickly when the husband leaves. Spouses and partners find it very challenging to obtain local authority housing when they have to vacate SFA. This simply adds to the stress the family experiences. The submission above was not an isolated story. Research⁶⁵ over many decades indicates the potential for conflict between parents to escalate both before and during the separation process and this can seriously damage their ability to co-parent effectively after the divorce. If one or both parents is under stress then this will be felt by children, and the detrimental impacts can be long-lasting.

Although the majority of children in civilian society continue to live primarily with their mother following separation/divorce, both parents are expected to maintain parental responsibility for their children and to cooperate to ensure that each child is able to maintain contact with both parents unless it is against the child's best interests to do so. Given that the majority of military children will be living with their mother following separation, male Serving personnel will continue to take parental responsibility and do their best to sustain regular contact. This can be very difficult if the Serving person moves into SLA and is unable to have children stay with them. Since joint parental responsibility underpins family justice policy in the UK, this must be supported. Operational requirements render co-parenting demanding and challenging for Service personnel and it is clear that Commanding Officers and Welfare Officers on the bases we visited are taking this issue very seriously. We are aware that wherever possible SFA and other facilities are made available for Serving personnel to enjoy quality time with their children as frequently as operational requirements allow. We know that single Serving personnel with primary responsibility for children can apply to live in SFA.

Numerous research studies have shown that children benefit from regular contact with both parents. It is easy for relationships to deteriorate further, conflict to escalate, and for children to experience greater disruption if the transition from being a family to being separated and living apart is poorly managed.

64 See, for example, Amato, P. and Boyd, L. M., (2014) *Children and Divorce in World Perspective* in Abela and Walker (eds), op. cit. p227–243.

65 See, for example: Kelly, J.B. (2000) *Children's Adjustment in conflicted marriage and divorce: a decade review of research*, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 39, p963–973. Kelly, J.B. and Emery, R. E. (2003), *Children's Adjustment following divorce: risk and resilience perspectives*, *Family Relations*, 52 p352–362.

Promoting family stability

As we discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, the constant moves experienced by Service families can have a devastating impact on the work opportunities and career paths of non-serving partners and disrupt children's education. Many families have questioned why there is an expectation that the family will be required to move SFA on assignment if the new posting is to a base within easy commuting distance. The aim to build super-garrisons and to cluster bases in a geographical area should minimise the need to up-sticks and move.

“ It would make sense for us to stay in our house [SFA] and for my husband to commute to his station and then come back home at weekends. There does not seem to be a need for us to move for another family to move in and the children could continue at school. ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

We recognise that military life is essentially mobile. The questions being raised are about the frequency and timings of that mobility, and whether SFA could be retained to promote greater family stability while the Serving person commutes to their military base if it is within a reasonable commuting distance. In civilian life many families stay in one location and at least one partner commutes daily or weekly.

Widening Access to SFA

Increasing numbers of couples choose to live in long-term cohabiting relationships and raise their children without formally legalising their own relationship. Partners who are not married nor in a civil partnership have been denied access to SFA until recently. This has clearly discriminated against the growing numbers of couples who choose not to marry or form a civil partnership and prefer to live as a cohabiting couple and bring their children up in this kind of family structure. While the rule has changed recently there is a four year Service requirement before SFA is considered for cohabiting families. Moreover, the Serving partner has to show evidence of the relationship being 'long-term', that is more than 365 days in duration, and proof is required through the existence of joint bills and accounts.

While on the face of it the new policy recognises the choices increasing numbers of couples make about the status of their relationship, the requirements and lack of entitlement continue to be discriminatory for couples who have been in a long-term cohabiting relationship for some time, especially for those with children. If appropriate evidence can be produced this does not infer entitlement to SFA, but it merely infers eligibility to apply for surplus SFA. Surplus SFA refers to the existence of spare SFA in the Serving person's home base/duty station. Couples who are married or in a civil partnership have priority on the allocation of SFA and only if there is a clear surplus can unmarried families apply for accommodation. Not all bases and stations have spare accommodation so even if a couple in a long-term partnership is eligible there is not any guarantee that SFA will be available for them.

Moreover, the Army Families Federation has pointed out even when SFA has been allocated to a long-term partner family, should that surplus SFA be needed subsequently by a family who are 'entitled' to it then the long-term partners' family will be given 28 days to vacate the property. In other words the new policy still has restrictions and does not offer any entitlement. So even if a family is able to secure surplus SFA in one area, there is no guarantee that surplus SFA will be available to them when they are posted to another military base. This could have the negative impact of the family having to seek alternative private accommodation on assignment elsewhere and losing the community of 'patch' life which they and their children had experienced. This policy indicates an unacceptable lack of security of tenure for these families. Senior staff and welfare officers in all three single Services have highlighted the unfairness of this policy and its lack of understanding of modern family life. Senior members in the Chain of Command have commented that changing this policy, which they describe as being unacceptable, unjust and discriminatory, should be very high on the MOD agenda. As one non-serving partner wrote to us:

“ In your report are you going to re-clarify the definition of a 'Service Family'...the rules still infer the model of a working male with a stay-at-home wife and two children. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

We were given a number of examples of the negative consequences of the policy, including an unmarried dual-serving couple with a sick child and another on the way, who could not obtain surplus SFA and had reluctantly made the decision to leave the Armed Forces in order to avoid going through what they described as having been ‘torture’ to attempt to live together in SFA. Other cohabiting partners described the restrictive policy as discriminatory and archaic, and out of step with modern relationships and the principle of choice in forming committed couple relationships.

We understand that the rules pertaining to couples in long-term relationships are currently under review. For example, the policy was changed three months after its introduction to ensure that those in a long-term relationship who already had children were not disadvantaged. However, we note that the Armed Forces Families Strategy has a starting point that all types of family are included: co-habiting, married, those with and without children, those with caring responsibilities, single parent families, heterosexual, homosexual and so on. Current entitlement to SFA lies with married and civil partnership families, however, and long-term cohabiting partners are eligible only for surplus accommodation. There may be a question as to whether there is sufficient, suitable SFA to enable everyone to have entitlement, but there is an extremely strong feeling amongst Service families and the Chain of Command on many bases that the current rules which do not give long-term cohabiting partners equal entitlement are discriminatory, unfair and unhelpful in encouraging retention of highly skilled Service personnel.

If the MOD and the Armed Forces are committed to supporting families then they need to embrace the choices Service personnel make about whether to formalise their adult couple relationship or not and remove the disadvantages and discrimination they currently face. We agree that the current requirements are unfair and that they discriminate against a section of modern society who make the choice to live together without formalising their relationship in law.

The Cohabitation Policy was introduced with effect from 1 April 2019 for those Serving personnel with more than 4 years’ Service who can meet the criteria to show they are in a long-term relationship which has endured for more than 365 days. As at mid-November 2019, there had been 1,108 applications and of these, 579 had been approved and these families had either been housed (250) or were waiting to be housed. These statistics illustrate the demand for SFA by cohabiting couples in long-term relationships, and strengthen the argument that all discrimination should be removed.

Increasing Accommodation Choices

The MOD has been looking to increase choice for families in respect of the housing options available and also reviewing the relationship between supply and demand for SFA. We agree that it is vitally important to maintain a credible and realistic offer for supporting Service families that reflects the changes in society, family structures, living arrangements, and economic drivers. There is also widespread recognition that the current accommodation model is not sufficiently agile to meet changing demands and expectations and to mitigate the level of dissatisfaction with both SFA and SLA.

During our discussions and visits a number of Serving personnel have asked questions as to whether the current accommodation model is fit for purpose and the extent to which it offers consistency of provision to all members of the Armed Forces. Undoubtedly, there are variations in quality and also variations in demand. There is also accommodation that is not currently occupied because of its poor state. An important task for the MOD and the Armed Forces going forward must be to clearly understand the various accommodation requirements that fit with the principles of fairness and support for military personnel and their families and which meet the needs of operational efficiency, and then to consider the most appropriate options for change. The long-standing tradition of providing accommodation as part of the Service offer clearly needs to be reviewed in the light of modern family life. Our review demonstrates that the three single Services have rather different patterns in their use of Service accommodation. The 2019 FamCAS survey found that of those who responded to the survey just 24 per cent of RN/RM families did not own their own home, compared to 34 per cent of RAF and 48 per cent of Army families,⁶⁶ although not everyone was actually living in the home they owned.

⁶⁶ FamCAS (2019) op.cit.

The RN/RM and RAF families have been less dependent on SFA in recent years and more likely to buy their own home and provide stability for the family while the Serving partner commutes weekly to the base they are assigned to when they are not deployed. This is commonly referred to as ‘weekending’. Since spouses/partners cannot go to sea with their Serving partner there is a greater incentive for RN/RM families to stay put in one area and live off the patch. An estimated 24 per cent of the UK Armed Forces as a whole live separately from non-serving partners during the working week. This figure rises to 36 per cent of Royal Navy Families.⁶⁷ Added to the time spent on deployment, weekending increases the time families will spend living apart. There are clearly sacrifices which accompany this choice which Service families acknowledge as the price they pay for greater stability in some aspects of Service life. But the price can be considerable as our call for evidence revealed:

“ My son suffers from severe anxiety. He’s off school today, mainly due to the impact of Daddy weekending backwards and forwards. This is really disruptive for children and has a huge impact on their lives. ”
(RM non-serving partner)

“ In 2017 ...we bought our family home...our primary reason for this was schooling: our eldest child was months away from starting secondary schools and we did not wish his education to be disrupted by the demands, stresses and disruption that new postings can create... ”
(Army non-serving partner)

This mother went on to describe how her husband had been offered promotion on a posting some 625 miles away from their home and was feeling he should turn it down because

“ our daughter suffers with separation anxiety which has become worse since my husband works away each week. This has led to a CAMHS referral for which we are currently receiving help and support... and waiting for counselling for her. ”

She felt that there is a severe lack of compassion towards married unaccompanied personnel and their families when postings are allocated:

“ ...I feel myself and my children have been let down by the British Army. ”

Some families had felt ‘pushed’ into weekending for a number of reasons or had chosen it to provide stability for their children’s education:

“ We did apply for and reserve a SFA property but the rise in charges and expected standard of the SFA was one of a number of issues that pushes us into the commuting scenario, whereby I live in the Mess during the week and commute home for the weekend. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

“ I have been with my husband for ten years and seven years of this time has been a long-distance relationship. I am aware that the needs of the Army come first but this has been a huge strain. For five years we were 300 miles apart and I felt myself seriously getting down with the situation. ”
(Army non-serving partner who had been living with her Serving partner in a long-term relationship prior to getting married)

“ I have been a Forces wife for 20 years. ... With our three children for the majority of this we have lived off base and purchased our own property. This meant that we detached ourselves from any support on base. When the children were very young and my husband was on detachment to Afghanistan for two six-month tours, I found this time incredibly hard and my only support network were the forces wives we knew in the village who also had husbands away. Otherwise I felt very much on my own. Once my husband returned from detachment he mostly lived away from home and weekly commuted. We chose this because we wanted to have a secure base for the children and did not want to pursue the boarding school route. I often think that those of us who choose not to live on base are forgotten by the system. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

⁶⁷ MOD (2016) Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitudes Survey.

The Naval Families Federation has pointed out that weekending can add to the pressures on couple relationships and that the disruption of weekending can be particularly challenging for children with special educational needs.⁶⁸

An online survey undertaken by the RAF Families Federation⁶⁹ between December 2017 and February 2018 looked at the lived experiences of dispersed families in the RAF. Some 70 per cent of the families were living in their own accommodation compared to just 38 per cent of the RAF respondents to the 2018 FamCAS survey. We have noted earlier that the FamCAS surveys tend to be completed by a limited number of families, hence the variations in findings from different surveys. The drivers for dispersed living were home ownership and family stability. The majority reported that their quality of life was better than living in SFA and the increased stability had a positive impact on partner employment and children's education. The downsides were the absence of the Serving partner during the working week and the negative impact this had on their children and family relationships. The 2019 FamCAS survey asked about accommodation preferences and the responses indicate that 82 per cent of RN/RM families, 72 per cent of RAF families and 51 per cent of Army families would prefer to live in their own home rather than in SFA. The survey suggests that the majority of families (70%) were living in their preferred choice of accommodation at the time of the survey and 26 per cent were not.

A summary of needs undertaken by the Naval Families Federation⁷⁰ also reported a perceived lack of support for geographically dispersed families whose particular challenges as a Service family are often not understood by local communities and services. Indeed, we were told that the distance from the RAF station was often a barrier to accessing suitable support. These findings were reflected in many discussions with non-serving partners who had opted to live in their own homes away from their partner's base. The sense of isolation is increased further during deployments: one Army wife with very young children whose husband was away on deployment spoke of her loneliness since they had moved 'off the patch', and her inability to access support from other Service families and facilities in the garrison. She also described a lack of understanding of her needs in the community in which she was living as she was the only Service wife living in that area and, in her view, she was 'looked down on as being a single parent'.

Given that there is an expectation that more families will choose to live in their own accommodation it is very important to ascertain the kind of supports that families living off the patch need in order to cope with the possibility of loneliness and isolation, especially during deployments, and the impact of weekending on couple relationships when partners are not on deployment. The following comment is typical of many from families who had opted for a 'weekending' pattern of family life:

“ Not living on a married patch means the lack of support when partners are deploying is absolutely abysmal. Deployment packs are not given and deployment packs are apparently held on ships ...how are families supposed to receive deployment packs? Communication is shocking. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

We return to the issue of support for dispersed families in Chapter 8 and discuss the challenge of communication with families in Chapter 10.

The Forces Help to Buy Scheme (FHTB)

The Forces Help to Buy Scheme is regarded as a very positive offer for Serving personnel. The scheme was launched in 2014, initially for three years, and has been progressively extended since then. It enables Serving personnel who meet a number of requirements, to borrow up to 50 per cent of their annual salary up to a maximum of £25,000 interest free to buy their own property which they or their family are then expected to occupy. The scheme is not open to anyone who wishes to buy-to-let. The pay-back period is 10 years.

68 Naval Families Federation (2019) *The Experience of Parental Absence in Royal Navy and Royal Marines Families*.

69 RAF Families Federation (2019) *Survey Snapshot: Benefits and Challenges of Dispersed Living*.

70 Naval Families Federation (2018) *Summary of the Naval Families Federation Evidence of Need*.

Up to 30 September 2019, the FHTB scheme had helped some 19,400 Service personnel to purchase their own property. We received many very positive comments about the scheme, as well as concerns about whether it would continue:

“ Most Services families would love the opportunity to buy a property...the FHTB scheme is fantastic and worthwhile in terms of retention. If this is removed it's just another negative story that seems to be prevalent within the Services at the minute. ”

(Army Serving partner)

“ Amongst my friends and colleagues the Forces Help To Buy scheme has been well-received and widely used. ”

(RAF Serving personnel)

“ The FHTB scheme is a massive retention positive tool and should be a standing offer, rather than the yearly update to extend the scheme each December. This policy alone could retain personnel by tying them in to long Service as they repay the investment...There is a relatively high proportion of RN specific personnel who own their homes. ”

(RN Serving partner)

This RN officer went on to observe that although SFA appeared to him to be a diminishing resource it is highly valued by RN families. We understand that there are no plans to reduce the stock of SFA.

There is little doubt that FHTB is valued. The main concern expressed during our review, however, were whether this scheme would continue into the future. The FHTB scheme is popular but constant short term extensions have been regarded as extremely unhelpful and a family's ability to plan long-term as being compromised. Families we spoke to needed to know that the scheme would continue into the foreseeable future so that they can plan accordingly:

“ The Help to Buy scheme is viewed as a real positive, but again we have been told it will cease at the end of this year (31 Dec 19). This forces many families' hands to buy accommodation now, or perhaps feel that they have missed the opportunity to invest. As the loan is fully repayable, this appears to be a cost neutral endeavour by the Armed Forces to support families buying a house. Why not therefore, agree to maintaining the scheme for another 5 years. This would afford families the confidence that help from the Armed Forces is available and would allow many to make longer term plans. If the Armed Forces want their personnel to move into the private sector market, why remove a means for them to do so? Consideration should also be given to also affording families a 'buy to let' option. ”

(Army Serving partner)

We were delighted to learn that the scheme has been extended for three years to 2022, and that plans are in hand to consider some amendments to provide wider eligibility and flexibility, rendering it unnecessary for us to make a recommendation about its continuation.

Several people during our visits were of the view that helping families to buy a property that they could live in when they leave the Armed Forces would be sensible as it would ease transition out and also help families to plan ahead. Restrictions on renting out properties bought via FHTB are viewed as overly restrictive. However, the Forces Help to Buy scheme was established in conjunction with HMRC and HMT and is inextricably linked with Beneficial Loans tax legislation. Under current policy, where a Service person lets out a property bought with the help of an FHTB advance, interest is charged at HMRC's official rate. We understand that it is improper use of public funds to provide 'buy to let' facilities.

“ The Forces Help to Buy scheme was/is an outstanding initiative. However, for those of us who do not wish to lay roots in one place, its lack of flexibility with regard to letting the house out makes it extremely restrictive. Granted, it can be let if a posting subsequently takes you more than 50 miles from it, but firstly it cannot be utilised while overseas and secondly, two year postings (often less) make the logistics of the move(s) difficult. ”

(Army Serving partner)

The apparent restrictions on usage have caused concern for some people who like the idea of having a firm base for the future or when they leave the military but want greater flexibility.

The Future Accommodation Model (FAM)

During our review plans have progressed to pilot a new accommodation model which is designed to increase choice and encourage stability. The Future Accommodation Model (FAM)

- 6 aims to reshape the accommodation offer to recognise need rather than rank, and to incorporate the needs of the 21st Century family.⁷¹ 9

The offer features a basic accommodation allowance, supplemented by additional payments, depending on whether the Serving person chooses to be mobile or stable. There are a number of criteria governing who can apply while the model is piloted over the next three years or so.



Photo 3.1: More Choice, Family Accommodation Model, MOD

The model offers two specific options over and above existing housing provisions via SFA and SLA. First, a Serving person can use FAM to buy their own home, using FHTB if they wish; or they can choose to rent a home in the private rental market. If the choice is to rent privately, the Serving person can receive a regular monthly payment towards their rent, made up of a FAM core payment and a FAM rental payment which adjusts for the number of children and the relative cost of private rentals in the area. The payments are designed so that the cost of renting privately will be broadly the same as for an equivalent home in SFA. The new approach is based on each Serving person's need rather than their rank or marital status.

Three pilots, one in each of the three Services (HMNB Clyde, September 2019; Aldershot Garrison and RAF Wittering in 2020), are being phased in over an eight month period from Autumn 2019. The pilots are expected to test the policy and the take up. A decision as to whether to implement the FAM more widely will not be taken before 2023 and roll out, if it is seen to be beneficial, will take some 10 years. The piloting of the FAM model experienced a number of delays which caused an element of scepticism and uncertainty. A survey conducted by the MOD in 2016 indicated low awareness of FAM: 42% of the 27,997 Service personnel who responded had never heard of it, and a further 19% had heard of it but knew nothing about it.⁷² We found limited understanding about how FAM would work in 2019.

71 Taken from the welcome packs on bases.

72 Ministry of Defence (2017) MOD Future Accommodation Model Survey 2016.

When respondents to the 2016 survey were asked about their accommodation preferences the top two were: 'living in good quality accommodation' (97%) and 'being able to choose where I live' (88%). Accommodation quality clearly matters to military families as we have seen in the review, but as the survey revealed, one size does not fit all. There were clear variations between the three single Services, and between those who had children and those who did not. The accommodation choices made by Service personnel are clearly linked to their personal circumstances: families with children could see the advantages of having a stable home in a chosen location which would provide long-term stability for partner employment and children's education. Unmarried couples could see the advantage that FAM would enable them to live together as a family, a reflection of the current restrictive rules about entitlement to SFA. Over half of those who responded to the MOD survey considered the FAM to be an attractive option.

It is clear from the responses to our Call for Evidence and visits to bases, garrisons and air stations, that FAM is broadly welcomed by the RN/RM and the RAF while many in the Army remain uncertain and harbour a degree of suspicion that its real aim is to do away with SFA and require Serving personnel to find their own accommodation in the private rented or home ownership sectors. Many people referred to it as a cost-cutting exercise and one that would effectively destroy the sense of community built up on the patch, rendering Service families more isolated. This view was more likely to be expressed by Army personnel than by those in the other two Services. The patch-based community remains a dominant feature of Army life, underlined by the tendency for units to move en-masse. Serving personnel in the RN/RM and RAF, by contrast, tend to move as individuals (known as trickle posting) and are less wedded to the desire to maintain the Service patch community. The following comments were all submitted by Serving Army personnel:

“ The proposals for the Future Accommodation Model are a real concern and would make military life an unsustainable model as it stands. The plans are likely to be a key factor in me leaving the Army. ”

“ The threat of the Future Accommodation Model with very little knowledge as to what it looks like is an unwelcome irritant. ”

“ FAM might present value for money when looked at in isolation but I am prepared to bet my pension that it will result in net loss, as a result of increased sign-offs, marriage failures and other welfare issues. ”

“ ...if FAM is instigated...it will rip the soul out of the military community. ”

“ Many people now feel that Service accommodation is being frowned upon and that the cost to the MOD is prohibitive. Everyone is now encouraged to buy their own home, which in itself is laudable. However, the effect this is having on the Service community and ethos is a negative one. People in the Service community helped and assisted each other when people were away on detachment. Welfare services from the units could engage and ensure that the families were supported. Due to the cost of housing around most bases, then this is prohibitive for first-time buyers, especially junior ranks, so people tend to but away from the unit. Net effect, the camaraderie and friendships are not formed, hence the negative effect. This has an effect on the morale on unit and, indeed, has caused anxieties when personnel are deployed for long periods, six to nine months, as the support network can be felt to have been withdrawn. ... The welfare personnel have problems with gaining any face-to-face contact. ”

(Army ex-Serving partner now a Reservist)

It will take a good deal of persuasion for many soldiers to feel positive about FAM. Some of those who are suspicious point to a lack of clear information about FAM and poor communication with families. Even in one pilot area we noted that there was continued confusion among Serving and non-serving partners about what the offer looks like.

We have been assured by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation that there is no intention to reduce the availability of SFA during the pilots. Because the pilots were delayed, however, suspicions about the longer-term plans for SFA remain rife. Our understanding is that FAM will offer greater choice for families to be able to decide how to manage their home-life and their Service life. There are still concerns, however, expressed by those generally in favour of the idea. The issue raised by some families is that if

they buy a house in one area they might then find that a posting takes the Serving partner a long distance from the home, with a negative impact on family life:

“ We bought our own house and the reasons were two-fold: it would mean that my children wouldn't have to move schools every two years, and my wife would be able to continue her further education at university and get a job in her respective field without having to worry about transferring or moving... However, life was not so green on the other side... I was very much an absent father 5 days a week... This led to strains on my relationship with my daughter and left me feeling extremely low. My wife and I decided to move back into married quarters and rent our privately-owned house out. ”
(RM Serving partner)

The concern about living apart was one which several people raised as the negative consequence of buying one's own home:

“ I used Forces Help to Buy to help with a deposit contribution on my own home. I now live away from that home serving 'Married Unaccompanied'. Whilst not ideal my family are settled and in a fixed location now for the remainder of my Service. The Mess accommodation and general infrastructure in my current location is woeful. ”
(Army Serving partner)

This soldier's aim in buying a house was to allow his wife to become settled in a job once their youngest daughter had started school. While in SFA his wife had not been able to stay in one job for a sufficient period therefore she had relied on part-time work. They thought that they understood the pressures of living apart but subsequently felt that there was 'not enough understanding, sympathy or consideration given by the chain of command' to the fact that he and his wife were living at opposite ends of the country. His family were finding it difficult, were aware of the pressures of his job, and knew that he was living in unsatisfactory SLA such that he felt it was having a deteriorating effect on his mental health and general well-being.

This example and others like it renders it imperative that the FAM pilots must look carefully at the unintended consequences of living apart and weekending when long distances are involved, and that families need to be fully aware of the pressures that might accompany such an arrangement, so that they make informed choices about whether moving into the private sector is right for them. The evaluation needs to look further than the choices people make and attempt to understand individual motivation and outcomes.

In some areas, we were told that postings to specific remote bases, such as those in Scotland, are unpopular and that encouraging families to settle there or take up the FAM offer is likely to be a 'hard sell'. It was suggested to us that there could be some additional incentives built into the scheme to encourage take up near remote bases, and this should be considered in the pilot evaluation.

During our review we found some enthusiasm for the FAM model from those already looking to move on from SFA, and from the RN/RM and RAF Families Federations, but continuing negativity from the Army. The pilots could well highlight further the different choices about accommodation already evident between the three Services. Nevertheless, greater choice is clearly important but if choices are to be better informed there needs to be an increased emphasis on providing information to Serving and non-serving partners in as clear a manner as possible.

Of course, if efforts are made to reduce the number and frequency of postings in attempt to ensure greater stability in family life, then new options such as FAM may become more attractive. Hesitancy to move out of SFA is to some extent influenced by the fear of continuous postings that render any privately owned accommodation remote from the Serving partner's location:

“ Due to the possibility of postings we have been put off buying a house... the number of house moves is a concern for the future. ”
(Army Serving partner)

There is clearly some tension between thinking about privately renting or buying a home and the safety net of SFA. Nevertheless, there are clearly incentives to be considered:

“ We have lived privately for two postings. Having experienced first-hand the state of married quarters I would rather pay more to live in a property that I have control over the maintenance. ”
(Army Serving partner)

The ability to have control over accommodation quality, maintenance and location is regarded as an important factor by those not wishing to live in SFA. The responses we have received would seem to suggest that the value placed on SFA and patch-based living is largely driven by the numbers of times families have to pack up their home and move somewhere new. Moreover, if regional hubs work well then access to support should be more easily accessed when families live off the patch and in local communities around about. A whole family, systemic approach to supporting Service families needs to go hand-in-hand with the new choices and a revised accommodation offer, and a more attractive set of housing policies.

We have been assured by the MOD that for the future FAM planning, and modernisation of the accommodation offer, the MOD will be considering a range of options to help enable Service personnel and their families to benefit from an enhanced accommodation offer. The FAM pilot offers incentives to Service personnel who are buying a home for the first time as a result of being posted to a pilot site. Key to future considerations will be the evidence and feedback received from the FAM pilots.

Looking to the future: a revised accommodation strategy

There is no doubt that the MOD and the Armed Forces are acutely aware of the poor state of much of the Defence estate in recent years and the negative impacts this has had on family life and relationships and, indeed, on retention. The fact that SFA is relatively inexpensive for families compared with privately rented accommodation in civilian life does not compensate for the poor quality of the housing as a result of lack of investment over a number of decades. Many Service families are positive about living on the patch and the sense of community it provides, and concerned that new policies, such as FAM, will undermine the age-old tradition of being part of a community that understands the challenges of military life:

“ SFA is now on the edge of being value for money, and if the aim is to drive personnel out to private accommodation, then the MOD is succeeding... I can see that this will lead to more separation (ie weekending) which just adds to family difficulties and increased stress. ”
(RN Serving partner)

Greater choice is also welcomed but an apparent lack of understanding about FAM has fuelled suspicion as to the true motivation underpinning it. Moreover, if the principle of fairness is to be upheld, then the current restrictions relating to the entitlement of long-term partners must be removed in respect of all housing options including, especially, the difficult and discriminatory distinction between eligibility and entitlement. Unless this is addressed then the ambition to create a fair, relevant housing policy will not be realised and the vision underpinning the Families Strategy will be eroded.

In February 2019 the Rt. Hon. Tobias Ellwood MP, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence, made a statement in the House of Commons on the progress of the Defence Estate Optimisation Programme. In making a case for looking after the Armed Forces community he stated:

“ That means providing them with suitable, modern accommodation and basing requirements that will meet the changing needs of our Armed Forces community. The Defence estate is the rock around which our Armed Forces revolve. It is a place where our brave men and women work, train and deploy from. It is where they are educated, where they exercise and where they rest.⁷³ ”

This was a clear statement that Defence accommodation must be of sufficient quality to be a place that families can call 'home'. The Minister referred to the Defence Estate Optimisation Programme launched in 2016 to modernise facilities and bring them into the 21st century and the investments made since then,

and announced a further £1.5 billion to be invested in the estate over the next five years. The goal is to create regional clusters which will

“open up fresh opportunities for military families to find work, lay down permanent roots, and organise more stable schooling for their children.”⁷⁴

The vision of creating regional clusters that provide a range of accommodation choices and options as well as comprehensive welfare and other facilities for supporting Serving personnel and their families is important and valuable, but it will need investment and careful planning.

The process of moving home is known to be an extremely stressful time and the more that can be done to minimise the necessity of moving more than is absolutely essential to ensure operational efficiency the better it will be for families. It should be a priority for future accommodation strategies. We received many submissions about the tensions experienced during the processes of ‘marching in’ and of ‘marching out’ of SFA. The use of this militaristic language which continues to dominate ‘patch’ life reminds families that their home belongs to the military and is subject to a considerable range of rules and regulations. Often the poor state of the SFA when moving in was a cause for complaint:

“The march out procedure is questionable. Having always cleaned my own houses for handover, I have moved into houses that have been cleaned by contractors as part of a march-out system and the homes have been unclean with rubbish left by workmen and toilets unflushed.”

(Army dual-serving partner)

We spoke to several families who were determined to regard their SFA as their home whatever the rules and regulations:

“Despite knowing that the accommodation is only temporary, my husband and I have always taken the view that it’s home, so we do our best to make our quarters as homey as possible, and we always try to leave them in a better condition than when we arrive. We have put roofing over the bin shelter, landscaped the front garden including paved paths, planting of low-maintenance shrubs, and even spent our own money on minor repairs. I know this is not permitted...”

(RN non-serving partner)

The changes outlined in the Defence Estate Optimisation Programme should go some way to addressing the very real concerns raised during this review about the need for good quality housing that families are proud to call their home, the advantages of having stability for non-serving partners and children without having to relocate every two or three years, and greater flexibility in the options on offer. The aim is to deliver a more modern, fit for purpose and right-sized estate and a more agile accommodation strategy that meets the needs and aspirations of Service families today. The MOD is well aware that the existing accommodation model has not been sufficiently agile and is taking steps to remedy this, including the piloting of FAM and the provision of greater choice. For those families wanting to live in SFA, the investment in improvements and ongoing maintenance needs to be made now, and rules and regulations need to be commensurate with the ways in which modern military families wish to live their lives in the place they call home.

In the next chapter we examine the experience of growing up in the military and policies to support children and young people.

74 Ibid.

Our Recommendations

SFA: short-term

Recommendation 1

The Ministry of Defence to ensure that:

- there is continued and urgent significant investment in poor quality SFA that is intended for occupation
- remedial maintenance and high quality repairs are carried out swiftly and efficiently, and continued preventative maintenances is ongoing
- The Amey call centre is better equipped to respond to calls from Service families and that staff understand the challenges of military life.

Recommendation 2

The Ministry of Defence to remove the four year rule and the distinction between eligibility and entitlement to SFA for couples in long-term partnerships, and render SFA accessible with the same requirements as for couples who are married or in a civil partnership, including in the FAM pilot areas.

Recommendation 3

The Ministry of Defence to provide every family with the fullest information possible about the houses available so that more informed choices can be made regarding facilities and location, and ensure that non-serving partners are fully aware of the process which enables them to apply for housing.

Recommendation 4

The Ministry of Defence to review the rule about time-limited payment of removal expenses in order to fully support children’s educational needs and spousal/partner employment options.

Recommendation 5

The Ministry of Defence to review the current ‘improvements’ policy to promote greater pride in SFA, and update the information to make it clear that families are allowed to undertake approved improvements to their home.

Recommendation 6

The Ministry of Defence to:

- reconsider the three month rule on a case-by-case basis when families split up and ensure every possible assistance is given to the non-serving partner to access accommodation for themselves and their children in a timely manner
- ensure appropriate family accommodation and contact facilities are readily available on every military base for separated/divorced Serving personnel who live in SLA to execute shared parental responsibility.

Recommendation 7

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to facilitate speedy eligibility for and access to social housing via local authorities for partners of Serving personnel who have no accommodation to go to and no local connection when they leave SFA following separation and/or divorce.

Recommendation 8

The Ministry of Defence to review the complaints process to render it more responsive, transparent and better able to resolve disputes quickly and effectively via a web-based complaint system.

Recommendation 9

The Ministry of Defence to allow families to organise for urgent repairs (for example, when ovens have broken or heating systems have failed) to be undertaken by approved local contractors if Amey fails to respond quickly and appropriately.

Recommendation 10

The Ministry of Defence to allow families to retain SFA to enable non-serving partners to manage their work commitments and protect their career; and/or children to complete the school year, whenever possible.

SFA: medium term**Recommendation 11**

The Ministry of Defence to:

- ensure that families continue to have choices in accommodation, and that future options take account of the outcomes, both positive and negative, from the three FAM pilots
- continue to maintain sufficient SFA stock at an acceptable standard and reduce the amount of SFA only if it is surplus to current and predicted requirements.

Recommendation 12

The Ministry of Defence to:

- reconsider the expectation that families are required to move SFA on assignment
- promote geographical clustering of military bases where operationally possible
- retain sufficient SFA to enable families to remain in the same SFA while the Serving partner commutes between different military establishments in the same area, if they wish to do so.

FAM: short term**Recommendation 13**

The Ministry of Defence to consider whether offering additional incentives in remote areas would encourage home-ownership in the future.

Recommendation 14

The Ministry of Defence to continue to improve the messaging around the FAM to reduce suspicion and fear of it being seen as a cost-cutting exercise, and to enable families to make fully-informed choices that are appropriate for them.

Chapter 4

Growing Up in the Military: The Impact of Service Life on Children and Young People

The 2019 FamCAS Survey indicated that 79 per cent of Service families have children, 53 per cent of all Service families had at least one child of school age, and just over a third (34%) of families with children required early years (0–4) childcare.⁷⁵ While there are no accurate records of the number of military children in the UK, the 2011 census recorded over 200,000 children aged 0 to 15 in England and Wales as living in a household with a member of the Armed Forces.⁷⁶

The impact of Service life on children has featured highly during this review, with the majority of people who responded to the Call for Evidence and the families we spoke to on the military bases, raising concerns about the effect of their lifestyle on their children and, in particular, on their education. When asked in the FamCAS survey to rate the positive and negative aspects of Service life, those with children rated ‘the effect on my children’ as the third most negative aspect (48% negative) after the impact on the non-serving partner’s career (57% negative) and the amount of separation from their spouse (55%) negative.

While military children and young people face the same challenges as civilian children during their formative years, they also face unique circumstances, all of which can cause additional stress and anxiety.⁷⁷ In her Foreword to a Naval Families Federation Guide for parents⁷⁸ Dr Larissa Cunningham, Educational psychologist at Portsmouth City Council, wrote:

Children with parents in the Armed Forces face challenges that may go beyond the experience of the majority of families and children living in the UK. The families of Service personnel are often highly mobile and can experience long periods of separation which can lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety. Service families must continually adapt to the presence and absence of a serving parent, reorganising and readjusting to changing roles and routines. Education and social networks may be disrupted and the parent left at home often has to operate as a single parent. 9

Dr Cunningham has articulated clearly the transitions that military families have to make, and for children and young people these experiences are uniquely different from those of the vast majority of other children. An evaluation published in 2019 by the NSPCC points out that:

Even during peacetime, recurring features of military life, such as separations due to deployment and training, stressors associated with the deployment cycle, and frequent relocation create circumstances that potentially undermine parenting and child wellbeing.⁷⁹ 9

There has been a considerable body of research about military children, much of it undertaken in the United States,⁸⁰ and concerns raised about the impact of constantly moving from one place to another which usually means moving schools and, often, leaving friends behind. To varying degrees all military

⁷⁵ FamCAS 2019 op.cit.

⁷⁶ Office for National Statistics (2014) *Household Reference Persons (HRPs) who are members of the Armed Forces and associated persons in households with members of the Armed Forces by sex by age*, AF002 2011 Census.

⁷⁷ McConnell, N., Thomas, E., Boshier, A. and Cotmore, T. (2019) *Early Support for Military-Connected Families: Evaluation of services at NSPCC military sites*, NSPCC.

⁷⁸ Naval Families Federation (2019) *The Experience of Parental Absence on Royal Navy and Royal Marines Families: A Guide for parents and adults supporting children and young people*.

⁷⁹ McConnell et al (2019) op.cit. p8.

⁸⁰ See: Nolan, M. and Misca, G. (2018) *A review of coping strategies, parenting programmes and psychological therapies available to military parents with children under 5*, International Journal of Birth and Parenting Education, Vol 5, Issue 4; Skomorovsky, A. (2019) *Impact of Military Life on Children from Military Families*, Final Report NATO RTG HFM-258, ISBN 978–92–837–183–3, February 2019.

children experience relocations and periods of separation from one or both parents. Military children and young people are also acutely aware of the dangers Serving parents face as members of the Armed Forces. Nevertheless, studies of military children suggest that most adapt well to Service life.⁸¹

However, it is well-recognised that having a parent serving in the military creates unique stressors and challenges for children and young people which are not always recognised and addressed in schools and in wider society. The 2019 FamCAS survey found that 19 per cent of families with school age children who completed the survey had experienced difficulties with their children's schooling over the past year, and 28 per cent of families with school age children had at least one child change schools in the previous 12 months, 16 per cent of whom had moved for Service rather than educational reasons. While the FamCAS survey does not capture a picture of all military families it acts as a useful annual barometer of the changes and trends in lived experiences, and our review has attempted to understand these lived experiences and the concerns of parents and children in respect of their children's educational development and wellbeing.

During the review we examined the various stressors for military children and young people, looking specifically at deployment, parental absence, schooling, and educational outcomes.

Deployments and separation

Deployments are regarded by military parents as being a catalyst for difficulties for their children. In their study of UK serving parents, Rowe et al⁸² suggested that longer deployments may result in a perceived negative impact on Service children and pointed to the importance of the Services adhering to the UK Ministry of Defence Harmony Guidelines. These vary between the three Services, however, and we were told by senior officers and welfare staff during our visits to military bases that that the Harmony numbers are often broken. However, National Statistics report that Harmony figures are not often broken. The statistics would suggest that the percentage breaching harmony has been on a downward trend, with the percentage of Serving personnel breaking Harmony being RN & RAF about 0.5 per cent, and the Army about 2.25 per cent.⁸³ We understand that if there is a deliberate decision to break Harmony then the circumstances of the Serving person and his family should be taken into account, and that many Serving partners volunteer for additional time away.

The Harmony Guidelines are measured slightly differently for the three Services. Both the RN/RM and the RAF measure their guidelines over a 36 month rolling period, the Army guidelines refer to a 30 month rolling period. At the current time, the Harmony Guidelines for the three Services are set at: 660 days over three years for the Navy; 468 days away over three years for the RAF; and 415 days away over a two and a half year period for the Army. The RN/RM experience the longest deployments and nine month deployments are considered by most families we spoke to, and those in the Chain of Command, as too long, especially for children. We note that work is currently in train to revisit the guidelines and the amount of time spent away from home overall for each of the Services. We fully understand the difficulties in reducing the number of days away if operational efficiency is the foremost consideration and that there are specific reasons why the Harmony Guidelines vary between the three single Services.

We heard from several Serving personnel and non-serving spouses/partners that training periods and other times away do not count in the Harmony Guidelines which refer only to operational deployments. Many parents in all three Services referred to the number of additional days away that are simply not counted. However, it is clear from the policy⁸⁴ on the Harmony Guidelines and discussions with senior Serving personnel that there are 16 activities/circumstances which are counted in the Harmony

81 See Chandra, A., Martin, I. T., Hawkins, S. A. and Richardson, A. (2010) *The impact of parental deployment on child social and emotional functioning: Perspectives of school staff*. Journal of Adolescent Health, 46 p218–223; Blaisure, K. R., Saathoff-Wells, T., Pereira, A., Wadsworth, S. M. and Dombro, A. L. (2016) *Serving Military Families. Theories, research, and application*, Routledge; Rowe, S. L., Keeling, M., Wessely, S. and Fear N. T. (2014) *Perceptions of the impact of a military career has on children*, Society of Occupational Medicine, OUP.

82 Rowe et al (2014) op.cit.

83 National Statistics (2019) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/824753/201907-_SPS.pdf p11

84 MOD (2015) *JSP 756 Operational Movements and Tracking*.

guidelines, including training and pre-deployment preparation, for example. A separated service day is counted as any period of absence away from the normal place of work for 24 hours or more.

One of the consequences of increased numbers of families living away from the home base is that separation is increased. For families who see the Serving person only at weekends when they are not working away from the home base, it can seem as if Harmony guidelines are being breached more often than they are in practice. This raises issues about how families make choices about where they live and the importance of ensuring that they have a very clear understanding of the pros and cons of the choice they make. It would be helpful if the single Services each collect information about how weekending increases the number of days spent away from the family over and above the time spent apart as a result of exercises, deployments and other military activities. While most non-serving partners recognise the need for the Serving person to be away on deployment and regard it as '**part and parcel of being married to someone in the Forces**', the additional time spent away is not appreciated by many spouses/partners and it simply adds to the pressures related to prolonged separation:

“ My husband was away on pre-deployments, duties, courses, exercises etc etc at least nine months every year. Sometimes he would come home at weekends, other times that was not possible...Such long and regular periods of separation is very hard on a family. ”
(RM non-serving partner)

“ Deployments are a strange phenomena [sic]...your partner tells you that they are going away for seven months or whatever...don't be fooled nothing is that simple! What they fail to tell you, they have to be away for the build-up, which involves going away for weeks beforehand, working stupid patterned shifts to prepare aircraft and equipment for going away...they attend umpteen different courses...in the sea training...Then they get pinged to cover someone abroad for three weeks, just because they are...effectively on call and 24 hours' notice for two or three years...Before you know it you haven't seen them much in nearly eighteen months...but it's only a seven month deployment they said! ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ Deployment lengths are between four and seven months on average, but if you take into account the intensive training before a deployment, that easily adds an extra two months of time away before that. This does take its toll on our marriage and family life. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

There is no doubt that the more time Serving personnel spend away from home, the greater the stress on family life and on couple relationships. Our discussions with families would suggest that there is possibly a lack of transparency about time away and a lack of understanding by families. Communication with spouses/partners is key in this regard and it may be, as in other aspects of Service life, that Serving personnel do not always explain training requirements and other activities very clearly. It may well be easier to tell one's partner that the deployment is for seven months rather than explain that the total time away will almost certainly be greater. This adds to the lack of certainty which very many families raised as a major concern and one which we return to throughout the report.

It is not surprising that deployment issues were most commonly cited by Navy personnel who responded to the Call for Evidence. The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund has indicated that because children in Naval families are the most dispersed of children in all Armed Forces families they are the most likely to experience long periods of separation from their parent(s), even if they are the least likely to experience multi-moves:

“ Forty per cent of the Royal Navy are actively deployed at any one time with deployments lasting nine months. Naval personnel can expect to be away for over half the time over a three year period.⁸⁵ ”

85 Letter from the Director of the RN/RM Children's Fund.

We were told over and over by members of all three single Services that deployment lengths appear to be getting longer and longer. A strong view was expressed by both Serving personnel and non-serving partners that 4 months is about the right length of time for a deployment except for certain operations, and that 6 months and over is simply too long to be away at a time when children are growing up. Many families in all three of the single Services referred to the long times apart as being particularly difficult for children:

“ When my husband is deployed he receives 30 minutes to call home each week which is hard, especially as our son suffers from separation anxiety. ”
(Army, non-serving partner)

“ Deployments wouldn't be so bad if we had set dates we could rely on for him [husband] going away and returning. I am unable to tell our distressed child when Daddy will be home. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

“ My children coped well with their Dad's absence when they were young, but my son started to find it difficult at about the age of ten. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ While deployments are not so frequent in the RAF as in other Services the separation from the family has a significant and detrimental impact on our family cohesion...The potential for short-notice six months deployments all adds to the stress. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

The NSPCC study⁸⁶ found that young children were confused and upset by their parent coming and going and being away for long periods. This could affect their ability to sleep and could lead to behavioural problems and bed-wetting. Another study⁸⁷ which looked at the children of Serving fathers who had been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan has found evidence that these children were more likely to demonstrate a higher frequency of emotional and behavioural problems than children in the general UK population.

It seems clear that the tempo of deployments has increased over the years. Some Serving personnel reported that they had been deployed more often and for longer periods since returning from Iraq and Afghanistan than when they were engaged in operations in those two countries. We understand that the deployment of RAF personnel on operations is broadly comparable now to the levels in 2014. Research also shows that children worry about their absent parent's safety on deployment and this can increase their anxiety levels.⁸⁸ Children and young people we met described how difficult it had been for them if a parent was deployed at a vital time such as when they were taking exams. One sixth-former told us:

“ Often you don't get much notice of deployment and when you're very young that is very hard. It's not so bad if a whole unit is deploying but it's harder if you are the only child whose parent is going away. ”

This young man had been in a school with very few Service children before he went to secondary school. He had not told any of his friends about his father going away and how upset he was feeling as he did not think they would understand.

A literature review undertaken by the University of Winchester⁸⁹ found that mobility and deployment are the two most significant overarching issues for Service children. The authors concluded that deployment has an adverse impact both academically and pastorally, creating:

86 McConnell et al (2019) op.cit.

87 Fear, N. T., Reed, R. V., Rowe, S., Burden, H., Pernet, D., Mahar, A., Iversen, A. C., Ramchandani, P., Stein, A. and Wessely, S. (2018) *Impact of paternal deployment to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and paternal post-traumatic stress disorder on the children of military fathers*, The British Journal of Psychiatry, 212 (6) p327–355.

88 Chandra A., Lara-Cinisomo, S., Jaycox, L.H., Tanielian, H.B., Burns, M. and Ruder, T. (2011) *Views from the homefront: the experiences of youth and spouses from military families*, Technical Report Rand Corporation.

89 McCullough J. and Hall, M. (2016) *Further and Higher Progression for Service Children: research paper*. University of Winchester.

- increased incidence of emotional and behavioural problems
- a higher incidence of mental health issues in children and parents
- increased incidence of the child as carer.⁹⁰

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has noted that Service children have a higher rate of caring responsibilities than children in the general population.⁹¹ We review this evidence later in the chapter.

A UK study which examined adolescents' views of the best and worst aspects of having a father in the Armed Forces found that the most noteworthy theme relating to the worst aspect was lack of contact with the absent parent, with 39 per cent of young people referring to being worried about their father's safety on deployment.⁹² The authors point to a study by the Rand Corporation in 2009 which found that having a parent deployed for a long period of time was the most important factor associated with whether military children would struggle with their personal lives.⁹³ This is consistent with other reports that lack of contact is the most commonly reported negative impact of having a father in the military.

We note that submariners are frequently deployed for five months with very limited access to communication with their families. They are entitled to a 'Familygram' to the submarine each week of up to 120 words including the addressee. These are open communications and seen by many people. They cannot contain bad news. We have been told by welfare officers that lack of meaningful contact can impact adversely on relationships and, for some, result in family breakdown. They said that the unpredictability of deployments can 'push some families over the edge'.

The relative lack of communication between the Serving parent and his or her family for certain sections of the military on deployment makes it even more important that there is as much certainty as possible about return dates so that children and parents can plan ahead for this. Research in the US has indicated that the more months a parent was deployed the more symptoms of anxiety were reported.⁹⁴ Not having firm dates was raised by many mothers who felt that it would be easier for their children to manage fathers' absences if they knew exactly when they would be coming home. The wife of a submariner told us:

“ The operational tempo of the fleet, the maintenance periods and the lack of man power makes my husband's work-life balance completely non-existent. This causes not only our marriage to suffer but also the lives of our children to be massively and irreversibly impacted. There is an immense amount of emotional whiplash which I believe children are not equipped for... ”
(RN non-serving partner)

This mother noted that her husband's last deployment was scheduled for three months but ended up being closer to seven months. Her very real concern was that the family were told of the changing timeline 'extremely late', and that because the submarine was delayed on its way home, the home date shifted 'no less than four times'. The home date was expected to be in September and it was January before her husband came home.

These changes of dates and delays are clearly upsetting for children and some mothers suggested that families should be helped to meet up with the absent parent at least once during the deployment. Having said that, some families had experienced flying out to spend time with the Serving partner only to find that the ship was not in port and the visit could not take place. These mothers felt strongly that the extensive pressure on the family was extremely problematic for children. In one mother's words:

“ My children have suffered monumentally from their father's deployment and the lack of certainty about when he was coming home. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

90 Ibid. p6.

91 Department of Health (2015) *Supporting the health and well-being of military families*.

92 Jain, V., Stevelink, S. A. M. and Fear, N. T. (2016) *What are the best and worst things about having a father in the UK Armed Forces? Analysis of free text*, JR Army Medical Corps, 01–4.

93 Rand Corporation (2009) *Military children face more emotional challenges as parental deployments grow longer*, Science Daily.

94 Blaisure et al (2016) op.cit. p89.

She and her husband had considered whether he should leave the Royal Navy but their 'pride' in the Service had kept them going, along with support from the Naval Welfare Service which she described as 'exceptional'. Submissions to our review about shifting deployment lengths and changing home dates were many. We understand that there are moves within the Royal Navy to reduce the length of some deployments by positioning naval ships in strategic locations around the world and changing the ship's company during the deployment. Instead of serving with the ship throughout the deployment length the ship's company would change part way through, thus reducing the time naval personnel were away from home by several months. Within this model, a new ship's company would be flown out to join the ship to relieve the company on board, allowing them to return home. This is certainly an interesting and potentially sensible way by which to limit the length of deployments without sacrificing operational effectiveness.

We met non-serving partners on our visits to various military bases, garrisons and stations and became increasingly aware of the potential for them to feel lonely and overwhelmed with their parenting responsibilities, especially if they had several very young children and were living 'off the patch'. Research indicates that mental health issues can develop from the isolation and loneliness during deployments.⁹⁵ The Royal British Legion has identified that regular moves and deployment are common risk factors for social isolation and loneliness.⁹⁶ The NSPPC study referred to earlier, points to the potential for parental stress to impact on mothers who spend long evenings alone.⁹⁷ This can be especially acute during pregnancy and there is evidence that deployments during the non-serving partner's pregnancy is correlated with loneliness and increased stress.

The Guide for Parents written by the Naval Families Federation⁹⁸ provides very useful information about the emotional cycle of deployment experienced by parents and by children of different ages. How children respond to deployment depends on their age and stage of development, and the Guide provides detailed information about the common behaviours at different ages and strategies to help them cope. The Guide also covers the inevitable challenges to parenting when families have to adapt to one parent, usually the father, coming and going. Several non-serving partners spoke about the stresses associated with transitioning from being a 'single' parent to shared parenting:

“ Children struggle with parents being away so much...I just wish someone took the time to live in our shoes [our emphasis]. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

One mother we met expressed her concern about the imminent return of her husband later that day after several months away:

“ I am not sure I am looking forward to it...its always hard when he first comes back just adjusting to him being there and sort of taking over. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

The Serving partner can also experience parental stress when reconnecting with their children post-deployment⁹⁹ and this has an impact on the whole family.

95 Alfani, C.A., Lau, S., Balderas, J., Bunnell, B.E. and Beidel, D.C. (2016) *The Impact of Military Deployment on children: Placing developmental risk in context*, Clinical Psychology Review, 43, p17–29.

96 Reported in the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018.

97 McConnell et al (2019) op cit.

98 Naval Families Federation (2019) *A guide for parents and adults supporting children and young people*, op.cit.

99 Trautmann, J., Alhusen, J. and Gross, D. (2015) *Impact of Deployment on Military Families with Young Children: A systematic review*, Nursing Outlook, 63 (6) p656–679.

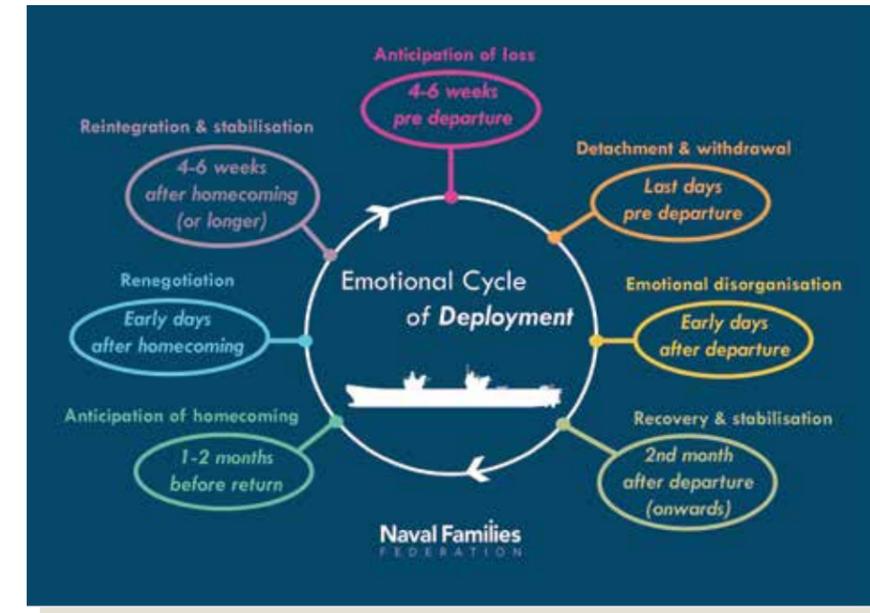


Figure 4.1 The Emotional Cycle of Deployment

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment model, illustrated above, was developed by Kathleen Vestal Logan in 1987.¹⁰⁰ While military life has changed, it is still an extremely valuable way to help parents and children understand how they may feel and behave at various stages of the deployment. Inevitably, each person will experience the deployment cycle somewhat differently, but the model shown here illustrates very clearly how feelings and behaviours may start to change some weeks before the Serving person goes away, then change again as the deployment progresses, and continue to change for some considerable time after the deployment is over and the family are reunited. The NFF Guide¹⁰¹ provides a detailed explanation of these stages which will be relevant to Serving families across all three Services.

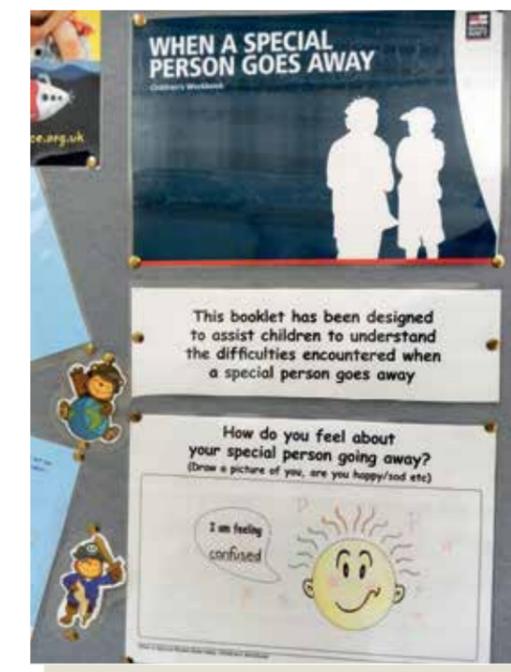


Photo 4.1 Information about Books for Children, Drumfork Centre, HMNB Clyde

100 Vestal Logan, K. (1987) *The Emotional Cycle of Deployment*, Proceedings Magazine, February vol 113/2/1, p1,008.

101 NFF (2018) op.cit. p16.

We have been shown a range of books written specifically for Service children, to help them manage separation periods.¹⁰² Activity books for parents to work together with children are also available.¹⁰³ Various publications would also be helpful to teachers who are not used to teaching Service children. In addition, young people argued for better briefings to be provided especially for them when a parent is going on deployment:

“ I would like to know more about the deployment, so that I could understand what my father was going to be doing. ”
(Army young person)

This is a particular challenge when children do not live in SFA and may be some distance from the support offered on a base. It underlines the importance of finding better ways to communicate directly with young people irrespective of where they are living. We understand that the Defence Children & Young People's Board is hoping to try and address this through the development of a virtual online platform which would enable children and young people to access professional support from wherever they are located, both in the UK and overseas. This is to be welcomed, particularly with the possibility of more families being dispersed in future as a result of new accommodation policies, rendering the communication issue even more acute. We return to the issue of communication with family members in Chapter 10.

Education Challenges and Opportunities

The impact of Service life on children's education is a topic that was raised over and over again during the review. It would be wrong to suggest that Service life necessarily impacts negatively on attainment, and the young people we spoke to were extremely ambitious and keen to do as well if not better than civilian children. Nevertheless, they referred to the stressors that can affect them and the ways that these can be mitigated. The evidence suggests that if military children and young people are to thrive at school it is imperative that they receive appropriate support at all times and schools are critical to delivering this.

During the review we have talked to a range of educationalists across the UK, including: head teachers of schools with a large number of Service pupils; local authority children's champions; members of SCISS (Service Children in State Schools) in England; members of the SCiP (Service Children's Progression) Alliance; and members of the Directorate for Children and Young People (DCYP) in the MOD. We have been impressed with the passion and commitment to do the best for Service children expressed by all of these people. They are all acutely aware of the challenges that these children face. We have also spoken to children and young people at each of the military bases visited; members of the Military Kids Club in Devonport; military children attending a Children's Voice conference held at the Duke of York's Royal Military School (DOYRMS) in Kent; and pupils at a number of state schools including at Catterick Garrison, RAF Benson, Kendrew Barracks, and the DOYRMS. The children and young people have provided valuable first-hand accounts of being a Service child in the UK today.

The DCYP, established in 2010, acts as the champion for all Service children throughout the Armed Forces, wherever they may be in the world. The Directorate provides a single MOD focus for all the issues related to Service children and young people through its staff of teachers, education and children's services professionals based overseas and in the UK. It also provides professional leadership on safeguarding. A major goal pursued by DCYP is to ensure that Service children are not educationally disadvantaged compared to their civilian peers.

The Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS) is an integral part of the Directorate, providing information, advice and guidance to Service families. The DCYP works closely with the SCISS and with the SCiP Alliance to ensure continued partnership working and that research is coordinated to provide a clear evidence base for supporting Service children. The DCYP is also responsible for championing policies relating to Service children and liaising with other government departments, particularly the Department for Education, local authorities in England and the devolved administrations.

¹⁰² See, for example, McMenemy, S., *Zoe and the Time Rabbit*.

¹⁰³ See, for example, The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, *Knit the Family*.

There are no accurate statistics of the number of Service children currently attending schools in the UK. However, in January 2018 the number estimated to be in schools in England was some 76,153.¹⁰⁴ The highest concentrations were in the South West and the South East with a combined total of 39,066. While some schools such as those located behind the wire or close to major military bases have a very high percentage of military children as pupils (between 90 and 100%), the majority of Service children attend schools with fewer than 10 Service children. It is not unusual for a school to have just one Service pupil registered.

It is inevitable that the additional support available to the Service children will differ considerably between these schools. Schools with a high percentage of Service children are far more likely to understand their needs and their challenges, as we have witnessed in the schools visited in Catterick Garrison, RAF Benson, Kendrew Barracks, and the DOYRMS. Looking to the future, there is considerable potential for the numbers of schools with very few military children to increase as the changes in living patterns kick in as a result of the FAM and FHTB schemes and more families are dispersed. So ensuring that all schools can offer the most appropriate support is an important goal.

Head teachers are keen to point out that Service children are not disadvantaged children and should not be viewed as such, but teachers believe that because of the impact of military life and its many transitions and relocations, children with a parent in the military are more appropriately described as being 'vulnerable'. The majority of concerns expressed during this review have been about the frequency of school moves and the potential negative consequences of frequent disruptions to education, and about the variable nature of the support offered to Service children.

Frequent school moves

Mobility is a characteristic of Service life but patterns of mobility are different in each of the three single Services, with Army families the most likely to move frequently due to operational demands. Because Service families move frequently, especially those in the Army and RAF, children normally face several disruptions in their education. This factor was raised repeatedly during the review. One RAF Serving partner told us that his children had attended eleven different schools in three different countries, thus experiencing a variety of curricula. The children and young people we spoke to recounted stories about the number of schools they had attended, with as many as 7 or 8 schools being commonplace. The fewest number of primary schools that pupils in a group of teenagers had attended was five and several had attended seven. These children described changing schools as 'interesting because you meet different children', and suggested that 'it makes us more independent', but they pointed out that it is difficult if the subject teaching is at different stages. One teenager had been held back a year as a result of having missed some key elements of the curriculum. Several young people made a plea that all schools should teach to a national curriculum, otherwise there is a danger that some material is covered over again while other aspects are lost completely. As one teenager put it:

“ I've learned about the Romans five times now in history, but maths is a problem because I have missed bits out. ”

“ My son has had four different schools in three years and, as he went to Scotland in this time he was also in different years and different curriculums. ”
(Army, non-serving partner)

“ My eldest two daughters (8 and 11) ...have missed some aspects of schooling as different schools cover the same material in different academic years. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

Some pupils felt strongly that they had been particularly disadvantaged in respect of not being able to learn their chosen foreign languages when they had moved from school to school. We were given examples of pupils learning German as a chosen language at one school only to move to a school where German was not an option and they were forced to start again with another language which they were not

¹⁰⁴ Service Children in State Schools (2018) *Service Children Footprint in England, January 2018*.

really interested in learning. This kind of experience is more likely when children move from one country to another, including within the UK where the Devolved Governments have different educational systems.

Education in Wales

The Welsh Government has recognised the challenges faced by Service children and launched a bespoke fund to provide educational support in 2018. The Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru project helps schools to support Service children. Funding has been increased and new research is being conducted to provide better understanding of the needs of Service children and their families. Between April and June 2019, 388 schools in Wales with Service children as pupils were invited to take part in a survey and just under half of them responded.¹⁰⁵ The survey revealed that while there were a number of examples of good practice in supporting Service children, many schools were unaware of the needs of Service children and, therefore, unprepared to support them. The survey showed that 22 schools each had just one Service pupil enrolled, the majority had up to 9 pupils and two schools had 100 plus children from military families. Schools reported that some 150 pupils had additional educational needs. Of particular note, is that 35 schools indicated that 334 children had arrived mid-year during 2018–2019 academic year, and 19 schools reported that 206 Service children has left mid-year in the same period. This inevitably presents challenges for those schools in having the resources to support new learners.

The survey also asked about the most significant challenges to Service children's education. Primary and secondary schools reported the emotional impacts of parental separation and deployments, and also listed the challenges of adapting to different curricula in the different administrations and learning Welsh. When asked about the three most significant challenges in supporting Service children, amongst their answers schools listed emotional needs and well-being; helping children with gaps in their learning; supporting children who were learning Welsh for the first time; gaining an understanding of the military lifestyle, and getting information from previous schools. The schools listed tailored pastoral support as the most beneficial support for children, and also referred to the value of having a dedicated member of staff available to support the children and peer-to-peer support. A number of schools have put specific interventions in place, including extra tuition, targeted support in core subjects, one-to-one support, and support for emotional well-being. We note that schools referred to the issues they face in meeting prioritisation thresholds when referring children for mental health support, including children moving school while on a waiting list and not being assessed.

We note that many schools were unaware of the key Armed Forces charities and military support organisations, although many said they would like to engage with these organisations. We discuss the role of the military charities in more detail in Chapter 9 and consider the need for more joined-up support and greater awareness of the work they do. It is encouraging that 98 per cent of the schools in the survey would like an information pack on how best to support Service children and a majority would welcome further training in working with Service children. We understand that a digital training package will be developed.

One of the specific challenges is the use of the Welsh language in schools. In Wales, learning Welsh is mandatory. Assessments take place at the end of Key Stages 2, 3, and 4, and at Key Stage 4, the curriculum currently requires all pupils to take a short course in Welsh. Families assigned to a base in Wales expressed their concerns to us that their young children were having to learn Welsh as a new language for two years and then would be moving again. This was particularly acute for Nepalese children whose parents felt strongly that their children would benefit more from additional help to improve their English language skills rather than having to learn Welsh. These children speak Nepalese with their parents and so are already moving between English and Nepalese on a daily basis. While we fully recognise that Welsh language teaching is a Welsh Government policy and there is a desire to ensure that Welsh is taught in schools, applying it to military children who are in Wales for a short time could be detrimental to their overall educational needs. Moreover, parents told us that they felt at a loss to be able to assist their children with their learning if they were being taught in Welsh rather than English. Some Nepalese mothers were struggling to improve their grasp of the English language themselves and wished that the focus at school could be on helping their children with English.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, M., (2019) SSCE Cymru School Survey (2019) Findings <https://www.sscecymru.co.uk>

We understand that a Day School Allowance is offered to support families who live in North Wales to access education taught in English, subject to eligibility, and that the RAF Families Federation has published a new guide for parents.¹⁰⁶ The Tri-Service Regulations for Expenses and Allowances¹⁰⁷ states that the aim of the Day School Allowance is to assist any accompanied Service parent on assignment to North Wales with the cost of independent day schooling where tuition is exclusively in English, and is limited to those areas where teaching in state schools is on a bilingual or non-English basis. The allowance attracts income tax and national insurance contributions. It was suggested to us that this allowance might be extended to military families in other parts of Wales, but it is not clear to us how helpful this would be. It would seem more helpful for there to be some flexibility for schools in other parts of Wales to consider whether military children who will not be resident in Wales for the entirety of their primary or secondary education could have the option of being exempt from learning Welsh, especially those children for whom English is already a second language.

The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 makes provision for a new statutory framework for supporting children, including Service children, with additional learning needs. Moreover, the Welsh Government has reinforced its commitment to uphold the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant. Work is continuing in Wales to enable the collection of data on Service children in schools through the Pupil Level Annual School Census. This is important as it will enable improved understanding of their attainment levels and educational needs. Moreover, the School Admissions Code makes provision for Service children to be admitted to an infant class mid-term, even if this means that the class will breach the class size limit. Importantly, school places can be allocated to Service children in advance of them moving into the area, and they can be prioritised in the school admissions process.

One of the initiatives in Wales involves working in schools with children and young people with a parent in the military to help them make a toolkit to assist parents and teachers to better understand when and why things might be hard for Service children in school and the kind of help they need. The All Wales Standing Committee for Service Children in Education has been working to raise awareness of the needs of Service children in education and to develop and share good practice to help schools and local authorities to meet the needs of Service children across Wales. A wide range of information is available for Service children and their parents on the SSCE Cymru website.¹⁰⁸

Education in Scotland

Moving between the Devolved Governments of the UK impacts on education due to the different school systems. Schooling in Scotland starts later, school term times are different and year groups can change. We heard of some children being held back because of the different approach. The welfare staff at HMNB Clyde commented on the fact that families need to secure the right education for their children when moving between England and Scotland. They also commented on the barriers to accessing further and higher education in Scotland as a military family with children born and schooled in England. We understand that the reciprocal arrangement across the Devolved Governments ensures that Armed Forces families are able to access student support for courses of higher education, but differences between the nations of the UK in respect of the payment of tuition fees leads to perceptions of unfairness between Scottish and other students. A more consistent approach across the UK would be welcomed.

There are clearly a number of support mechanisms in place in Scottish schools. For example, the Army Families Federation highlights the availability of a buddying system, the therapeutic services offered by the Place2Be and Place2Talk, and lunchtime clubs run by the Army Welfare Service and the Children 1st charity.¹⁰⁹ The Scottish education system aims to meet the needs of individual children, both civilian and military, and works to identify and overcome disadvantage. We understand that early learning and childcare policies will be expanded from August 2020 and there is a commitment to develop counselling services in schools. School counsellors should be in a good position to provide a quick and effective

¹⁰⁶ RAF Families Federation (2019) *What it's like to be an RAF family in Wales*, <https://www.raf-ff.org.uk/news/being-an-raf-family-living-in-wales/>

¹⁰⁷ MOD, *JSP 752 Tri-Service Regulations for Expenses and Allowances*.

¹⁰⁸ [sscecymru.co.uk](https://www.sscecymru.co.uk)

¹⁰⁹ AFF (2019) *Army and You: School Report*, Autumn 2019.

response for children who are in need of support. In 2019, Education Scotland launched a suite of resources (the Compassionate and Connected Community and Classroom) to raise the awareness of challenges faced by children and young people and provide supportive relational approaches to use. The Scottish Service Children's Strategy Group, chaired by the Scottish Government, works in collaboration with key stakeholders to support the educational needs of Service children in schools in Scotland. Moreover, the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government are exploring the barriers to further and higher education that may exist for Service children.

The Scottish Government is reviewing the implementation of Additional Support for Learning to ensure that every child gets the support they need when they need it. This could include providing short term support to a child whose parent is being deployed or when moving into a new school. It is anticipated that recommendations from that review may focus on how to support children and young people with additional needs, including Service children. The Scottish Government is committed to improving the consistency of support for Service children and to sharing and promoting good practice.

Education in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the standard of education is widely acknowledged by the Armed Forces serving there to be high, but some subject syllabi, particularly at secondary school level, do not transfer from other parts of the UK, causing some stress for children when they move between schools in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Educational support for Service children in Northern Ireland is well-established, although levels of pre-school support and age-entitlements differ between the administrations.

Moving between the nations of the UK

We suggest that families moving between the devolved administrations should all have access to information about the differences in education systems and how best to support their children with the move from one curriculum to another. While Service families accept that mobility is a facet of service life and that changing schools is inevitable unless children go to boarding school, they questioned the necessity for Army units and Serving personnel to move every two or three years, especially if these postings require a move from one country to another. There was a plea from many parents for postings to be of a longer duration to allow children some continuity of education without going to boarding school:

“ Without a doubt, moving every two years has had a huge negative effect on my children's education. My son suffers from special needs and cannot deal with moving schools all the time, he needs to build a relationship with his SEN teachers and helpers. When my posting order came through I had to fill out countless forms and requests just to keep my married quarter so my son could stay in school... My wife has correctly described the feeling of ... never really getting a decent footing anywhere or making real friends... ”
(Army Serving partner)

This father, in common with others, felt that the constant moving coupled with repeated deployments and time away from home during peacetime was having a negative impact on his family and ultimately on retention:

“ ...in a time when families are put under so much strain from everyday life the needs of my family fall behind the needs of the Army...I have had to tell my kids the last four out of five Christmases that I won't be home. ”

The timing of school moves

The timing of posting orders also came under criticism. Many parents, children and young people we spoke to were especially unhappy about children having to change schools during the academic year. Children regard this as completely disruptive to their learning and described it as being much harder to settle into a class during the year, when friendship groups have been formed already and the Service child is the odd one out. Moving mid-academic year or mid-term can result in many weeks of missed schooling while waiting for a place. While it is not expected that children will be moved during the school year we

heard of it happening frequently. In some cases it was the concern about the changes in education that had culminated in a decision to leave the Services:

“ [My daughters] have more often than not started a new school at the beginning of May, two thirds the way through the academic year. It is partly for this reason that I have chosen to leave the RAF. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

As we indicated in Chapter 3, it is possible for a family to request to remain in SFA so that their child can complete a school year in certain circumstances: where children are reaching critical examination periods where retention is admissible for up to 4 months; within 3 years of a public examination where it would not be possible to move because of syllabus differences, courses etc. and where a child is undergoing statutory assessment for special educational needs, retention is possible for two academic terms or until the end of the academic year. Where retention has been agreed in any of these circumstances, the family can also claim removal expenses. However, if none of these circumstances apply, one of the drivers for families to move during the year when the Serving partner is posted, is the three month restriction on claiming removal expenses. Those living in their own property can move to fit with school years but still do not qualify for removal expenses if the move is outside the three months of a posting window. In Chapter 3 we recommended a change to this policy which would remove the limited three month restriction when it is clear that it would have a positive impact on children's education not to move mid-academic year.

Overall, there was a general plea for fewer and less frequent moves and more stability in respect of education. Many families expressed the view that the impact of frequent postings on children's education is not taken into account by the Armed Forces. For example, at Catterick Garrison, when children talked about attending six schools by year 6, two parents commented as follows:

“ The Army do not understand that some children don't deal well with change. It's not recognised unless a pupil gets a diagnosis of a mental health condition or has special educational needs. ”
(Army non-serving parent)

“ With it being our tenth move it's highly disruptive to the children's schooling. ”
(Army non-serving parent)

A member of a dual-serving couple commented:

“ We are both serving and my daughter will have had three nursery moves and two school moves by the time she is six years old. Her next move will be from the Scottish education system into the English education system. There is a lot of adjustment expected of a forces child, getting used to new schools, new teachers and making new friends. ”
(RM dual-serving partner)

Reviewing policy to reduce the need for families, especially those of Army and RAF personnel, to move so frequently, is a plea we heard from families everywhere. Many questioned the rationale for two year postings given the disruptions for the whole family, and especially during peacetime. Reducing the number of transitions would be welcomed, especially by non-serving partners and children. The Children's Commissioner of England's Report in 2018 commented that the

“ lack of continuity between schools left children feeling behind, unable to get involved in lessons and to maintain levels of academic progress...¹¹⁰ ”

The teachers who took part in that study identified specific issues with maths when there are gaps in children's learning, and filling these gaps is very challenging as children move around. Deficiencies in basic skills was seen as a real problem. Moreover, leaving friends behind can result in children feeling unsettled, and making new friends is often scary. These factors, of course, could impact negatively on educational attainment.

¹¹⁰ Children's Commissioner for England (2018) *Kin and Country: growing up as an Armed Forces Child*.

Another issue raised by head teachers in England relates to the ways in which funding is allocated to schools via the National Funding Formula and the problems associated with pupils changing schools during the school year. This is especially difficult for schools with large numbers of Army children who are likely to move in and out as a group. We have received a number of examples and case studies of primary schools where the numbers of pupils on the register shifted dramatically during a single school year. For example, one school told us that the number of pupils rose from 38 to 120 as a result of the drawdown of units from Germany, but that funding does not follow the child immediately with enormous implications for staffing levels and forward planning. This can result in deficit budgets and staff being let go only to be needed again as another unit moves.

While the Education Support Fund (ESF) in England was set up to alleviate these significant changes in pupil numbers we heard consistent cries for school funding to take account of the numbers of joiners and leavers at any point during the school year. Furthermore the ESF has been cut by a half since it was introduced. A more nuanced approach is sought by head teachers attempting to ensure that they can provide a quality education to military children who are exceptionally mobile. The class structures and staffing decisions have to be taken around Easter time for the coming academic year and some schools are finding it very difficult to plan ahead because the posting of one regiment can make a significant difference to pupil numbers. Head teachers have suggested that schools known to have a high percentage of Service children who are very mobile should be prioritised in the funding from the ESF, and a national mobility formula which takes into account all non-standard arrivals and departures in any one school year should be put in place. We understand that, in fact, schools with a high number of Service children who are very mobile are indeed prioritised in the ESF formula.

The bulk of primary school funding is based on the number of pupils calculated from an annual census in October. This number dictates the funding for the following financial year, with no adjustment for further increases in pupil numbers. We have been told that if a child moves school after the census and starts school at any point after 6th October the child is without funding for up to 18 months. This is a particular problem for schools with large numbers of Service children where mobility is high. For example, one school pointed out that when the census took place in October 2018 there were 270 pupils on the roll but the funding until April 2019 was for 246 pupils, the number who were on the roll in October 2017. The shortfall in funding for the additional pupils was estimated at being some £3,000 per child per annum. Children arriving mid-year therefore pose a real funding problem for schools.

We are aware that the funding allocation to schools is a complex issue and that the mobility factor within the National Funding Formula is intended to support schools that have a high percentage of pupils joining the school midway through the academic year. We have been told by the Department for Education (DfE) that in the 2018–19 and 2019–20 academic years the National Funding Formula mobility factor was funded on the basis of historic spend, which means that only local authorities who had previously chosen to use the factor were eligible for mobility funding.

We were informed that the Minister of State for School Standards in England has set out key aspects of the arrangements for schools and high needs National Funding Formula. As part of this, the DfE will be formularising mobility for 2020–21, thereby extending the factor to all eligible local authorities with high levels of in-year mobility, including those serving military bases. The DfE expects to provide further details on a new approach to mobility funding. This is clearly welcome and hopefully will alleviate some of the issues schools in England have reported to us. If the funding for a military child could follow that child as he/she moves from school to school it would aid the funding issues highlighted to us. If this does not happen then the ESF needs to be able to alleviate any shortfall in funding.

In the meantime, however, it is still largely a matter for each local authority in England whether they choose to give mobility funding, or any additional funding to schools impacted by significant in-year mobility due to nearby military bases. Local authorities can also allocate growth funding to schools – this is funding to support increases in pupil numbers not captured by the lagged system. Local authorities are provided with growth funding to enable them to support schools with high pupil number growth. The changes will mean that in due course all eligible local authorities with high levels of in-year mobility will attract mobility funding. It is clearly important for schools with large numbers of military children to know what their funding will be as they attempt to plan for the next academic year and cope with significant

within-year variations in pupil numbers. Ideally, the funding difficulty would be resolved if postings allow the vast majority of school moves to take place in the summer holiday.

It is also worth pointing out that even if school numbers do not change much the pupils almost certainly will. There is a high level of churn in some schools when one military unit moves from an area to be replaced by another. In these schools whole classes of children can change.

We understand that the MOD and the DfE are already working together to consider how the Armed Forces Covenant might be strengthened with respect to education providers. This is to be welcomed and further collaboration is strongly encouraged.

Educational Attainment

During the review a number of concerns were raised about Service children's educational outcomes being lower at some Key Stages than those of children in the general population and, also, about the apparent lower numbers of Service children entering higher education. We have examined the available data carefully and would caution against repeating some of the statistics that have been quoted.

Many of the head teachers we spoke to and the DCYP are clear that, on the whole, Service children do as well as other children but there are some exceptions. The data reported in the Children's Commissioner's report¹¹¹ shows little difference between the attainment of Service children and civilian children at various Key Stages. However, it is critically important to compare like with like. There will be a range of factors for both groups that affect attainment and outcomes at Key Stages. The comparisons must be made between Service children and children in the civilian population who are not considered to be disadvantaged, that is those not in receipt of free school meals. The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018¹¹² presented figures to show that the average performance of Service children as a group in England is on a par with or better than that of civilian children not eligible for free school meals, across all key pupil progress and attainment measures. Moreover, comparing Service children with other children who move frequently such as those in the traveller community shows that they do less well than military children. The report notes that it is important to improve data collection in respect of Service children in order to develop a more contextual understanding of the impact of mobility on attainment and welfare.

We have examined data provided by a number of local authorities in England with high numbers of Service children and they give mixed results relating to educational attainment when the correct comparisons are made. While some local authorities in England have given us detailed data which indicate that Service children are doing less well at certain key stages than civilian children, other local authorities have provided detailed data that show positive results. It is critically important, therefore, to explore the reasons for these different outcomes and to understand the factors that contribute to some military children seeming to fall behind their civilian peers while others appear to flourish. Falling behind in both maths and English because of changes in curricula could well contribute to poorer grades as the child gets older and has not managed to fill the gaps. We have been impressed with the level of analysis that different local authorities have undertaken to attempt to understand the relative attainment of Service children, but more analysis is needed to fully understand the differences between them. We have noted several factors that must be examined.

First, each local authority in England has its own way of tracking the academic achievements of military children. This leads to inconsistent data being available on a national basis and no definitive way to compare Service children with the correct group in the general population. This renders national comparisons difficult and cautions against making generalisations about levels of attainment. In this respect it is possible to examine individual local authority data but more difficult to draw a national picture.

Second, given the challenges faced by Service children as a result of frequent changes of school, it would not be surprising that some of them will not do as well as they might have done had their education been more stable and consistent. We have heard first-hand how some children have missed out on vital

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² *The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report (2018)* Crown Copyright.

elements of the maths and English curricula and have struggled to catch up with their civilian peers. We have heard also just how much time some children miss at school due to moving during the school year. This is the reason why some parents opt to send their children to boarding school, as we explore later in the chapter. It is clear from analysis undertaken by Kent County Council, for example, that Service pupils who had remained in the same school for at least three years had the highest attainment,¹¹³ suggesting clearly that continuity and stability in education are correlated with levels of attainment.

Third, as some head teachers have pointed out, we need to take account of socio-demographic and cultural factors, both of which impact on attitudes towards educational attainment. Some civilian families place a stronger emphasis on education than others and this variation will be mirrored in the Armed Forces population. Some military families may be so used to the disruptions in their children's education, know that this will hinder their achievement, and sense that that there is little they can do about it.

In seeking to understand the data about attainment at various key stages and the apparent discrepancies from one local authority to another, all these factors need to be taken into account before drawing any conclusions about Service children's levels of attainment and how they might differ from those of civilian children. More in-depth research is necessary. An examination of all the data presented to us and the various research studies which have explored children's attainment have led us to conclude that generalisations about Service children's attainment when compared to civilian children need to be treated with considerable caution. A causal link between mobility and educational attainment has not been proven, but disruptions and lack of continuity in teaching may well be factors that can adversely impact on attainment. Similar investigations in the USA have reached the same conclusions.¹¹⁴

A study published by the Department for Education in 2010 found that Service children performed better than non-service children after controlling for demographic factors, mobility and prior attainment.¹¹⁵ The factors influencing attainment are undoubtedly complex. We also know that different local authorities and the devolved nations of the UK use different Examination Boards and that approaches to assessing attainment through examination results can vary. Mobility between schools and the nations of the UK can in itself have an impact on the results of Service children who experience a variety of curricula. An important conclusion from all the data available is that movement between schools

⦿ has been identified as a risk factor in systematically monitoring the educational progression of Service children.¹¹⁶ ⦿

In our view, the evidence about Service children's attainment needs further scrutiny in the light of better data. Frequent moves and a lack of educational stability undoubtedly constitute risk factors for children's learning but this does not necessarily mean that Service children will do less well at school or that their attainment will be lower than that of civilian children. Rather than promote a deficit model of educational attainment we consider it essential to understand the factors which can hinder the attainment of children and young people with a parent in the military, and take steps to enhance the factors which support Service children to reach their full potential at all stages. We understand that in Scotland the focus is on understanding the barriers to learning rather than on a deficit model.

Tracking Service children's educational journey

Getting support right for every Service child requires much better data than are currently collected. In order to accomplish effective tracking, information about each Service child should follow the child through their educational journey. An education marker placed on the file of every Service child should encourage tracking and identification. There is currently no marker placed on a Service child in Wales, however, and it is hoped that the Welsh Government will adopt a monitoring system that is compatible

¹¹³ Strategic Commissioning-Analytics, Kent County Council (2019) *KCC Service Pupil Premium Children, 2017/2018, Academic Year, Insight Report (Draft)*.

¹¹⁴ Blaisure et al (2016) op.cit. chapter 4.

¹¹⁵ Department for Education (2010) *The Educational Performance of Children of Military Personnel*.

¹¹⁶ McCullough, J. and Hall, M. (2016) *Further and Higher Progression for Service Children: research paper*. University of Winchester p13.

with England. We note that the Welsh Government has recognised the challenges faced by Service children and committed £250,000 per annum (Supporting Service Children in Wales Fund) to function in the same way as the Education Support Fund in England, and has introduced a new Code of Practice for education. The Welsh Government has also provided for a new statutory framework for supporting children with additional learning needs which will include Service children. These developments are to be welcomed.

Although a flag is placed on Service pupils in Scotland the data relating to these pupils are not currently analysed at a national level. We are aware of the perceived barriers that currently exist in respect of some military children accessing higher education in Scotland, and the welfare officers and families we spoke to at HMNB Clyde are anxious to see these barriers overcome. Similar barriers exist for non-serving partners wishing to pursue certain careers in Scotland, and we return to these in the following chapter. The Association of Directors of Education Scotland's National Transition Officer has introduced a local authority management information indicator to flag children from military families. These data give schools and local authorities information as to where children are being schooled so as to ensure additional support is available.

We understand that bespoke arrangements for Service children in Northern Ireland are in place. Our conversation with military personnel in Northern Ireland confirmed that education is perceived as being a hugely positive factor for military families located there. The DCYP team have confirmed that there is now greater coordination between the devolved nations of the UK to ensure smoother transitions for Service children between the different systems as parents are posted around the UK, and further development is welcomed. It would be to the benefit of all Service children in the UK if data systems could be aligned for easier tracking of Service children, and policies relating to education and other devolved matters could be more closely coordinated so that, in line with the Covenant, Service families are not disadvantaged.

The Common Transfer File

Of particular importance is the smooth and speedy transfer of information when children move from school to school. The Common Transfer File is the means by which state schools and local authorities in England transfer pupil data when a child moves from school to school. It contains a flag to denote a Service child. Since September 2018 a Service Child section has been added which asks questions about the child's response to moving school, parental deployment and parental separation. A school can also include details of concerns, gaps in education and particular strengths or difficulties experienced by the child. This has the potential to minimise the challenges of moving schools and of education being disrupted. These changes have been welcomed by the three Families Federations. It is clear that it would be helpful if these files could be routinely used when Service children move between the devolved administrations.

We were told that sometimes the files are not transferred quickly enough and that children miss out because the new school has not received all the information. The three Services' Families Federations have suggested that the Common Transfer File should include a Pupil Voice section to enable tailored pastoral support to be put in place. We strongly support any change that allows children and young people to have their say in matters which impact on them. The 'Moving On Pupil Passport' prepared by the MOD would be a good way of ensuring that schools know what kinds of help a child would like.

One of the concerns raised by many parents is the allocation of school places when families move. When families do not have much notice about a posting or do not have an address for SFA some have found that the local authority will not permit them to start applying for a school place. The Admissions Code 2014 indicates that local authorities must allow the use of a 'quartering address' supported by an official letter or a posting notice to enable parents to apply for a school place. However, parents have found that by the time they have an address and can decide which school is the most appropriate, the school may not have any places to offer them. While the Code does not guarantee that Service families will be offered their first or second choice of school, it does permit children of UK Service Personnel to be admitted outside the normal admissions round and to make an exception in respect of the class size limit. Nevertheless, parents can be very disappointed:

“ You can't apply for a school place until you have a home address, but you can't apply for SFA until you are within 90 days of your assignment start date. This causes issues and there are not always places available within the catchment area. ”

(RN dual serving parent)

“ The Armed Forces Covenant has no sway on school allocation, this seems unfair. We were repeatedly told by local authorities that only special needs children and children of travellers had any priority in school allocation, and that military families are not considered a higher priority than anybody else. This, combined with disparity between the school place application timelines and military assignment timelines results in sub-optimal allocation of schools... my recent experience is that allocation of a third and fourth choice school takes students away from schools located near military bases which are well set up to deal with military children. ”

(Army Serving partner)

It is clear that schools should consider a posting address as good enough to allocate a place but this does not always seem to happen. It is also important for parents to understand their obligation and responsibility to be active in applying for school places. Serving personnel returning from overseas have pointed to the lack of sufficient notice to be able to apply for a school place in good time. This is seen as particularly worrying given the high quality of MOD schools abroad. Referring to a MOD school in Cyprus, one father told us:

“ The class size was comparatively smaller in numbers than UK schools, which made a significant difference in the attention the teachers could invest in the children. The school was of a high standard and the entire package was delivered flawlessly. Every parent could say nothing negative about the schools. My child had an amazing start for the first three years of school. ”

(Army Serving partner)

He went on to comment on the challenge for children when they had to transfer to a non-military school when returning to the UK where class sizes are higher and the support for Service children may be considerably less. It is also important to support children returning from schools overseas as they have to fit into different systems where there may not be equivalence in the education offered. This can be particularly stressful when the move is in the midst of the school year:

“ When I moved my family across from Cyprus back to the UK, I was posted after the school term had started... My twins remained out of education for three months [January to April] which is absolutely disgraceful given their age and the critical time leading up to their GCSEs. This was the result of a lack of places available within our local schools... The whole thing left my girls considerably upset and put undue pressure on me and my wife... ”

(Regular Army Reserve Serving partner)

Since moving children during the school year is undesirable in respect of their education and ability to settle into a new schools, it is important that postings should be organised wherever possible to take place in the summer holidays, and that families are given as much notice as possible about the move and information as to where they can live so that applications for school places can proceed in an orderly and less stressful manner. The 2019 FamCAS survey indicates that of the families who had a child who had changed school, 53 per cent were able to apply for a school place within the timeframe for the normal point of entry. Just under three quarters of those who had moved and applied for a place in a state school, were happy with the child's allocation, and just over a quarter of families were unhappy with the allocation.¹¹⁷

We have been impressed by the efforts made by some local authorities in England to ensure that schools are prepared and ready to take Service children. For example, we have been told about the head teachers in Kent visiting Brunei in advance of the return of Ghurkha children to ensure smooth transitions, and a report by the Forces in Mind Trust reported on the efforts made in Wiltshire to support Service children.¹¹⁸

117 FamCAS Survey 2019. op.cit.

118 FiMT and Local Government Association (2017) *Our Community – Our Covenant: improving the delivery of local Covenant pledges.*

The Army garrisons in Wiltshire inform the local authorities about future admissions so that schools can make sufficient preparations for smoother transitions. This has been vital while the Army re-bases large numbers of Serving personnel from Germany in the years up to 2020. We are sure that other bases, garrisons and stations will be similarly engaging with their local authorities and this good practice is to be commended.

The three Families Federations have consistently raised the problems associated with changing schools and the high levels of anxiety they engender for parents and for children. We believe that the School Admissions Code should be reviewed to give clearer direction to admission authorities about placing Service children. It is also important that clear information about applying for a school place is provided to all parents, including the non-serving partner, when they are moving. It is also incumbent on Amey to allocate SFA, or at least indicate the area where it is likely to be, as soon as possible when a posting is known, to enable families to locate the most appropriate school. If all local authorities in England were required to join the MOD Local Authority Partnership (MODLAP) this would ensure that a Service children's champion in every local authority could take responsibility for promoting smoother transitions between schools and accord a higher status to the needs of military children. We hope that they can be strongly encouraged to do so.

Progression to higher education

Another issue brought to our attention during the review relates to the numbers of Service children progressing to higher education after leaving school. Concerns were expressed that a significant percentage of Service children in England, when compared with civilian children not in receipt of the Pupil Premium, are not progressing to university. We understand that the proportion of Service children leaving school and progressing to higher education in Northern Ireland, for example, is roughly comparable to that of the local population. Nevertheless, while it is acknowledged that moves from one educational system to another might well have an impact on Service children's likelihood of going to university, generalisations are problematic.

An in-depth study by the University of Winchester which sought to understand the situation rather more clearly than can be determined by simply looking at the data each local authority provides¹¹⁹ found from their initial literature review that Service children were not shown to underachieve up to GCSE level and that progression and attainment post-16 was not known. The research sought to bridge this gap in knowledge using both secondary and primary data. They reported that mobility and deployment are two overarching issues for children but found that the number of schools attended did not impact on young people's intent to go to university. Importantly, the researchers pointed to the lack of consistent data relating to Service children and concluded that:

“ it is difficult to build a coherent picture of the educational progression of military Service children on the basis of fully compatible data sources.¹²⁰ ”

Nevertheless, they suggested that:¹²¹

“ it is in the realm of up to four out of ten [military children] who, if in the general population would go to university, do not go if they are a Service child. ”

This was suggested as an 'indicator' of difference between military children and civilian children but has been used to generalise further about the possible lower numbers of military children going on to higher education. Many contributors to the review felt that such generalisations are problematic and that the data should be treated with extreme caution since the factors influencing a decision to go to university are various. In the absence of further research, we agree that the statistics need to be used with caution.

119 McCullouch J and Hall, M. (2016) *Further and Higher Progression for Service Children: research paper.* University of Winchester.

120 Ibid. p16.

121 Ibid.

It is clearly essential to examine military children's progression in greater depth and with more accuracy than has been possible thus far in order to reach definitive conclusions about the impact of military life on children's educational outcomes and their choices about higher education. The authors of the Winchester study conceded that we have a

- fragmented and partial picture of Service children's progression. The factors that may influence a Service child's successful progression into and through higher education are many and various, with the potential to be in tension with each other.¹²²

And they concluded that:

- Although the existing evidence does indicate the potential for Service children to be placed at an educational disadvantage compared to their civilian peers, we need further evidence in order to make an objective argument.¹²³

This caveat is critically important. In respect of the question as to whether Service children are under-represented in higher education, the team commented:

- A significant barrier to determining whether Service children are objectively under-represented in higher education is that there is no clear definition of what 'under-representation' means in the context of higher education.¹²⁴

They also acknowledged that the term 'under-representation' is not a neutral one but rather it is tied to political ambitions and objectives. Some educationalists were keen to point out to us that Service children whose parents are from lower socio-economic groups in society may not have high ambitions to go to university and may well choose to learn a trade or take an apprenticeship. The Armed Forces offer a wide range of apprenticeships and these might be more attractive than academic study for some Service children. Teachers in secondary schools indicated that they regard their main task as being to assist Service children to follow a career of their choosing and to help them to be the best they can be, which may not include seeking higher education in a university. The Winchester researchers have suggested that

- the notion of under-representation could be viewed in terms of wider social values such as equality and inclusion in addition to proportional representation in higher education. Such an approach may better support the principles and core values of the Armed Forces Covenant, as well as offering a more nuanced understanding of disadvantage and under-representation that could benefit all children.¹²⁵

None of our discussions with children and young people themselves during this review have indicated that they felt unable to progress through to higher education. There was no suggestion that higher education would be more difficult for them to access. While they regard constant changes of school as disruptive and potentially disadvantageous to their education, their main concerns centre on repeated disruptions during their secondary school years.

Stability in the teenage years is regarded as the key to overcoming some of the difficulties changing schools has meant while they were younger. For example, young people in Catterick who had not moved for several years after previous frequent postings pointed to the stability which had allowed them to focus on doing well in their GCSEs and A levels and, consequently, to apply to university if they wish. Young people saw stability in their teenage years as opening up opportunities that would include going to university, but which gave them the confidence to make informed choices. In their view, going to university was not the only measure of success. None of the parents who responded to the Call for Evidence highlighted concerns about their child not being able to go to university or enter higher education, and it would seem that concerns about this are largely unproven given the available data. In our view, more research is needed to fully understand the onward progression of Service children when they leave school.

¹²² Ibid. p32.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p15.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p32.

In the meantime, we suggest that generalisations about the progression of young people from a military family should be treated with considerable caution.

We note that the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019¹²⁶ includes data from the Department for Education in England about the progression of Service children to higher education. The data suggest that the proportion of Service children who go on to higher education after the end of Key Stage 5 is four percentage points lower than it is for non-Service, non-free school meals children (47% compared to 51% respectively), with Service children being more likely to go into employment at age 18 (26% as compared with 22% of non-service children). These data underline the importance of gaining a better understanding of the choices made by Service children, and they do not in themselves suggest that Service children are being disadvantaged in respect of higher education. We were told by several teenagers from military families that university might be an option later after they have spent some time with their parents or doing voluntary activities, and a significant number were planning to join the military themselves when they left school. It is important to note, also, that the DfE data reported in the 2019 Covenant Report show that in 2017–2018 the performance of Service children as a group is, as in previous years, largely on a par with that of non-Service children across most measures.¹²⁷ After Key Stage 4, Service children are as likely as non-Service children to stay in sustained education or employment.

We know that Service children are more likely to have moved schools than other children. The DfE data indicate that levels of mobility are correlated with attainment at Key Stages 2 and 4 with average attainment being lower among those who move schools more frequently, although Service children who move twice or more during their education perform better than non-Service children who make the same number of moves.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the correlation with relocations and school moves supports our recommendations that assignments should take account of the potential impact on Service children's education and that fewer moves would be beneficial for children and indeed for spouses/partners.

It is encouraging to know that concerted efforts are being made by universities and colleges to identify Service children in their widening participation programmes, and that UCAS will have a flag on applications from military children. The UCAS forms will ask applicants whether they have been a Service child in the last 25 years and there is guidance for young people with a military background on the UCAS website. It is important that young people from a military family list all the schools they have attended, in order to provide a complete picture of their educational journey.

The UCAS changes and the commitment of universities to ensure that Service children are not inadvertently disadvantaged are very positive steps, but it is possible that not all young people will want to declare their military connection. Some parents decide not to disclose to teachers that they are from a military family, and some children and young people have been told not to disclose their military background. Nevertheless, the various initiatives taking place should enable much more accurate research to be undertaken into the educational challenges and outcomes for Service children than has been possible thus far, and to build a more sophisticated data base for future analysis. We welcome the new student information and advice page for Service students launched by UCAS with support from the MOD and The Service Children's Progression Alliance.

We welcome also the establishment of a 'What Works Centre for Higher Education', announced in February 2019 by the Office for Students (OfS). Known as the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) it will commission, share and support the take-up of evidence on what works to improve access and participation in higher education in different settings and for different groups of disadvantaged and under-represented students. While Service children are not disadvantaged they may be under-represented in higher education although this is not proven. The new Centre should be able to remedy the lack of accurate data about military students in higher education. The TASO is designed to be an independent hub for higher education professionals to access leading research, toolkits, and evaluation techniques to help widen participation and improve equality across the student lifecycle. We strongly encourage a specific focus on pupils from a military background.

¹²⁶ *Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report (2019)* Crown Copyright.

¹²⁷ Ibid. Annex B.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

The University of Winchester research team made 49 recommendations, many of which we re-emphasise in the recommendations stemming from this review, including the need to gather consistent, coherent, accurate data in respect of Service children and the need for more research. These recommendations are in line with those emphasised in a study undertaken for the SCiP Alliance¹²⁹ which also identified a significant need to develop the knowledge about and understanding of the educational and progression outcomes for Service children.

Providing additional support for Service children

There are a number of ways in which governments, local authorities and schools are attempting to provide additional support for Service children who may move schools more frequently than civilian children and also experience particular stressors as a result of military life. As we have seen during the review, some of the programmes are not universally available and not necessarily used to maximum benefit for the children and young people themselves.

The Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights drew our attention to the lack of children's voices in understanding the unique challenges faced by Service children:¹³⁰

“ Little attention has been given to the children affected by parents or siblings in the Armed Forces...there is very little evidence to bridge the gap in knowledge of this vulnerable group. ”

It has been our mission during this review to include the voices of children and young people whenever possible and it is to be hoped that more research will involve Service children in future. A booklet produced by the Service children of Kent and Medway gives a powerful voice to Service children¹³¹ and can help other children to understand more about military families. We attended the Children's Voice event for Service children held in Dover during the review and heard first-hand from pupils from a number of schools about what matters to them. Having teachers who understand the stressors that impact them as a result of having a parent in the military was top of their list, and having someone to talk to who understands military life is also very important.

Two Creative Forces events were held at the University of Winchester in 2017 which involved 63 pupils from primary schools and 57 from secondary schools in Hampshire. The children and young people formulated a list of Top Tips which included:

- raising awareness among civilian children about what it is like to be a Service child
- settling Service children when they arrive in a new school
- supporting Service children's emotional needs and helping them keep in contact when a parent is deployed
- helping them to build bonds with other children
- creating an app for Service children to communicate with each other.¹³²

The pupils who attended the events offered detailed advice about the kinds of support Service children need and appreciate. Most of their ideas do not require financial support and can be implemented fairly readily providing there is a more understanding and sympathetic culture within schools, together with a clear commitment to supporting Service children with the challenges they experience. These children and young people are very clear that they do not consider themselves to be disadvantaged nor are they looking for special treatment, but they would like better understanding of what their lives are like and how they differ from most other children. It would be helpful if all schools take account of the messages in this document.

¹²⁹ Service Children's Progression Alliance (2018) *Identifying shared priorities for action to ensure the educational success of Service children, and to better enable their progression through further and higher education into thriving adult lives and careers: a stakeholder consultation*, Report by Rose, C. and Rise, P. for Tiller Research.

¹³⁰ Submission from the Royal Caledonian Education Trust.

¹³¹ Cheriton Primary School (2019) *Our Parents Are Special: the Service Children of Kent and Medway*.

¹³² The University of Winchester (2017) *Creative Forces April 2017 Top Tips*.

Service Pupil Premium

The Service Pupil Premium (SPP) was introduced in 2011 in England and is funded and administered by the Department for Education (DfE) as part of the commitment to delivering the Armed Forces Covenant. The premium of £300 per Service child from Reception to year 11 is paid directly to state schools, free schools, and academies across England to support Service children. The expectation is that it should be used to provide pastoral support, principally to mitigate the impact of mobility and deployments.

The SPP is not offered in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Framework requires education authorities to identify, meet and keep under review a child's individual needs for support for learning, irrespective of the reason for these needs. The Scottish Government's commitment to invest in school counselling services across Scotland will also benefit Service children who need additional support.

In Northern Ireland support for Service pupils is sourced differently and applied for in October each year. It is referred to as the 'Support for Children of Service Personnel Funding Factor', and the schools can spend this as they see fit. This funding pre-dates the SPP in England by some 20 years.

In this report we have focused specifically on understanding how the SPP is being used in England, the extent to which it is well-understood, and how good practice is disseminated. Schools decide how to use the SPP and, unlike the Pupil Premium, it is not intended to bolster attainment, although when a child moves to a new school it is considered appropriate to use the money to help children catch up with their studies. We know that some schools are using the SPP in this way but others are unsure whether this kind of practical support is allowed. We are told that schools are expected to show how the money has been spent and that OFSTED will consider its use during their inspections. We note that SPP cannot be claimed retrospectively, nor is it transferable between schools. There are other restrictions on eligibility. In 2017/8 75,268 children were identified by the DfE as eligible for the SPP.

The SPP allows schools to provide pastoral care and support projects for Service children. The allocation of SPP is dependent on parents disclosing that their child is a military child, however, and, for a variety of reasons, some parents prefer not to tell the school. This mechanism for allocating the SPP means that there are a number of Service pupils who do not benefit from the school having funding to provide pastoral support. The SPP is not being utilised to its full potential and Service children are losing out on valuable support as a result.

The wide dispersal of military children across England means that some schools near the major Army garrisons, RAF stations and Naval bases will receive substantial income from the SPP, while the majority of schools with few Service children will receive relatively small amounts. Since the SPP is a much lower sum than the Pupil Premium for disadvantaged children the income for supporting Service children in some schools will be quite small.

The use of the SPP has been a controversial topic in the review with some parents clearly delighted about the support it has offered their children and other parents feeling that it is poorly understood and poorly used:

“ Service Pupil Premium is good, but more could be done with this to leverage against the negative impact on children of serving parents. What is provided with it varies from school to school. ”
(Army Serving parent)

“ We were extremely impressed by what the majority of the schools were doing with this additional funding...this is a real hearts and minds winner for Service families and needs to be continued. ”
(RAF Serving parent)

“ The school that my daughters attend collect the Service pupil premium, but I have seen no evidence that the school are using it to support my daughters with pastoral care...are schools audited? Where does the money go? ”
(RAF non-serving parent)

“ Colloquial evidence suggests there is limited understanding by some schools of how to effectively use this funding to support children. ”

(RN Serving parent)

These comments were echoed throughout the responses to the Call for Evidence. One non-serving parent said that she knew nothing about SPP until she stumbled across it doing some research. Another said that the school had handed her a cheque for £300 as they did not know what to do with the SPP.

There would appear to be great variation in the use of SPP and some children are clearly not seeing much benefit from it. Others, by contrast, who attend schools with large numbers of Service pupils are being well-supported. For example, some of the schools we visited employ an educational psychologist on a part-time basis to offer specific support to individual children, which can include therapeutic story writing, talking about worries and anxieties, emotional coaching to help children to handle different emotions, and providing story books about deployments (through Reading Force). Some schools employ counsellors to work with Service children, with a clear focus on providing pastoral care when it is needed. Children and young people themselves talked about how much they valued having someone to talk to who understood their worries and why they might be upset, for example when a parent is about to be deployed.

The lack of consistency and understanding about how the SPP can support Service children has been well-documented. The Children’s Commissioner’s report¹³³ indicated that in the schools with a distinct group of Service children the support provided was ‘clear, explicit and structured’. The report also suggested that specific support for Service children is less obvious in secondary schools. Some parents were of the opinion that the SPP had simply been added into the general school coffers in some areas, particularly in schools with few Service children. As one parent commented to us:

“ What can they do with £300 when there is just one Service child on the roll? ”

(RAF non-serving partner)

The DCYP has produced a short guide to best practice in the use of SPP but a more structured approach is needed to ensure that all schools, especially those with very few Service children understand their responsibilities in respect of providing support to this group of potentially vulnerable pupils. It was clear from the comments we received from parents that their child was not necessarily in need of pastoral support but very much in need of support with specific subjects or aspects of the curriculum that they had missed out on as the result of moving from school to school. The subjects that children and parents referred to most often were maths and English. There needs to be flexibility given to schools to use the SPP in the most appropriate way for each Service pupil to ensure that they have the best possible support.

A more detailed best practice guide is scheduled for publication in 2020. There is also recognition that the use of SPP is not monitored and that schools have not followed the expectation of publishing information about how it is used. Parents, welfare staff in the three single Services, and teachers have made it clear during the review that they want to see greater transparency and accountability by schools about their use of the SPP, and many have suggested that OFSTED should include this in their brief. Parents have also challenged the lack of SPP for pre-school children and for children aged 16 and above when emotional stability is key to their success. There would seem to be a strong case for SPP to be available throughout the school years until Service children leave school. Young people themselves and head teachers have told us that teenagers can be especially vulnerable during the transitions at the end of their school career. This is particularly important for pupils transferring to state schools from boarding schools to undertake A levels and other courses.

Head teachers in schools we visited talked about the importance of extra-curricular activities, ensuring that children can join clubs and develop a sense of belonging even if they are likely to have to move to another school within two years. Many non-serving parents told us that the school holidays are the hardest time when the other parent is deployed. The Head Teacher at Kendrew Barracks was keen to keep the school open during school holidays in order to offer activities and support to parents with young children and was planning to trial this if the funding could be made available. This is seen as a good way to involve

¹³³ Children’s Commissioner for England (2018) op.cit.

the non-serving parents in activities at the school and to encourage them to take an interest in their children’s education.

Identifying the priorities for support

The Tiller research undertaken for the SCiP Alliance¹³⁴ suggests that the impact of mobility and frequent transitions can shape an individual’s attitude towards education, their personal and social skills, and their aspirations. The impacts can be both positive and negative. The study listed a determination to work hard at school, maturity and resilience and learning to adapt to change as positive impacts. However, periodic stress and ‘a transitory mindset’ were identified as potentially negative impacts. The notion of a ‘transitory mindset’ was reinforced in our discussions with head teachers who could see that some children and their parents were less keen to ‘settle’ or engage with the current school as they knew they would be moving on soon.

This can be frustrating for teachers who want to encourage children to take their learning seriously. One head teacher who had offered to provide books and learning materials to a parent whose child was about to move to another school was rebuffed by the parent because ‘there is no room for books’. This ‘mindset’ could well limit the child’s own attainment and aspirations in due course. Commanding Officers and Welfare Staff should encourage parents to make arrangements for the continuity of their children’s learning on assignment to another area.

Several teachers suggested that learning materials could be made available online for Service children and their families, to minimise disruption when moving schools and to fill gaps in the curriculum. We understand that the DfE’s approach in England has been to specify what schools must teach in each national curriculum subject, but other than in the core subjects of maths, science and English, the programmes of study are sometimes deliberately minimal or at a high level, allowing schools to use what teaching resources they wish. There would seem to be a demand from teachers to have access to online learning materials that Service children and their families can be encouraged to use to fill in gaps, especially when children are in the process of relocating to a new school. The publishers of online educational resources could be encouraged to look specifically at the needs of Service children who move schools frequently. During the COVID 19 pandemic, many schools have provided on-line teaching resources, and the learning from this could provide important material for military children in future.

A number of resources are available to military children in the USA who experience frequent moves and differing educational approaches from State to State. Schools that are run by the Defense Department (181 overseas and 7 in the US) follow a standardised curriculum to ensure transferability when children move around, and the Defense Department also provides educational resources for civilian schools in addition to grants for improving the education of military children and for providing professional development for teachers in all the schools that serve military children. There are a number of online learning resources available for families and children as well.

Significantly, in addition to the resources available for all schools in the US, the Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission (2014) established an Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunities for Military Children to promote continuity in many educational policies and practices across all 50 States.¹³⁵ The Compact is an agreement among States as to how to handle educational issues that often vary from State to State. The Compact was developed to avoid inconsistencies in education as parents move around, particularly if children find themselves missing or repeating parts of the curriculum. The Compact also gives guidance to schools as to how to recognise and address the difficulties military children may experience.

Both sending and receiving schools have a range of responsibilities which include providing education records that go with the child. Guidelines on education are provided, and although not all local schools adhere to these, the Compact has enabled children to take classes in a new school and link these back to

¹³⁴ SCiP Alliance (2018) op.cit.

¹³⁵ Blaisure, K. R., Saathoff-Wells, T., Pereira, A., Wadsworth, S. M. and Dombro, A. L. (2016) *Serving Military Families: theories, research and application*, Routledge.

work undertaken in the previous school. This allows children to receive diplomas/credits in subjects they have studied in previous schools by linking the achievements across the different schools. This is very important since the vast majority of military children in the US do not attend Defense Department schools. If parents encounter difficulties in transferring children from school to school they can contact the Military Child Education Coalition for information about the Compact and advice.

The non-military schools vary in quality across the US, and different States have different mandatory courses that can easily put children back a year on moving. It is interesting to note that over 10 per cent of US Service children are home-schooled and this number is increasing.¹³⁶ Parents are provided with the same Defense Department curriculum and families are compensated for the cost of computers and books. It is regarded as one way of ensuring continuity in education for military children.

The attempts to promote continuity in education in the US would seem to chime with teachers in England who are keen to see greater compatibility between different parts of the UK, and to ensure that the provision of appropriate support for Service children is not a post-code lottery depending on where they go to school. We have seen excellent examples of high-quality pastoral support being offered in some schools, championed by the SCISS which is led by a National Executive Advisory Committee of head teachers, representatives of local authorities, the three Armed Forces Families Federations, and members of DCYP. The SCISS aims to bring together state-maintained schools in England with Service children on their registers in order to advocate for Service children and disseminate good practice. The SCISS, the SCiP Alliance and other education agencies offer vital support to the DCYP in its lead statutory role as champions for Service children.

One of the SCiP Alliance priorities is to assist in the development of resources and training to support educational professionals. The consultation undertaken by Tiller Research¹³⁷ involving a variety of education professionals acknowledged the complexity of the challenges faced by Service children. These include understanding: the demographic variations in the Armed Forces; the repeated transitions that children and their parents navigate; the more limited opportunity to engage in extra-curricular activities; disruptions in contact with careers advisers because of the frequent changes of school; and potential limitations of choice in subjects studied at A level because of changes in school curricula in different schools and nations of the UK. All these factors can influence the aspirations of Service children who are highly mobile. The General Teaching Council for Scotland accredits Initial Teacher Education programmes, all of which must prepare teachers to be responsive to the diverse needs of all children and young people.

The SCiP Alliance consultation respondents all highlighted the importance of hearing the voices of Service children, and identified ten areas for action, including:

- improving Service children's transition between schools
- avoiding repeated coverage of some aspects of the curriculum
- supporting Service children's holistic well-being throughout and beyond periods of transition
- helping Service children to think about and plan for their future
- engaging Service families, children and young people, practitioners and education stakeholders in sharing effective evidence-based support for the education and progression of Service children which responds to administrative variations in schooling, and the needs of each individual child.

The report also points to the need to prioritise the development of a high-quality evidence base on the experiences of Service children and best practice in responding to the challenges they face.

The consultation report suggests three possible future areas of support for education professionals working with Service children

- an online resource bank to help them be more effective in their roles
- practitioner groups to share practice and plan collaborative activities
- an annual conference.

¹³⁶ Information provided during a visit to the Center for New American Security, Washington DC, June 2019.

¹³⁷ SCiP Alliance (2018) op.cit.

Teachers also recognised that they do not always understand the specific needs of Service children and that they would benefit from a clear focus on this during their training. We understand that these suggested initiatives are being developed by the SCiP Alliance and will be launched in 2020.

Supporting children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)

All families with children with special educational or additional needs and disabilities (SEND) face a number of challenges. These challenges are exacerbated by military life, however, and we received many responses about the problems Service families have faced. It can often be difficult to obtain recognition that children have additional needs, and ensuring they receive the most suitable education for them can be a source of considerable stress when families move from one area to another. Many parents feel that the Armed Forces do not understand the pressures on parents with additional needs children and that these are not taken sufficiently into account:

“ My situation is complicated as I have an eight year old that is disabled. We currently have to drive 20 miles to get him to school. I don't think my chain of command fully understand how difficult it is for us to find a new school to suit his needs every three years. ”

(Army Serving parent)

“ My son suffers from special needs and cannot deal with moving schools all the time. He needs time to build a relationship with his SEN teachers and helpers. ”

(RAF Serving parent)

These children are especially vulnerable, particularly if their family is posted to another country in the UK as different nations have different systems for dealing with SEND children. The DCYP are currently focusing on supporting additional needs children in England and have been working with a number of families who have found it difficult to access appropriate schools on posting. Despite parents informing the new local authority well in advance of a move it is not uncommon for them to find that there has been no allocation when they arrive some months later. For example, one child who had transferred to a new local authority in February had not been found a school place by July so had missed months of education. The strain on this family was so great that the Serving partner was forced to ask for a change in his duties to assist his wife and his other children, and was even considering having to leave the Armed Forces because of the negative impact on the whole family.

Missing several months of schooling was not uncommon amongst those who responded to the call for evidence:

“ My son is an ESN child...Schools and councils should see you as priority when you are given an assignment order and get things in place for when you arrive [into a new area]. If the council had put my son's needs and requirements in place for him ...he would have had the support he needs... Councils should work together better to ensure all therapies and the EHCP [Education, Health and Care Plan] and schools are started at the assignment order day rather than when we get to the area to prevent children being out of school for weeks and not receiving the care they need and require.. ”

(RAF Serving mother)

“ ...we had been given a month to move... if you have no address you cannot apply to a school or a LA. We couldn't even use the camp my husband was posted to as we could have lived in five different areas! So my children [both with Education, Health and Care Plans] had to miss nearly two months of school...My children's mental health is what matters. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

A Serving mother with a child with severe developmental issues described the difficulties she had experienced finding suitable education for her son when moving from one RAF station to another such that he had no educational support for several months when they arrived in a new area. She had turned down promotion and her husband had taken time off work in order to address their son's needs on assignment. She told us:

“ You are not a priority to get a school place until you reach the area... ..I believe that in the Armed Forces when you are given an assignment order that this should make schools and councils see you as a priority and get things in place for when you arrive, to prevent children being out of school for weeks and not receiving the care they need and require. ”

(RAF Serving partner)

Another 8-year-old child diagnosed with ADHD and mental health difficulties was out of education for months as a school place was not allocated, with the result that his health was deteriorating. It is not unusual for children's behaviour to deteriorate to the point that parents find it difficult to cope at home. The strain of this impacts on the whole family, including the Serving partner. Some local authorities report that there is a general lack of resources to place children with additional needs, highlighting a considerable problem with special education in some areas.

By contrast, the DCYP have found some local authorities extremely helpful in providing school places promptly for military children with special needs. Some local authorities such as North and South Kesteven in Lincolnshire, North Yorkshire and Wiltshire have a named professional in their SEND team who deals with Service children, others have SEND professionals who deal with referrals promptly on a case by case basis, ensuring that children do not experience a delay in their schooling when they move. There are important lessons to be learned from this good practice which must be replicated across all local authorities.

There appears to be what DCYP describe as a 'grey' area in the SEND Code of Practice. The Schools Admission Code includes specific actions a local authority must follow when supporting a Service family moving into their authority area: a school place must be allocated in advance of a Service family's arrival. However, there is no such requirement within the SEND Code of Practice, which means that some local authorities believe that they do not have to commence consultation with schools until after the family has moved to the area. Given that it takes some time to find a suitable place for a SEND child, this inevitably means that the child may experience a gap in provision every time they move. Since many Service families move every two or three years then, cumulatively, a child with additional needs can miss many months, if not years, of education. Children who are already very vulnerable as a result of their needs and the requirements of Service life become even more vulnerable as a result of a system which fails them:

“ One of our sons is on the autistic spectrum and requires additional help to access the curriculum with input from OT and speech and language services. These are very difficult to obtain when moving between authorities... We still do not have an EHCP [Education, Health and Care Plan] for him from our current local authority after a year of living here. It still remains in draft form under the name of our previous LA. And a four year waiting list for orthodontic treatment in Wiltshire led to a six-hour round trip for his braces. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

Currently there is no collective approach among local authorities in England in respect of this group of potentially very vulnerable Service children. Hence the current focus in DCYP to address this via the MOD Local Authority Partnership (MODLAP) between the MOD and local authorities in England. This partnership involves 15 local authorities committed to working with the MOD to improve the educational experience of Service children. By focusing on SEND children at the current time, MODLAP has agreed a set of principles for the transition of Service children with SEND between local authority areas. These principles are designed to ensure that the outgoing authority will transmit all necessary child records to the new local authority within 15 days of the parents notifying them of the expected move; and the new local authority commits to reduce to the absolute minimum the amount of time a SEND child is out of education. Moreover, the receiving local authority recognises the existing assessment of need which travels with the child and seeks to ensure the continuity of provision for all Service children moving from one area to another.

This set of principles is an extremely important step forward in addressing the needs of Service children. Having been made aware of the stresses and strains children and their parents suffer when provision for special needs children is lacking and the consequent amount of time these children are out of education, we believe that it should be mandatory for all local authorities to engage with MODLAP and to work steadfastly to implement the agreed principles for all Service children with additional needs.

Furthermore, it must be to the benefit of all Service children with additional needs for these principles to be adopted in the devolved nations of the UK. Each of the devolved administrations has its own policies and terminology with respect to additional needs children and a Code of Practice to follow. The equivalent to the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in England is the Coordinated Support Plan in Scotland and the Individual Development Plan in Wales. These differences can be confusing and worrying for families moving between the nations of the UK:

“ It's a massive concern with the twin who has developmental needs. We've already experienced an extended wait for a review by ENT as we move between England and Scotland. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

We are heartened to know that the DCYP and the MODLAP team are working closely with the Welsh and Scottish administrations to extend good practice throughout the UK. Central to the success of this initiative is the recognition and acceptance of different ways of assessing and establishing the needs children have and the plans that are put in place to meet them. We note that the Welsh Government Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 makes provision for a new statutory framework for supporting children, including Service children, with additional learning needs. The new system is expected to be implemented over a three year period from September 2020 and will make provision for children and young people requiring extra support. Moreover, the new Additional Learning Needs Code will include specific guidance of the children of Service personnel. These changes are much welcomed.

The Scottish Government is also taking steps to improve provision for Service children through the Supporting Children's Learning Code of Practice. The Scottish Service Children Strategy Group identifies the challenges faced by Service children and is working on guidance for teachers, local authorities and parents in supporting early stages transitions between different education systems.

In England, SEND children should have a personalised EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan). The plan is for children and young people up to 25 years of age who need more support than is available through special educational needs support. Local authorities carry out the assessment for this and the plan identifies educational, health and social care needs and sets out the additional support to meet these needs. The plan is portable and should go with the child. Currently, Service children attending a MOD school in a base overseas have a Service Child Assessment of Need (SCAN). The SCAN is analogous to the EHCP but local authorities have been reluctant to accept them on transfer back to the UK. This reluctance has meant that some children have to be assessed again when they return to the UK. Not only can this be upsetting but, crucially, it can delay the provision of appropriate education and support. The MODLAP principles acknowledge the validity of each plan so that re-assessment can be avoided and delay minimised. It is important that MODLAP ensure that the two documents are as closely aligned as possible and that local authorities should accept the professional judgements of the MOD specialists who undertake the SCAN.

It would also make sense for there to be no need for two such documents: either the statutory framework around EHCPs should be extended to include Service children attending MOD schools, or SCANS should be treated as statutory documents. Alternatively, and preferably, MOD should investigate the practicalities of being able to provide statutory ECHPs for children with additional needs rather than a SCAN document. We note that all Army families with children with additional needs must register their children with the Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS). Families in the RN/RM and the RAF are encouraged but not required to register their children except when the family accepts an overseas assignment, when the registration of all children with additional needs is mandated. Registration enables CEAS to provide advice and assist in liaison with local authorities amongst other support for families. It would be sensible for there to be consistency across the three single Services in this respect.

In August 2019, the Department for Education launched a Call for Evidence in respect of SEND children. The three Families Federations have responded to this call and have concluded that mobile Service families with a SEND child face a disadvantage in the current system. They point to the lack of resources for SEND children generally which can result in gaps in education; and to the transfer of SEND documentation being too complex and too slow for mobile families. They are asking the DfE to remove the disadvantage for Service families who move between counties and across country borders on assignment; and for a formal training programme for teaching staff to raise awareness of the specific needs

of Service children with SEND. Our responses from Service families during the review lead us to concur with these observations.

In their recent report FANDF¹³⁸ point to the lengthy waiting lists for educational assessments and diagnosis and these delays mean that assessments are not completed before the family have to move to a new posting. The report also highlights the concern that educational diagnoses are not accepted between local education authorities and the lack of transferability of EHCPs between counties and the Devolved Governments. The report recommends that either EHCPs should be recognised across the UK or a new system should be introduced that has universal applicability, in order to assist transfers and avoid delays. The report recommends that more should be done to identify families with children with additional educational needs or disabilities in order to improve understanding about these families and their needs. It also recommends that an investigation is needed into the availability of respite care.

We understand from the Department for Education that the SEND Code of Practice is due to be revised by the end of 2020, prompted by the Timpson Review of school exclusions. We very much hope that the revisions will include changes that will ensure that military children who have special educational needs or disabilities are not disadvantaged in any way. We are aware that a good deal of work is ongoing in the Devolved Governments in partnership with the MOD to improve support for Service children. For example, the 2017 revised Supporting Children's Learning Code of Practice in Scotland includes specific references to Armed Forces children, reiterating to schools and local authorities their potential need for additional support. The clear message from all the work being undertaken across the UK is the importance of ensuring as far as possible that Service children are not disadvantaged in any way when they move between different education systems and curricula, and that policy-makers collaborate to find common principles and pathways to support all Service children, and especially SEND children, through their formative years.

Supporting young carers

Young carers are children and young people under 18 who provide, or intend to provide care for another person who has a long-term illness, is disabled, has a mental health condition, or addiction problem.¹³⁹ The young carer may be looking after a parent, sibling, grandparent or another family member.¹⁴⁰ In recent years there has been an increased focus on young carers as a somewhat 'hidden' population of children and young people. The Children and Families Act 2014 and the Care Act 2014 in England have significantly strengthened the rights of children who are caring for a family member, with an emphasis on a whole family approach to providing services and support. Local Authorities must identify and assess the support needs of young carers. The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 includes a Carers' Charter, with specific reference to young carers. Under the Charter,¹⁴¹ young carers under the age of 18 have a right to a 'young carer statement' which contains a variety of information about the young carer's circumstances and caring role. The statement must contain information about:

- the nature and extent of the care being provided and the impact on the young person's wellbeing
- the extent to which the young person is able and willing to provide care
- whether the responsible authority thinks that the caring role is appropriate
- emergency and future care planning
- the personal outcomes that matter to the young person to have a life outside caring and to improve their own health and wellbeing
- the support available to the young person if they reside in a different local authority than the person being cared for
- whether support is needed to have a break from caring
- what support is available to the young person locally
- any support the responsible authority intends to provide to the young person
- the circumstances in which the statement is to be reviewed.

138 FANDF (2020) *Families Fighting On* op.cit.

139 The Children's Society (2017) *Young Carers in Armed Forces Families: Evidencing the need*, The Children's Society.

140 Roberts, D., Bernard, M., Misca, G. & Head, E. (2008). *Experiences of Children and Young People Caring for a Parent with a Mental Health Problem*, SCIE Research briefing 24.

141 Carers' Charter (2018) Scottish Government.

Importantly, a young carer's statement identifies the young person's needs as a carer, and the local authority is expected to meet these needs.

The Information and Learning Hub¹⁴² in Wales indicates that there are approximately 30,000 young carers in Wales under the age of 25. According to the 2011 census, Wales had the highest proportion of carers under 18 in the UK (29,155 young carers), and it is likely that the actual number is higher. These young carers tend to have poorer health than other young people and to be more likely to not be in education, employment or training.¹⁴³ The Welsh Government defines young carers as being carers under the age of 18. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 brought in new rights for carers and a duty on local authorities to support them. Assessments are undertaken which include many similar provisions as the statement in Scotland, and Care and Support Plans prioritise the young person's wellbeing.

The Children's Society has estimated that there are more than 800,000 young carers in the UK, many of whom miss out on school and have to grow up early in order to look after a family member. Armed Forces Welfare Officers around the UK have indicated that they are aware of children and young people in their communities who are looking after one of their parents but Service families do not always disclose the extent of any problems they may be experiencing at home. As a result young carers are likely to be a 'hidden' population, as they are in civilian society more generally, and less likely to receive the support they need. Research¹⁴⁴ has shown that social care, health and educational professionals have a crucial role to play in identifying and assessing the needs of young carers. Moreover, barriers to accessing support for young carers included parental concerns about the consequences of disclosure for families.



Photo 4.2 Army and You: The Voice of Youth, AFF, Summer 2019, p30.

The SSAFA Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum (FANDF) has recognised that the challenges of military life can be greater when a family member has long-term health difficulties, especially if they are suffering from PTSD or mental health issues.¹⁴⁵ In the responses to our Call for Evidence we received responses from Serving partners who commented on their partner's health issues, and some mentioned that this had put pressure on their child when they were away on deployment. Some non-serving partners also mentioned health issues in the context of being a 'single parent' during deployments. Young carers in military families have been highlighted as a particularly vulnerable group because of the other aspects of Service life which already impact on their everyday lives.¹⁴⁶

142 Information and Learning Hub: Social care legislation in Wales (2017) Social Care Wales.

143 Ibid.

144 TNS BMRB and Aldridge J. (2016) *The Lives of Young Carers in England* Department for Education.

145 FANDF (2020) op.cit; see Creech, S. K., & Misca, G. (2017) *Parenting with PTSD: a review of research on the influence of PTSD on parent-child functioning in military and veteran families*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1101.

146 The Children's Society (2017) op.cit.

Unfortunately there seems to be no reliable evidence as to the numbers of young carers in the UK within Armed Forces families. North Yorkshire County Council in its biennial health and wellbeing survey of pupils in years 2, 6, 8, and 10, analysed responses relating to Armed Forces families and found that 27 pupils in primary schools and 39 pupils in secondary schools identified themselves as young carers.¹⁴⁷ In their 2018 survey, North Yorkshire County Council reported that young carers in secondary schools had less exercise, more cannabis offers, skipped breakfast more often, and had more absences from school than other pupils.¹⁴⁸ There is a stigma associated with disclosing problems in the family and with asking for help. Yet research indicates that caring responsibilities have an adverse impact on young people's own mental health and development and on their educational outcomes.¹⁴⁹

The Children's Society looked at the needs of Service children in Hampshire and Wiltshire who were caring for a family member and concluded that young carers in military families are a hard to reach group. This can make providing support difficult, particularly as Service children move schools. They have recommended that more needs to be done in schools and by the Armed Forces themselves to identify and support young carers. The Naval Families Federation has highlighted the additional challenges young carers face and recognises that they may have to look after siblings and a parent while the Serving parent is away for considerable periods of time.¹⁵⁰ These young carers may well become isolated and afraid to ask for help, perhaps because of a sense of loyalty to the Serving parent and other family members. Young carers are often invisible in society generally and even more so in the military. It is critical that they know where to find help and support and that the Services are sympathetic to their needs.

Promoting Stability and Continuity in Education

In order to secure stability for their children's education some Service families decide to send their children to boarding schools. Their reasons for doing so vary and not all parents want to send their children away but consider it to be in their best interests for increased stability:

“ My husband and I are seriously considering boarding school for the children. However, we are acutely aware that this is something we should be prepared to self-fund, as it seems likely that Continuity of Education Allowance will be phased out in the future. ”

(RN Serving partner)

“ We have gone down the boarding route, which not our ideal but a lifeline. My children were fed up with all the different primary schools and just wanted friends that did not change. My youngest is 15 and he is on his 7th school. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

“ This September my eldest daughter will start at Boarding School on the Continuity of Education Allowance. Whilst we would prefer to keep her at home, in our view it is the only route to stability for her education. This allowance is a vital aspect of Service life and if it were removed we would have no option but to leave the Army in order to deliver the stability that our children require to flourish. ”

(Army Serving partner)

“ Whilst our children are settled in boarding school the decision to go down this route was based on the uncertainty of postings every two years and the high possibility of changing between Scottish and English education systems. It also allows our children the guarantee of a settled education in a school close to our extended family. ”

(Army Serving partner)

Other parents had opted for boarding school because of the amount of education the children missed when moving schools. Losing valuable time could well set their children behind in certain key subjects:

147 North Yorkshire County Council (2018) *Growing Up in North Yorkshire*.

148 North Yorkshire County Council (2018) op.cit.

149 Carers Trust (2016) <https://professionals.carers.org/young-adult-carer-mental-health>

150 Naval Families Federation (2019) op.cit.

“ We did not necessarily want to opt for boarding but we find that the children lose a half-term of learning each time they move schools, and it takes a while to settle, for the teachers to get to know their strengths and weaknesses. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

“ We are in the CEA scheme. This has allowed us to keep the children in the same secondary school for the duration. My daughter has already been to five primary schools...it has given us the reassurance that the education provision for our children will not be disrupted with frequent postings. This is a huge benefit for Service families and negates the numerous disadvantages we have endured as a military family over the years. ”

(RAF non-serving partner)

The Continuity of Education Allowance (CEA) is offered by the MOD to assist with funding a place in boarding school in order to provide continuity of education for a child. Accompanied service is the overriding principle for maintaining entitlement and the family have to expect to be mobile. It is available for children aged 8 years and over. The MOD pay 90 per cent of the cost up to a ceiling which is lower for primary/junior school pupils and higher in the secondary/senior school years. As at September 2018, 4,200 pupils were in receipt of CEA.

Once a child has started at a boarding school changing schools is not an option and it is expected that the pupil will remain in the school for the duration. The DCYP provide detailed information and guidance for parents thinking about opting for boarding education and about the implications of doing so. They also provide guidance about the different kinds of schools. As many parents have commented, boarding provision can be very expensive although state boarding schools are significantly less expensive than others because the only charge is for the boarding element. Sending a child to boarding school is not a decision to be taken lightly and the application for CEA is thorough. Nor should it be regarded as a 'perk' or a privilege which is given mainly to officers. Families across the ranks use CEA to provide continuity of education for their children:

“ It is heart-wrenching for me to have ... a child away in boarding school and not a route I thought I would take ... I appreciate we receive CEA. I don't see it as a privilege but as a necessity so my child can have the same education as a child not moving every two years. My son had four different schools in three years and as we went to Scotland in this time he was also in different years and different curricula. ... He is in his third year [of boarding] now and thriving and talking about university... ”

(Army, non-serving partner)

This mother explained that sending her son to boarding school was not what she wanted to do, but because he had dropped back a year as a result of the posting to Scotland and his education had suffered, he made the decision himself to board.

While the choice of boarding school does not appeal to all parents, young people we spoke to at DOYRMS were very clear that being at a boarding school had offered them the kind of opportunities they would not have had if they had stayed at day schools and moved around. The advantages they all agreed upon were:

- the ability to plan their education, choosing their subjects at GCSE and at A level, knowing that they would not be forced to change them because of a school move
- smaller class sizes which are conducive to learning
- the chance to develop lasting friendships with their peers
- being able to live in a 'homely' environment with a clear focus on achievement in all aspects of their lives
- supportive teachers who understand the challenges they face as Service children and the emotional ups and downs that accompany being away from their parents and the stressors of deployment cycles
- access to counsellors who can help them when they need it
- pastoral support being available 24/7
- stability which builds confidence for the future.

In this state boarding school the pupils are imbued with military values and leadership skills from day one, which those we spoke to had all appreciated. They said that this approach had helped them to understand the expectations placed by the military on their serving parent(s). Importantly, all the children in the school (60% military pupils and 40% civilian pupils) are taught to respect and celebrate the Armed Forces. The pupils from Service families found this to be enormously helpful in encouraging their civilian peers to understand the military far better than they otherwise would. One young person said that previously his father had told him not to tell his friends that his father was a soldier for fear of bullying in his local school. Another young person said that his father would never go in uniform into the primary schools he had attended because it could mark his son out as 'different'. In DOYRMS military uniforms are commonplace and worn with pride.

Interestingly, these young people were sceptical about children going to boarding school before the age of 11. They were of the view that it is better to be with parents until year 8 but critically important to be able to be in a stable educational environment from year 8 until leaving school at 18. Looking back over their school careers the sixth formers we spoke to listed the 'bad things' about their schooldays prior to going to boarding school. These included:

- moving schools part-way through the year
- being bullied and teased
- finding it hard to make friends
- getting lost when changing schools...not knowing their way around
- losing friends
- finding that civilian children do not understand or value military life
- being posted all the time
- feeling like a 'no-one'
- teachers not understanding what they were going through when a parent was deployed
- having to change school uniforms endlessly.

What these young people had valued more than anything else about some of the schools they had attended was the support and understanding they had been given. When asked about their career aspirations, some had secured university places, some were joining the Armed Forces as soon as they left school, and others were taking time out to travel, do voluntary service overseas or join their parents who were currently posted abroad. Those taking time out said that they would almost certainly go to university or some kind of higher education at some stage in the future. Some 17 per cent of pupils at DOYRMS join the Armed Forces.

Whether Service children attend day schools or boarding schools, however, all the head teachers agreed that the key to educational attainment and progression for these children is stability in education, and that this is especially important in the run up to GCSEs and throughout the sixth form up to A levels.

Despite the very positive views about CEA, however, changes in the rules and eligibility have clearly upset a number of parents:

“The change of rules concerning 6th form education have caused a lot of uncertainty. They have not been clearly presented/communicated to families and this has caused more stress than is necessary.”

(Army non-serving partner)

“We have chosen to make use of the CEA for our children's secondary education, and it has been key in providing a solid and stable learning environment while allowing me to fulfil a varied and mobile military career. The withdrawal or reduced eligibility for this allowance, for both officers and soldiers will, I believe, have a detrimental effect on Army retention.”

(Army Serving partner)

“I don't like the idea of being faced with having to justify the [children] staying in the 6th form.”

(Army non-serving partner)

Undoubtedly, the CEA is seen as a very valuable offer, enabling children and young people to have a stable and continuing education. For the purpose of CEA a child's education is divided into three distinct phases: primary, junior or preparatory school; secondary or senior school; and A level or academic equivalent vocational training or sixth form college. From September 2018, parents have been expected to acquire a new CEA Eligibility Certificate when a child is preparing to enter sixth form. It is this change which is causing concern amongst many parents, young people themselves and their teachers. The regulations state that in order to prove mobility a Service person must be likely to move over 50 miles away from their current location in the next four years. The Army Families Federation believes that this is an unacceptable requirement for eligibility for CEA. We received a number of emails detailing the worries this change has brought for families already receiving CEA:

“Children's education has been our biggest worry...Ultimately we opted to board using CEA. This however, became a huge problem when we were given postings within 50 miles of each other...we lost entitlement to CEA. Notwithstanding the Army Personnel Centre insistence we remained mobile and liable for posting anywhere at any time, DBS [Defence Business Services] ruled us ineligible....After the decision was made I was offered an assignment in Canada...DBS make a decision based on the last assignments irrespective of the future.”

(Army Serving partner)

The stress on this family was such that this officer ended his commitment to the Armed Forces after 32 years, feeling bitter:

“We opted for boarding our children so we could remain as a married family during postings...CEA was critical to allowing us as a family to enjoy the benefits of service mobility without the angst of education. The loss of CEA with the retained risk of relocation created so much stress it almost broke us as a family.”

The welfare of children was the over-riding concern of this family throughout the years. Their choice of boarding had clearly been influenced by their own experiences of being Service children. This officer's wife had boarded and done extremely well at school while he had changed schools endlessly and had done less well at school.

Other parents told us:

“The new sixth form rule was brought in last year. You are now required to reapply for CEA for sixth form around June of Year 10 regardless of whether your eligibility certificate has run out...It is a massive disruption to the children's education at a vital point... I don't want my son's education to suffer at the last hurdle because his Dad did not move that year!”

(Army non-serving partner)

“My wife and I decided that it was no longer in our children's best interests to continue [changing schools after the age of 10] so we applied for CEA. This process was rigorous; rightly so given the financial cost to the MOD...Almost three years later we have been given no reason to doubt our decision in any respect. In addition to providing a high standard of education our chosen school has a large proportion of serving personnel and therefore understands the unique requirements of military Service. Continued access to CEA allows me to serve overseas without further impacting on my children's education and is therefore critical to my continued military Service. It is therefore hugely disappointing that the MOD has introduced changes to CEA eligibility...This causes me significant concern as I can no longer guarantee continuity for the remainder of my children's education.”

(Army Serving partner)

Parents and teachers have indicated that to have to reapply at the 6th form stage does not meet the expressed aims of education being continuous, and that the years between GCSEs and A level are of extreme importance for successful outcomes for young people. Therefore, in their view, education provision should be as continuous as possible. Several parents pointed out that the CEA is about continuity and that the new rule is contrary to that.

The young people who were boarding told us that some of their friends had had to leave after GCSEs and that this seemed very unfair at such an important time, particularly as planning for A levels and choosing subjects starts well before 6th form entry. This is an important point. Having to move to another school after GCSEs could mean that the choices available are not the same, thus placing pupils at a disadvantage. Moreover they may not receive the support or careers advice they are used to. There is general agreement that changing from a boarding school to a day school after GCSEs, unless it is by choice for a specific educational or personal reason, is a transition too far for Service pupils at this stage of their education:

“ *With a serving husband and six moves in the past eight years we have valued being in receipt of CEA for the stability of our three daughters’ education. This was fundamentally shattered last year when the Defence Business Services (DBS) Personnel, Casework and Complaints Cell (PACCC) deemed that I had breached CEA eligibility, which I had not, when two daughters were at critical stages of education (GCSE and A levels)...The whole process has felt like I have been judged by a Kangaroo Court...* ”

(RAF dual-serving parents)

This parent went on to describe the length of time it took to sort out the problem while the parents self-funded boarding education. They pointed out that the PACCC can, in their view, make an arbitrary decision about CEA eligibility with minimal attempts to understand the circumstances of the family and that this becomes even more critical with the new regulations.

While it is a fact that some civilian children move schools between GCSEs and A levels, this is usually by choice or where the young person is attending a school that does not offer education beyond GCSEs. In these circumstances it is clear to the parents and the child concerned that a school move will be necessary long before entering 6th form education. By contrast, Service families, and therefore their children, may well not know whether they will have to change schools because of the mobility criteria taking effect, until late in the day when the next assignment comes through. There may be every expectation, as some parents told us, that they will continue to be deemed eligible only to find that this is not the case at the critical moment when the application has to be remade.

Teachers and parents expressed very strong views that the new rule for CEA can severely disrupt education at a vital stage. One primary school head teacher described the rules and regulations as extremely unhelpful and likely to result in unnecessary turbulence for pupils at a crucial stage in their schooling which could in itself have a negative impact on attainment at A level. As one mother told us:

“ *We decided to put him [son] into boarding school as his education was continually disrupted...He is now happily settled with structure and routine and friends that he can build actual relationships with instead of continually saying ‘goodbye’, making new friends and starting over all the time. The idea that he wouldn’t be able to continue sixth form where he is would crush him. After all that continuity and stability to then maybe have to move hundreds of miles away from the consistent friends he’s bonded with defeats the whole purpose...It’s not fair on these children when they live hard enough lives anyway.* ”

(Army non-serving partner)

These parents fully accepted that civilian children sometimes have to move school at this time in the education journey, but the majority of those in boarding schools would not have to move. It is also recognised that the requirement for the Serving person to submit a new Eligibility Certificate prior to their child moving into the 6th form stage of education was introduced to improve governance. The MOD consider this to be an appropriate time for the family to reconsider whether their individual circumstances still warrant CEA and for the Department to be assured that CEA is necessary. It is also accepted that not all pupils will want to take A levels but may prefer to undertake a different pathway after GCSEs, and that 6th form colleges offer a wider range of choices. Nevertheless, many pupils in boarding education, given the options, may opt to complete their education via A levels within the same school.

It is clear that the CEA represents a considerable cost to the MOD and that it must be administered fairly and provide the stability in education intended. It was pointed out to us by some Serving personnel that CEA has allowed some families to select relatively expensive boarding schools because of the generosity of the cap. Parents made several suggestions for ways in which the CEA budget could be managed in future to allow pupils to retain eligibility into the sixth form. One of the most frequently made proposals was for the cap to be reduced, and if a family want to send their child to one of the more expensive schools then they have the choice to make up the cost themselves.

Teachers have suggested to us that if the overall objective of CEA is to protect and support military children during what is for most a life of considerable mobility and transition and to prevent them from having to interrupt what is a stable school journey via boarding school provision and, at the same time, keep the cost to the public purse as reasonable as possible, then an obvious answer is to reduce the top rate of CEA. The various suggestions offered by parents and teachers for remaining within the current budget envelope and allowing continuity into the 6th form included:

- reducing the level of the cap...the most frequently mentioned suggestion
- increasing the percentage paid by parents at all levels from primary school upwards
- introducing a sliding scale of contribution by parents so that they are required to pay a larger contribution in the 6th form if they no longer meet the mobility criteria
- increasing the age at which CEA is payable unless there are especially good reasons why children of primary age should be attending a boarding school
- encouraging the increased use of state-funded boarding schools which have excellent reputations (currently just 14% of CEA children attend these).

Several parents suggested that there should be a more defined sliding scale:

“ *A possible solution is to provide CEA on a sliding scale. Parents should receive a smaller amount of CEA for the younger children, rising as the children get older and then they receive the current rates as the children enter the crucial exam years.* ”

(Army Serving partner)

We recognise the sensitivities surrounding discussions about CEA and we have not examined these suggestions as to whether any of them are feasible within the current allotted budget. We are aware that a review of CEA was undertaken in 2016, which considered the management of CEA and its costs, including some of the changes suggested above. The suggested changes related to the level of the cap, the percentage contribution from parents and increasing the age at which children can enter into boarding school, and all these suggestions were discounted by the single Services. We also understand that if a child is within two years of exams within a particular stage of education (e.g. GCSEs or A level) and it is assessed that a Service Person is no longer eligible for the allowance, payment of the allowance continues until the exams have been taken. This would appear to be a strong argument in favour of continuity for the two years running up to A levels. The Ministry of Defence did introduce a measure to encourage take up of state boarding places, through a reduction in parental contribution for these schools.

Despite the previous rejection by the three single Services in 2016 of many of the ideas put forward by parents and teachers during our review, we would suggest that if a pupil is able to stay in the same school for 6th form education and the parents and head teacher believe this to be in the young person’s best educational interests then CEA should offer continuity for these pupils. Teachers and parents alike have argued that the eligibility must be based on educational needs at this time and in the best interest of the pupil involved, rather than on rules that appear to be somewhat arbitrary about what constitutes mobility. We would urge that the situation be reviewed again, particularly as parents we spoke to were keen to find alternative ways to ensure the cost to the public purse is not increased, even if this means that they pay a higher contribution to the cost of boarding provision.

Support through leisure activities

Young people, parents and teachers have underlined the importance of Service children and young people being able to access youth clubs and other activities wherever they live. It is sometimes difficult to achieve this if the child moves every two years or so. We were told of long waiting lists for youth clubs and other activities, such that by the time a child is at the top of the list they are just about to move again and slip straight to the bottom in another area:

“ The waiting lists for extra-curricula activities make it difficult for a child to maintain skills if they have long breaks or several moves to different clubs around the country. ”
(RN non-serving partner).

“ The school my daughter is at offers before and after school clubs (much needed as I am a Serving soldier with unforeseeable and ever-changing work patterns which often require me to travel), but as we are in a Garrison town which is ever-expanding there is a year-long waiting list. I feel that under the Armed Forces Covenant we are being failed through this lack of provision. ”
(Army dual-serving partner)

“ There is the much over-looked problem of the disadvantage to children’s extra-curricula activities. Many after-school clubs, such as Scouts, and swimming lessons have enormous waiting lists. Your child can easily spend anywhere from six to twelve to eighteen months or more languishing on a waiting list, only to be finally allocated a place just months before the next posting move, only to start the process all over again... This makes the children frustrated and miserable by increasing social isolation (many friendships are forged through after-school clubs), but it also disadvantages them in the long-term by creating skills and learning gaps for things like music and sports, where they fall further behind their peers with each subsequent move due to gaps in instruction. Organisations such as leisure centres and Scouts do not recognise the Armed Forces Covenant, and give no priority for forces children who have been uprooted through no fault of their own. I would like to see this remedied. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

This mother told us that one of her daughter’s had started piano lessons which she loved, only to find it impossible to locate a piano teacher in their new posting. Similarly:

“ ...my youngest [daughter] had just started swimming lessons...and was progressing beautifully...
...When we moved I was unable to get her into swimming lessons anywhere. ”

Young people told us that one of the advantages of boarding is the considerable choice of extra-curricula activities with no problems in respect of waiting lists.

We have been impressed by the various initiatives we have witnessed to encourage children and young people to join in activities and we refer to some of them here.

The Military Kids Club which began in Devonport and is now financed by the Royal British Legion, is a tri-service network of after-school clubs for Service children aged between 3 and 18. It has involved large numbers of children becoming ambassadors and advocates for Service families. The aim is to enable Service children to support each other and the network now reaches across the world as far as the Falkland’s and Brunei, with 10,000 members. The clubs undertake a wide variety of different activities, depending on the needs of their members, and these include emotional literacy sessions, games, crafts, and leisure sports. The children and young people create lasting friendship groups and any school with Service children can join MKC Heroes.

We were privileged to meet members of the MKC on our visit to Devonport, to find out about the MKC choir (Service children aged 3–15) and to hear first-hand how being a member had assisted them. This initiative gives Service children a voice and helps them to feel valued within the military community.

Little Troopers is a charity which has ambitious aims to support all children with a parent serving in the Armed Forces. Founded by a member of a dual-serving family who experienced her daughter showing severe anxiety and health issues while her father was deployed, Little Troopers engages with parents and

their children via a range of resources, including story books; story apps that can bring Serving parents into the lives of their children; school projects which can help to educate civilian children about the lives of Service children; and packs for primary schools. This valuable initiative demonstrates the benefits of developing specialist materials which can be targeted directly to parents and children.



We understand that some of the materials need updating but there is clearly potential to increase opportunities for Service children to use innovative ways to cope with the stresses and anxieties linked to their parents’ deployments, separation and frequent assignments.

Several parents and welfare staff on the bases we visited mentioned the valuable role that **Kings Camps** play during school holidays, offering activities for children aged 5 to 17, and welfare staff on military bases recommended that Service children could benefit more from this programme. The Kings Camp charity works closely with military bases throughout the country. We have also seen first-hand the work of The **RAF AirPlay** programme. We consider both these initiatives in more detail in Chapter 9.

The overall goal of these and other initiatives is to ensure that military children can access materials and join in a range of activities, create lasting friendships and help the wider community in society to better understand the lived experiences of Service children. It would seem reasonable that military children who move around so much have some priority when accessing local clubs, sports and other activities so that they are not perpetually on waiting lists. It does not seem fair that some young people miss out on these activities because of the frequency of their parents’ relocations. It would be helpful for young people’s wellbeing if local activity groups could be made aware of Service children and young people arriving in their area and encouraged to include them whenever possible.

Supporting Service Children: the evidence

There is no doubt that children growing up in a family where one or both parents is a member of the Armed Forces will have experiences that vary from their civilian peers. Overall, the research suggests that as a group, military children cope well with the challenges and transitions, but deployments and frequent moves can disrupt education and friendships and there are some situations in which they appear to be disadvantaged. These can have an adverse impact on academic outcomes. Research in the UK and in the US suggests that long and frequent deployments may have negative impacts on well-being. Nevertheless, when considering the impact of Service life on children’s education it is critically important to:

consider the individual circumstances of children from military families and not regard them as a homogenous group.¹⁵¹

The latest survey undertaken by the Army Families Federation shows that growing up in a Service family can help children to build resilience, confidence, tolerance and adaptability, but at the same time, mobility can result in a sense of uncertainty, distance from extended family and having no roots which can lead to anxiety, loneliness, bullying, and low self-esteem.¹⁵² The survey also revealed that 34 per cent of children lost close friendships due to a posting and some reported difficulty in making new ones. Perhaps the most important finding is that almost half of the respondents reported that their child had experienced gaps in their learning and for some the impact was severe. Greater understanding of the impacts from an individual perspective is essential if each Service child is to be appropriately supported in future. Schools can play a vital part in reaching this goal and the various initiatives around the UK are to be welcomed and encouraged.

We heard from a number of dual-serving families whose children had experienced greater challenges with either one or the other parent away much of the time. Appropriate support for children and their families can do much to assist families and it is to be hoped that the recommendations in this chapter can ensure continued commitment to making improvements. Some couples felt that understanding and support for dual-serving families is lacking within the Armed Forces and that:

“ the dynamic of being one part of a couple who both serve causes additional issues. ”
(RN dual-serving partner)

This mother highlighted the difficulties associated with postings that are not co-located and suggested that looking after their two small children would be unsustainable in the longer term:

“ Due to short-notice postings on this rotation I missed the deadlines to apply for the local schools... I do worry about the long-term effects on my children’s mental well-being at being under constant change...It is my opinion that long term it is unsustainable to have two parents in the Forces... I would very much like to continue working in the RN but not to the destruction of my marriage and my children’s happiness. ”

Like other dual-serving mothers she was thinking that eventually she would have to give up her long-service career to meet the needs of their children. It was not unusual for dual-serving parents to be told they may have to place their children in foster care, a suggestion that they regard as unacceptable.

The Children’s Commissioner’s report highlighted the disruptions experienced by children with both parents serving in the military which went far beyond those of other Service children.¹⁵³ We heard from parents who had to send their children to live with extended family members during school holidays and, at the extreme, from parents who had to consider foster care for their children. Other dual-serving families commented that:

“ ...there is still a difference for a Service couple where both parties are working. Traditionally the Service is geared for men with wives at home. When we both serve, we face additional challenges. For example, on returning from maternity leave I was offered a role which would have seen me away for at least three out of four weeks. ”
(RN dual-serving mother)

It was impossible for her to accept this role because she was still breast-feeding, and her RN husband had a 24 hour watch-keeping duty role. The couple’s daughter had changed nursery four times by the age of 4 which had ‘affected her development, both personal and educational’.

151 Hall, M. (2018) *Moving Schools and Service Children’s Educational Progression*, Service Children’s Progression Alliance Research Briefing Paper R/001, p3.

152 AFF (2019) *Army and You: We’re Listening*, Autumn 2019.

153 Children’s Commissioner for England (2018) op.cit.

The prevailing view from the Call for Evidence is that dual-serving couples find it extremely difficult to continue their careers and bring up children:

“ When you throw in [that we are] both working full time in the military, with children, the constant cycle/threat of moving home and then having to re-establish ourselves with childcare again with one of us being away so much of the time...There has been a marked increase in personal instability over the last few years with short notice job changes to fill gaps...We both love our jobs, but there have been occasions recently when the ‘is it worth it’ or ‘is it sustainable’ question had had to be asked. ”
(RM dual-serving father)

The Children’s Commissioner for England has recommended that when both parents are serving personnel and subject to deployment, every effort must be made by the Armed Forces to ensure that both parents are not deployed at the same time, and certainly never unless suitable childcare is available.¹⁵⁴ We would endorse that recommendation.

In summary, research has demonstrated how non-operational family separations can influence family functioning and well-being.¹⁵⁵ Children especially can find parental separation difficult and, coupled with frequent moves and changes in education, they have to find ways of coping with the exigencies of Service life. Adequate understanding and support are vital to ensure that these children thrive and do well. In one local authority we were told that some military children are engaging in what is described as ‘risky’ behaviour with little to occupy them around the patch, and were falling down in their grades. This is clearly causing some concern. However, research has shown that, for the most part, military life can have positive impacts on children and young people when compared to civilian children. Military children have

- similar or lower rates of psychopathology
- less juvenile delinquency
- less risky behaviour
- better grades
- greater self-control
- higher median IQs.¹⁵⁶

It is clear that more research is required to understand why some children are doing less well and causing concern.

It is appropriate to give the last word here to young people themselves. They told us over and over again that they are proud to have a parent in the military. They talked about becoming skilled at developing new friendships; enjoying the opportunity to live in different places and countries; and learning to be independent. None of them want to be treated as disadvantaged, but they would like more people to understand what it’s like to be the child of military parents and the additional stresses they experience as a result, and to know that support is available to them when they need it. Given that all the Commanding Officers, Welfare Officers, Families’ Federations, military charities, teachers and a range of other professionals who have contributed to the review feel passionate about supporting military children to enjoy the best possible outcomes, our first recommendation below urges a more coordinated approach to achieving it.

154 Ibid. p18.

155 Gribble, R. and Fear, N.T. (2019) *The Effect of Non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines Families*, Naval Families Federation.

156 Rowe et al (2014) op.cit.

Our Recommendations

Over-arching recommendation

Recommendation 15

The Governments of the UK to make 'Getting It Right for Service Children' a national education priority in all nations of the UK, and take all necessary steps to ensure that Service children, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities, are not disadvantaged by Service life.

Relocation: short term

Recommendation 16

All three Services to ensure that their career managers have a consistent understanding of the issues facing vulnerable families, especially those with special educational needs or disabilities, and take all necessary steps to ensure that children do not have to change schools unless this is absolutely unavoidable and necessary for operational reasons.

Recommendation 17

The Ministry of Defence to ensure that SFA is allocated as soon as possible when a posting in England is known, to enable families to select and apply for the most appropriate school.

Recommendation 18

The Armed Forces to minimise short-notice postings wherever possible, enabling parents to apply for school places in the normal admissions timeframe, and to develop a common agreed short-notice posting timeframe.

Relocation: medium term

Recommendation 19

The Armed Forces to limit the number and frequency of relocations and facilitate extended postings to allow for more educational stability for military children.

Recommendation 20

The Armed Forces to take account of the needs and situation of military children and the non-serving partner when posting a Serving person to another area, and ensure, wherever possible, that the assignment process aligns to a much greater extent with defined stages of education and school years.

Deployments: short term

Recommendation 21

The Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence to ensure that appropriate, high quality, information guides for Serving and non-serving parents and age-appropriate guides and books for children (such as that written by the Naval Families Federation) are routinely provided directly to all parents and to children and young people in all three single Services to help them understand and cope with the emotions they might feel during parental separation and deployments.

Education: short term

Recommendation 22

The Department for Education, the Devolved Governments and the MOD to prioritise more detailed, robust research into Service children's academic choices, attainment levels, educational outcomes and career progression, and explore the factors which might hinder educational outcomes.

Recommendation 23

The Department for Education to review the funding for schools where the high mobility of Service children leads to 'funding gaps' and a 'funding lag'.

Recommendation 24

The Ministry of Defence and Department for Education to continue to work urgently with Local Authorities in England to ensure a more coherent and consistent interpretation of the provisions for Armed Forces families in the School Admissions Code.

Recommendation 25

The Department for Education and Devolved Governments to ensure that all children with a parent in the military are identifiable with a marker that enables them to be tracked throughout their education between different schools and education systems, and that their educational outcomes are reported at all Key Stages, alongside destination data.

Recommendation 26

The Ministry of Defence to distribute MODLAP papers and outcomes to all Local Authorities in England and strongly encourage them to engage with MODLAP.

Recommendation 27

The Department for Education to:

- ensure that the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) is available in England throughout the child's final two years of sixth form education
- require all schools in England in receipt of the SPP to provide evidence of the pastoral care or other practical support given to Service children
- make it clear that the SPP can be used to assist a child to make up lost learning in key subjects
- build a more comprehensive evidence base as to the use of the SPP
- promote the sharing of good practice.

Recommendation 28

The Department for Education and the Devolved Governments to encourage all Local Authorities to appoint a Service Pupils' Champion.

Education: medium term

Recommendation 29

The Department for Education and the Devolved Governments to ensure that teaching staff in all schools, including Early Years professionals, undertake training in supporting the needs of Service children.

Recommendation 30

The Department for Education and the MOD to support the development of evidence-based tools, resources, and practitioner guides for all education professionals working with Service children throughout the UK.

Recommendation 31

The Ministry of Defence to continue to work with the Welsh Government to introduce a greater degree of flexibility offered to some Service children with regards to the learning of the Welsh language as an additional language, focusing especially on those children who may already need support for English as an additional language (EAL), and take into account the nature/length of a particular posting.

Recommendation 32

The Ministry of Defence and the Department for Education to continue to work together through the Admissions Working Group to revise guidelines relating to normal points of entry and in-year school admissions.

Recommendation 33

The Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence to encourage the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) to focus on investigating the needs of pupils with a parent in the military entering higher education and developing support to widen participation of this group of students.

Recommendation 34

The Department for Education to work with the Office for Students and higher education establishments to: increase guidance for students with a parent in the military on the UCAS website; place a marker on their applications and admission to higher education colleges and universities; and monitor their academic achievements and onward career choices.

SEND children: short term**Recommendation 35**

The Department for Education to update the SEND Code of Practice in England so that it mirrors the duties placed on local authorities through the School Admission Code and requires them to allocate a place to a Service child with special educational needs ahead of the child arriving in a new area. Devolved Governments are asked to consider equivalence.

Recommendation 36

The Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence to explore how to avoid Service children's Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) lapsing as a result of accompanying their parents on deployments outside of England, to ensure a continuity of provision for Service children with EHCPs.

Recommendation 37

The Ministry of Defence and Department for Education to encourage all local authorities in England to develop a collective approach to providing consistent support for all Service children, especially SEND children, throughout their education, by adopting the MODLAP principles, and work with the Devolved Governments to extend this collective approach throughout the UK.

Recommendation 38

The Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence to work closely with the Devolved Governments through MODLAP to ensure EHCPs, SCANs and other similar records are fully transportable and transferrable, and ensure that they include information from previous schools, including those overseas.

Recommendation 39

The Department for Education to:

- strengthen the SEND Code of Practice to ensure local authorities make full use of assessments made by MOD professional disciplines as part of the MOD SCAN (Service Child Assessment of Need) documentation
- require local authorities to use assessment of needs contained within MOD SCAN documentation, to inform the Special Educational Provision within Section F of the Education Health and Care Plan, in order to reduce the time taken to convert SCAN documentation to EHCPs
- consider making SCAN documentation statutory documents.

Young Carers: short term**Recommendation 40**

The Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence to:

- improve the identification of young carers within Serving military families
- ensure that appropriate support is available
- provide information directly to children and families about the support available
- ensure that the education, accommodation and support needs of families with a young carer are taken into consideration when the Serving person is assigned to a different area.

Recommendation 41

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces, together with the Devolved Governments, to ensure research is undertaken to extend understanding of the additional challenges faced by Service children who have caring responsibilities and the kinds of support they need.

CEA: short term**Recommendation 42**

The Ministry of Defence to:

- remove the requirement to re-apply for CEA on entry to the Sixth Form to ensure the continuity of boarding education for pupils already in receipt of CEA
- ensure that decisions about continuing eligibility for CEA are based on the educational needs and best interests of each child, with an emphasis on 'continuity', while managing the cost to the public purse.

General: medium term**Recommendation 43**

All UK Governments to include the voices of Service children and young people in the development of all policies and support services that impact on them.

Recommendation 44

The Armed Forces to collect information to understand how dispersed living impacts on the time families spend apart over and above normal Harmony Guidelines.

General: longer term

Recommendation 45

The Department for Education to work with the Devolved Governments to consider how their respective education management information systems might be aligned to enable data relating to Service children to be transferred more smoothly across the whole of the UK.

Chapter 5

Not Just a Partner: Employment Challenges and Opportunities

As many non-serving partners have pointed out, a military model that is based on a notion of a working father and a stay-at-home mother looking after her husband and her children, willing to go anywhere the Armed Forces require, whenever they require it, is no longer realistic. During the review we have gathered consistent data about the difficulties and frustrations experienced by many non-serving partners in gaining and maintaining suitable employment and the barriers they face when trying to build their own career.

Partners and spouses clearly acknowledge that Serving members of the military expect to be moved around and to be away from home for lengthy periods, and that these requirements will have an impact on whether and how the non-serving partner chooses to work. The need for compromise was well understood within the military families we spoke with. Nevertheless, traditionally ascribed gender roles have changed and it is increasingly expected and financially necessary that both partners will be in paid employment. Balancing paid employment with bringing up children and navigating a military lifestyle presents a number of challenges for the non-serving partner.

Similar challenges associated with work-life balance are also well-known for couples in civilian life. Despite greater gender equality, the majority of household tasks and the responsibility for childcare are still undertaken primarily by one partner. In heterosexual partnerships, it is usually the woman who manages the home and takes the main responsibility for looking after the children.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, women in all walks of life and in all kinds of families often face barriers to employment when they have children. Having a baby usually means a career break of some kind and, thereafter, employment options are often determined by the availability and affordability of suitable childcare, the working hours required, and whether the demands of a job can be balanced with the demands of sustaining family life. It is still the case that the majority of military non-serving partners are women for whom work-life balance will be a challenge, therefore, irrespective of the kind of employment they can secure.

The 2019 FamCAS survey shows that in 2019, 77 per cent of non-serving spouses/partners were in employment, an increase of nine percentage points since 2014.¹⁵⁸ The employment rate for Service spouses aged 16–64 was 76 per cent for women and 91 per cent for men. These figures are just a little higher than in the UK population as a whole (72% women and 80% men). The survey shows that there is a difference between the three Services, however, with a lower proportion of Army spouses in employment compared to RN/RM and RAF spouses. This may reflect the fact that Army spouses/partners are more likely to move location with the Serving partner more frequently than those in the other Services. Across the three Services, the statistics indicate that 46 per cent of spouses were in full-time employment; 26 per cent were in part-time employment; and 7 per cent were self-employed. Of these, those who were in full-time employment or were self-employed reported being more satisfied with aspects of their job than those in part-time employment. Of note is the finding that in the past year, 39 per cent of spouses had looked for a new job, 25 per cent of all spouses had experienced difficulties locating suitable employment, and 13 per cent had found a job without any difficulty. The top reasons given for the difficulties they experienced were recorded as being:

- having a spouse who is often away (46%)
- having a partner who is unable to assist with caring responsibilities (46%)
- extended family living too far away to help with childcare (44%).

Statistics only tell part of the story, however. We need to dig deeper to reveal the issues spouses face when they want to find employment and to suggest how they can be addressed. We have analysed the evidence from our review along with existing research about partner employment in the Armed Forces

¹⁵⁷ Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

¹⁵⁸ FamCAS (2019) op. cit.

to understand the difficulties that spouses and partners face and to consider some of the options and innovations for addressing these in future.

An in-depth study of military spousal and partner employment undertaken for the Army Families Federation has pointed to several difficulties, including:

- the lack of suitable childcare
- the impacts of separation and deployment
- the challenges associated with keeping up with professional development
- the lack of (re)training opportunities
- having to change career path
- what is referred to as 'MOD reluctance' to support spouses and partners
- general military culture.¹⁵⁹

Other research in the UK has identified high mobility as a specific difficulty related to military life.¹⁶⁰ The 2019 FamCAS survey reported that 57 per cent of respondents cited the effect of mobility on their career as the most negative aspect of Service life. This is a concerning finding given that research in the United States has shown that spousal employment is an important contributor to the wellbeing of military spouses and partners, and to the financial health of many military families.¹⁶¹ Moreover, the pursuit of a career is said to be a major component of military spouses' own assessment of their quality of life.¹⁶² Understanding the challenges and addressing them is critical for the wellbeing of non-serving partners in particular and for retention in the Armed Forces generally. We look at the difficulties and challenges in turn.

Restricted employment choice

Of course, not all partners will want to work, especially those caring for very young children or older adults, but the AFF study showed that the majority of spouses who were not in work said that they would want to work sometime in the future.¹⁶³ Although similar proportions of civilian and military partners are in employment, the statistics do not show the kinds of jobs that military partners are likely to obtain and this is where the difference lies. The AFF study revealed that the majority of military partners are employed in administration, support services activities, health and social work, and education.¹⁶⁴ Many military partners take jobs that do not make use of their education and/or academic qualifications or technical skills:

“As a professionally trained person, my spouse when we moved to some areas, including overseas, has had to take employment that is away from her profession [in the NHS], i.e. shop work, cleaning, that leaves a gap in her CV. This can then require a period of retraining [in her professional field] that quite often requires her to fund the courses, so that she can again interview for her role.”
(Army Serving partner)

This Serving partner referred to the fact that when his wife was able to find appropriate professional employment she usually had to start at a lower position and work back up the promotion ladder, not only slowing down her career but incurring a loss of income. The difficulty in finding appropriate professional employment when the family moves around was cited by many well-qualified partners. This difficulty could be especially acute when moving between countries:

“In Cyprus there are barely any employment opportunities for spouses...Despite my qualifications and best efforts I couldn't find work and was therefore out of work for seven months.”
(Army non-serving partner)

159 Lyonette, C., Barnes, S-A., Kispeter, E., Fisher, N. and Newell, K. (2018) *Military spousal/partner employment: identifying the barriers and support required*, Army Families' Federation, Warwick University and QINETOO.

160 See: Blakely, G., Hennessy, C., Chung, M.C. and Skirton, H. (2012) *A systematic review of the impact of foreign postings on accompanying spouses of military personnel*, Nursing and Health Sciences, 14(1) p121–132.

161 Blaisure et. al. (2016) op.cit.

162 Castaneda, L.W. and Harrell, M.C. (2008) *Spousal Employment: a grounded theory approach to experiences and perceptions*, Armed Forces and Society, 34 p389–412.

163 Lyonette et al (2018) op. cit.

164 Ibid.

“I will put my hand to any work going but I have been to places that even working on checkouts they wouldn't employ me because I was overqualified.”
(RAF non-serving partner)

“I have applied for basic entry-level sales and warehouse roles...they take one look at my CV and completely disregard me [because of my qualifications].”
(Army non-serving partner)

Some non-serving partners are having to transition from well-paid, frequently professional, jobs to look for and secure lower-paid work that does not require their level of qualifications or skills, in order to stay in paid employment. Several partners with higher degrees told us that they had had to take what they described as 'menial' work just to get some income, while others had been denied employment for being over-qualified for 'menial' work. There were many responses from spouses who had changed their career because their original training was in a profession which is so specialised that finding work would be almost impossible with a highly mobile life.

Many Serving personnel referred to highly skilled partners whose expertise 'goes unrecognised' because there are not enough opportunities for employment, particularly in remote military bases:

“Employment opportunities are extremely limited in remote locations of many RAF units. Professional people are forced into poorly paid roles in many cases just to earn money. Regular movement of families is extremely detrimental. My wife gave up her job...to follow me and my career. As a result she is now struggling to return to work despite significant experience and a good degree from Oxford University.”
(RAF Serving partner)

Welfare Officers in all three Services and non-serving partners described the financial difficulties faced by families when non-serving partners have to take low-paid jobs despite their qualifications, just to bring in an income:

“I often feel quite oppressed that I cannot pursue my wanted career [in education] and have to do a mundane job to make up some extra pocket money for family days out and holidays.”
(RN non-serving partner)

While teaching and social work are normally considered to be portable professions, a number of partners had faced difficulty when being posted to different countries where their qualifications are not recognised. Even within the UK this presents a barrier to employment: teaching and social work qualifications in England and Scotland are not transferrable, much to the frustration of many families. Partners trained in childcare can face similar barriers to employment:

“I am a qualified social worker, as such I have studied and worked hard to get my qualification. In order to practice I have to be registered and there are different registering bodies in Scotland and England...As such I now have to maintain and pay for registration in both countries because we move back and forth between them regularly...I need my employment to be meaningful and progress my career ...moving so regularly I miss out on being considered for promotion because employers know I will move on.”
(RN non-serving partner)

This navy wife commented that it would be simpler if she took unskilled work or gave up work altogether:

“...trying to manage and plan your own career when your Serving partner's career is so inflexible is exhausting. I absolutely make sacrifices to my career in order to prioritise my husband's military career and because I will always choose to try to live together...the compromise is always mine.”

“My wife is a registered childminder with Ofsted which to complete...took about 12 months and cost around £1,200...When we moved to Wales, it is a different governing body so it would have meant re-registering plus the expense, so not worth it.”
(Army Serving partner)

It would seem to be a waste of skills and potential for these professional spouses/partners to be unable to take the jobs they are qualified to do. The Scottish Government is well aware of the barriers that some spouses/partners face and have pointed out there are ways in which spouses/partners who have qualified in England can gain access to professional work in Scotland. For example, there are apprenticeships in the Early Learning and Childcare sector which allow people to earn as they learn, and vocational opportunities which do not require people to go to college to retrain.

Moreover, if a social worker moves to Scotland with a UK generic social work degree it will normally be accepted by the professional regulator, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). We understand that there are some issues relating to new social work courses in England which are specialised in work with children only. The holders of these qualifications have to undertake further training to meet Scottish social work standards. Similarly, day care and nursery workers are required to register with the SSSC and meet specific qualification requirements. However, recognition of prior learning gained elsewhere in the UK can be used to support the achievement of the required qualification or to identify an appropriate entry level in Scotland. The advice from the Scottish Government is for military spouses/partners to consult with the relevant agencies in Scotland in advance of relocating to check what qualifications are required and ways to gain entry. It is also important for the Armed Forces to ensure that family members have access to appropriate information when a posting notice is given so that they can plan for a move across the border, including consideration about spousal/partner employment opportunities.

Partners with teaching qualifications in England receive automatic recognition of their qualifications provided they are from a recognised teaching agency. We understand that the General Teaching Agency in Scotland (GTCS) continues to work with the Armed Forces to overcome any barriers that Service spouses/partners might experience when relocating to Scotland. The GTCS continues to identify routes to registration to allow partners with qualifications from other home nations to teach in Scotland.

We are aware that the challenges faced by military partners and spouses who seek to continue a professional career when they move between the nations of the UK are well understood, and that steps have been taken to smooth the transfer of qualifications and credits to ameliorate the need for retraining. We urge the Armed Forces and the Devolved Governments to continue to work together to provide information about employment opportunities when military families relocate between different nations of the UK, and to facilitate the portability of credits and professional qualifications wherever possible.

Relocating across international boundaries outside the UK can be even more challenging for partners who wish to pursue a career of their own. A systematic review of the impact of foreign postings found that four key themes emerged: the functioning of a military family on an international posting, loss, wellbeing, and support.¹⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, it was apparent that military spouses are subject to many stressors that civilian spouses may not experience. Non-serving partners told us that they often feel like the choice is between being with their husband or having a stable base and pursuing their career, but that they can never have both. They frequently argued for longer assignments and fewer moves. Serving partners were very aware of the sacrifices their spouses were having to make. Many told us that their partners had been unable to pursue a career and had never met their full potential because they are always having to start again when they are posted to another area. We heard many comments such as the following:

“ My wife has had a number of jobs whilst I have been Serving. Almost all of the roles have necessitated ‘starting again’...In general the posting cycle does not allow partners to have a full career...To retain talented Service personnel the ambitions of spouses also require addressing. Longer postings within a commutable area, such as the Lincolnshire hub provides, can and have been assisting with this, but ultimately the spouse is not considered when you are posted, whether it is with an offer of promotion or not. ”

(RAF Serving partner)

¹⁶⁵ Blakely et al (2012) op.cit.

“ Partner employment has always had an impact on my family. With the constant moving around my wife cannot really settle down into a decent job, and even if she can get a job, then by the time she has built up her experience we move again and she has to start from scratch again and again. ”

(Army Serving partner)

Some of the children and young people we spoke to also told us about the challenges their mothers had faced. For example, one teenager whose mother had held a well-paid professional job told us that his mother was currently working in a supermarket. Others told us that their mothers were unemployed while some had trained in childcare to have a more portable qualification. Postings overseas present the most serious challenges. These young people recognised that their mothers had had to make considerable sacrifices as a result of their military lifestyle.

The FamCAS 2019 survey recorded that 25 percent of Army and RAF families had moved for Service reasons in the last 12 months, compared with 13 per cent of RN/RM families; and one in ten Army/RAF spouses had accompanied their Serving partner overseas in the last year, 30 per cent of whom were unable to find paid employment.¹⁶⁶ The statistics show that RN/RM spouses are less likely to accompany their partner overseas (just 6 per cent in the last year), which reflects the lower proportion of RN/RM personnel assigned to accompanied postings overseas. The percentage of Army spouses/partners accompanying their Serving partner overseas has dropped from 20 per cent in 2014 to 12 per cent in 2019. It is to be expected that living overseas might well limit employment opportunities.

A number of partners asked why they are not able to apply for civil service jobs on military bases, especially when they are living overseas. They referred to a number of ‘gapped’ posts which they would have the skills and expertise to fill. We met a number of partners who had found jobs in Embassies while their husbands were posited overseas, including in the British and Australian Embassies in Washington DC. We understand the current rules do not consider the employment of Service partners in vacant civil service posts, and suggest that this is reconsidered and the possible benefits re-evaluated:

“ The civil service is missing a trick... Why is the civil service not doing roadshows around the bases and barracks to tell partners about the benefits of working in some roles? There is an under-utilised workforce just sitting there. ”

(RM non-serving partner working as a MOD civil servant)

There is considerable international evidence that military partners’ earnings are adversely affected by Service life.¹⁶⁷ Career disruption occasioned by frequent moves inevitably punctuates career progression. Research in the US shows that partners continued to have low earnings two years after relocating.¹⁶⁸ Given that some Service families in the UK relocate every two years there is little chance that partners will be able to make up for the negative impacts on their earnings.

A large and growing body of research on civilian populations confirms that ‘trailing spouses’ (i.e., those who follow their partner when he/she is relocated) face a number of stressors, including: adjustment to a new culture if they move from one country to another; loss of an existing job or career; and having to familiarise themselves with a new employer’s support network.¹⁶⁹ These factors will also impact on Service partners. Other research has estimated that there are significant differences in earnings between military partners and civilians when comparing educational attainment: military partners with a doctorate were found to earn less than half that of a civilian counterpart.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ FamCAS (2019) op.cit.

¹⁶⁷ Meadows, S. O., Griffin, B. A., Karney, B. R. and Pollak, J. (2016) *Employment Gaps between Military Spouses and Matched Civilians*, *Armed Forces and Society*, 42(3) p542–561.

¹⁶⁸ Burke, J. and Miller, A. (2018) *The effects of job relocation on spousal careers: Evidence from military change of station moves*. *Economic Inquiry*, 56(2), p1261–1277.

¹⁶⁹ Cole, N. & Nesbeth, K. (2014). *Why do international assignments fail? The expatriate families speak*. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 44, 66–79.

¹⁷⁰ Bradbard, D. A., Maury, R. and Armstrong, N. J. (2016) *The Force Behind the Force: A business case for leveraging Military Spouse Talent* (Employing Military Spouses, Paper no 1) Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University.

The most striking result from analyses undertaken by Meadows et al in the US,¹⁷¹ is the persistence of the relative employment deficits for Service partners, even after a historic recession that diminished employment and earnings among their civilian peers. They work fewer hours and earn less money, in terms of both raw income and proportion of total income, than civilian spouses matched on age, race/ethnicity, parental status, and level of education. Even those who were working as many hours as their civilian counterparts were still earning significantly less. Deployment time did not appear to impact on this finding, but there was a significant association with the number of relocations military spouses had experienced: a greater number of recent moves was significantly associated with working fewer hours and earning less than civilian peers.

A recent Canadian study of the impact of military lifestyle on employment status and income among female civilian spouses¹⁷² found that, consistent with most of the previous research in this area, female military spouses who have experienced at least one residential move are significantly more likely to be unemployed. Furthermore, when they are employed, spouses who have experienced at least one residential move due to military postings are significantly more likely to have lower employment income than spouses who have not experienced at least one residential move. Not only do spouses who experience a residential move have to deal with finding new employment, but they also do not reap the benefits associated with seniority (e.g., promotions, pay rises), which probably explains why they have lower income even if they do secure employment. The study also found that spouses who live in a civilian home are significantly more likely to be employed than those who live in military accommodation. Moreover, when employed, those who live in private accommodation have higher employment income than spouses who live in military accommodation.

As suggested by previous research, living close to a town/population centre, which is more likely to occur living in a civilian rather than a military accommodation, is associated with a greater likelihood of being employed. Living on a military base can isolate military spouses from the wider community, which, along with commuting problems (e.g., accessibility of public transport), may make it more difficult to secure employment. Spouses may be forced to accept a lower paid position that is geographically close to the base if there is a lack of public transport in the area.

Clearly, there are other factors to be taken into account such as the age of the Service spouse, their level of education, employment history, and whether they have children or not and their children's ages. But factors such as mobility, accommodation, and education are amenable to change. In an attempt to increase the well-being and satisfaction of Armed Forces families, the researchers suggest that targeting these factors in programmes that improve the lives of military spouses could go a long way to supporting them in employment. This could include: promoting access to higher education programmes; enabling the transferability of learning credits when the family is relocated and between the Serving person and the non-serving partner; providing social support programmes directly related to mobility issues; and allowing access to transferable employment opportunities on military bases. We are acutely aware that transferring learning credits from the Serving partner to the non-serving partner is currently fraught with difficulties in the UK. Any consideration of a benefit-in-kind can be subject to tax. This was an unforeseen consequence of the MOD Spousal Employment Support Trial which offered training courses and other taxable benefits to spouses and partners of Serving personnel. We return to this issue later in the chapter. We note also that transferability of learning credits would require a change in the 'mindset' of some Serving personnel who regard learning credits as an important offer for them rather than for their spouses/partners.

The loss in earnings and lack of career progression when compared with civilian counterparts were reported to us many times by non-serving partners during the review:

“ I started married life earning one and a half times the salary of my then junior captain husband... As soon as we did our first Army move my salary slid and ground down to zero along with my self-esteem...I am hugely employable with Masters level qualifications and a specialist set of skills and experience but a string of ten and twelve month postings left me with a CV that looked like a car crash, and potential employers asking questions about my potential longevity of service. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

171 Meadows et al (2018) op.cit.

172 Wanga, Z. and Pullman L. E. (2019) *Impact of military lifestyle on employment status and income among female civilian spouses*, Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health.

“ Employment has been a bone of contention in our home for many years. My career, or lack of, has destroyed my self-confidence and self-worth. We have moved seven times in nine years and I have had eight jobs in this time. Considering I had a year out of work supporting my husband with rehabilitation, a year of unemployment due to lack of available jobs and I've had two children, those eight jobs have been squeezed into about four years. I am paid the same now as the first job I had after graduation from university, I haven't had a promotion or a pay rise in this time. I have watched my friends climb higher and higher while I have been left behind. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

This Army wife went on to describe the impact of this on her life:

“ The impact this has had on me, my relationship with my husband, my relationship with friends and family and the toll on my mental health has been devastating. Lack of employment opportunities for me will be the reason my husband leaves the Army. We have regularly lived on one income and I am at the very bottom of the employment ladder...it is thoroughly depressing and demoralising...Serving personnel have access to enhanced learning credits that they can use for training opportunities, degrees, masters etc. Could it not be possible to open these up to the spouses? If I was happy and fulfilled in my career my husband wouldn't be planning to leave the Army. ”

The difficulties faced by partners in securing a satisfying and worthwhile career while moving frequently are clearly drivers in Serving partners' decisions to leave the military. The loss of confidence and self-esteem and the loss in earnings reported by some partners had a negative impact on their relationship with their Serving partner, resulting in high levels of stress within the family. A navy wife who described herself as 'lucky to have a job at all' given the limited options, was nevertheless substantially worse off because she could not pursue her chosen career:

“ As it stands currently, the lack of suitable opportunities locally means that we are around £35,000 worse off per year, and I've also given up a £40,000 company car, private healthcare, dental cover and a substantial company share scheme...It's likely ...if I'd pursued my legal career as planned I would also be earning around £100,000 at this point...My future employment prospects will be even more limited as a result of having to explain why I have jumped from industry to industry...Do I explain that I'm a Forces wife and thereby risk being discriminated against...? ”
(RN non-serving partner)

An online survey of military spouses and partners in Australia found that those in employment had lower levels of distress and better well-being and quality of life, and it concluded that partner employment is significant to the Serving partner's retention, readiness for Service, and well-being.¹⁷³

Employer Discrimination

There was a general perception amongst Serving and non-serving personnel who contributed to the review that employers discriminate in various ways when military partners apply for jobs. Spouses/partners have found that some employers are wary of hiring Service partners if they think that the family will be posted again fairly soon. Partners' CVs often have gaps and show evidence of frequent changes of employment which lead employers to question their commitment to a job they might be offered.

The AFF study found that one of the greatest barriers to gaining employment is the negative perceptions of employers towards military partners.¹⁷⁴ The Army Families Federation has reported that 45 per cent of spouses and partners had experienced perceived discrimination when applying for a job.¹⁷⁵ A number of people who responded to our Call for Evidence described occasions when they were sure that they had been discriminated against when applying for a job:

173 Trewick, N. and Muller J. (2014) *Unemployment in Military Spouses: An examination of the latent and manifest benefits, quality of life and psychological well-being*, Australian Journal of Career Development. 23(2), p42-56.

174 Lyonette et al (2018) op. cit.

175 AFF (2019) *Army and You*, p14.

“ I was told point blank ‘I see by your address that you’re in military housing. We’re looking for someone who can commit long-term.’ ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ My wife was quite openly on two occasions refused employment and promotion because she wouldn’t be around long enough to be of benefit to the employer. This was reported and went nowhere. ”
(RN Serving partner).

“ Employment is a massive issue for me. I can never work properly because my husband’s work is so erratic that I’m classed as ‘unreliable’ to any employer! ”
(Army non-serving partner)

If the family live in SFA the address tends to be an obvious clue that the non-serving partner is connected with the military. Some partners told us that they have tried to keep their SFA address secret or have used another address when applying for a job, but their CV usually found them out because of the frequent changes of location and jobs, and gaps in employment:

“ I cannot realistically follow a career path while moving every two years. My CV instantly looks unappealing because I have a new job every couple of years. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

“ I lost confidence in my abilities and found it extremely hard looking for a job. In interviews, if you are lucky to get that far, they look at your CV and can see that you have moved every two to three years and then they ask the dreaded question ‘how long are you here for?’ I extend the truth, as who wants to invest time and money into someone who will not be around for long. ”
(ex-RAF non-serving partner)

Given the commitments made by employers who have signed the Armed Forces Covenant it would seem essential that examples of blatant discrimination should be reported and addressed during the annual reviews. The Partner Employment Group in the MOD should be made aware of these incidences so that more can be done to protect partners from both real and perceived discrimination in the job market. Blatant discrimination should always be challenged.

Several partners expressed frustration about the lack of understanding of some JobCentrePlus staff when they went along to look for employment after moving to a new area. They described staff as unsighted and not understanding the nature of military life and why there are frequent gaps in the employment history of non-serving partners. As a consequence, the staff appeared unable to assist them in their job search activities.

Taking difficult decisions

Most of the partners who contributed to the review had had to take difficult decisions about whether and how they could continue to work, or whether to live apart. As one put it:

“ It is always a question of saving my marriage or saving my career. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

Some partners had taken the decision to live apart but this has its costs and obvious sacrifices:

“ We are a modern relationship, unmarried, with me living in London and my partner based in Scotland. We have been saving for the past three years to buy a house. I do not want to give up my job to live on a patch. I think it would be too much of a compromise and with my partner away so much, it doesn’t make sense ... We made the decision that I would stay in London [living with parents] and work. I’m anxious about quitting a job I’ve worked very hard for. Therefore it remains that as long as he is in the military we will always live apart. ”
(RM non-serving partner)

This had not been an easy decision: during the previous year this couple had seen each other just six times, and she described feeling isolated and lonely, detached from any support from the military. We look in more detail at the issue of isolation and loneliness in Chapter 8.

Other partners talked about having to weigh up whether to accompany their Serving partner from place to place and live in SFA or to stay in one place to ensure continuity of employment and stability with respect to children’s education. They described this as a difficult decision when their prime motivation is to keep the family together whenever possible. The AFF research found that decisions relating to childcare, preserving the relationship with the Serving partner and whether and how to obtain employment were seen as hugely important decisions and they often involved significant compromises.¹⁷⁶ Our review reinforces these findings.

Being a partner of a member of the Armed Forces involves a series of transitions which will have a range of consequences for the ways in which both partners can shape their lives together. The mantra ‘Duty First’ sums up the expectations placed on members of the military:¹⁷⁷

“ From the first day when a loved one puts on a uniform, families experience the consequences of ‘duty first’, that is the priority of mission over family events or needs. Military Service is an obligation – an obligation to fulfil regardless of other competing demands. ”

Inevitably, the priority of ‘Duty First’ puts more pressure on non-serving partners to pick up the household tasks and the everyday responsibilities of family life. They also have to respect the priorities associated with the Serving partner’s commitment to put duty first. This can easily conflict with the desire to have a career of one’s own and result in having to make very difficult decisions about the level of compromise that is acceptable.

An Australian study has found that the most weighty consideration for the non-serving partner when deciding whether to accompany the Serving person was being able to remain in employment, although this factor varied depending on the rank of the Serving partner.¹⁷⁸ Partner employment is important for the wellbeing of many partners and the international evidence clearly indicates that partner employment is an important issue for military families across the Western world. Giving up employment in order to accompany the Serving person can be a significant sacrifice.¹⁷⁹

“ We moved 500 miles away on the last posting and I have been unable to find work in six months. I gave up a good job to accompany my husband. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

Several studies in the US have found that spouses who were employed had greater self-confidence and self-efficacy and that giving up work and becoming dependent on the Serving partner could result in a loss of autonomy and confidence.¹⁸⁰ Supporting those military partners who want to work is an important factor in enabling families to adjust and settle in new areas. We note that although there is widespread belief that military spouses and partners have a wide range of skills and expertise which are often untapped and under-used, the Armed Forces do not necessarily know the extent of these and how best to harness them and support more partners into meaningful employment. This is inevitably challenging but opportunities such as the Spousal Employment Support trial and co-working hubs discussed later in the chapter could help to increase understanding of the skills available.

176 Ibid.

177 Blaisure et al (2016) op.cit.

178 Brown, T. and Wensing, E. (2016) *ASF Families Survey – Absences and Relocations*, Australian Government Department for Defence.

179 Biedermann, N. (2017) *The Experiences of Australian Military Spouses on Overseas Postings; a qualitative study*, Australian Defence Force Journal, 202 p53–62.

180 Trougakos, J. P., Bull, R. A., Green, S. G., MacDermid, S. M. and Weiss, H. M. (2007) *Influences on Job Search Self-Efficacy of Spouses in Enlisted Military Personnel*, Human Performance, 20(4) p391–413.

The quest for childcare

Decisions about whether to work and the kind of job to pursue are often associated with the availability, accessibility and affordability of childcare. This factor was very prevalent in the review:

“ I was employed in the NHS as a full-time staff nurse...I loved my job...My partner being in the Armed Forces was a direct cause of me having to give this up as I could not get childcare to accommodate my shifts while my husband was both here and on deployment.... I looked at every possibility. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

This naval partner was typical of many who did not have any family members living nearby to assist with childcare and who described all the childcare responsibilities as falling on her even when her husband was not away on deployment. She felt strongly that when her husband was alongside there should be more flexibility to allow him to take an equal share in the care of their children when she was trying to hold down a demanding job that necessitated shift work. Having to give up her career had resulted in a loss of confidence and depression. Others commented that as a military spouse:

“ It's always the spouse's job that has to fit around childcare. The soldier doesn't get let out early to pick up the kids, or get them in the day if they're ill...No wonder employers don't like hiring military wives. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

The 2019 FamCAS survey found that some 34 per cent of families with children required early years (0–4) childcare and of these, 90 per cent had been able to access suitable childcare. Of the families with at least one child of school age, 48 per cent needed to find childcare both before and after school but many raised concerns about the cost.¹⁸¹ We are aware that there have been a number of schemes to address childcare costs, including a voucher (salary sacrifice) scheme which some military families were still taking advantage of. This scheme is no longer open to new entrants, however. The Tax Free Childcare scheme, which has replaced it, requires both partners to be in work and is narrower in scope (for children up to the age of 11). We understand that take up within the military is low, maybe due to the eligibility limitations and/or low awareness of the scheme.

Apart from the pressures of managing childcare and employment, many families who contributed to our review commented on the lack of affordable childcare in the area where they were posted:

“ With two children, childcare costs £9-12 per hour for both of them. This is significantly above the salary of what many people earn especially when their job choices are limited by location, solo parenting, and the career sacrifices they have made due to their partner's Serving. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

This mother had trained as a teacher as she thought that would be more flexible, but it was not financially viable because of her husband's frequent and short-notice deployments and extremely variable working hours which meant he could not do anything to assist with childcare.

The cost of childcare was a consistent theme:

“ We don't have time to socialise without the children as we can't afford to pay an arm and a leg for childcare...The childcare cost when both my kids are on half term is massive...and even if I do take some time off [from work] I still have to pay for my child's place at the childminders to hold the place. I often find myself under a great deal of stress as a result of our financial situation and childcare. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

“ I am currently working 30 hours a week. We have three children. I earn about £800 a month and pay £540 on childcare...We are now up to our eyeballs in debt and having to work like ships in the night...I personally can't wait for my husband to tell me he is leaving the military. The day to day stress is beyond putting into words. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

181 FamCAS (2019) op.cit.

We met several Army spouses/partners during the review who had taken jobs in the care sector and were working weekend night shifts when their Serving partners were at their home base. This ensured that the wives could be at home during the week to look after their children and save on childcare costs. As a consequence, they rarely spent time with their Serving partners or as a family even when they were not away. A childcare survey in 2018¹⁸² reported that childcare costs had increased at double the rate of inflation. After school club prices had also risen in the same way. The report quoted a sum of £122 per week for a part-time nursery place for a child under the age of two. Furthermore, the survey showed that just 45 per cent of councils in England had enough childcare places for parents to access their free 30 hours of childcare; 50 per cent of councils in Wales had enough childcare places for working parents; and 86 per cent of councils in Scotland reported having enough places for parents to access the three and four year old entitlement.

The AFF study cites a number of previous studies which highlight the importance of childcare.¹⁸³ The lack of affordable childcare was often cited as a barrier to obtaining employment during our review:

“ If my children are sick/unable to attend nursery, it is always me that needs to take time off work and there does not seem to be a culture in the Royal Navy that childcare responsibilities are important. There seems to be a complete acceptance that wives should pick up all childcare responsibilities and the Royal Navy work is more important. There needs to be a significant culture change. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

The RAF Families Federation's childcare survey in 2016 had 1,417 responses, almost equally split between Serving and non-serving personnel, three quarters of whom lived in SFA.¹⁸⁴ Childcare was cited as a significant driver influencing partner employment, with the cost being a real issue for many families, especially those living in the south and south-east of England. It is recognised that the availability of high quality childcare is a challenge for civilian families and they also encounter high costs in these areas, many of whom struggle to pay for it in order for both parents to work. Parents living in single parent households also have to weigh up the costs and benefits of working and paying for childcare. This concern is not exclusive to military families.

Although the availability and affordability of childcare is a problem facing many civilian families, not just those in the military, there are additional challenges for military families. Nevertheless, it is difficult to make a special case for military families in respect of the cost of childcare. Supply and demand drives the cost which can be considerably higher in some parts of the UK than others. This is the same for all families. However, the challenge for military families who move around on accompanied postings is that they are obliged to move when the military require it if they wish to stay living as a family and are occupying SFA. Whereas most civilian families have an element of choice as to where and when they move and do so less frequently, the choices about when and where military families move are restricted by operational requirements. This usually means that spouses and partners need to seek employment in a new area and look for childcare more frequently, especially those in Army and RAF families. They are also less likely than civilian families to be able to choose to live near to extended family members who might offer help with childcare. Civilian families can usually take the availability of childcare into account when taking decisions about moving.

A key concern for many partners is whether they can find affordable, accessible childcare in the new area. Military families told us about encountering long waiting lists in some areas, so even if childcare exists it may not be available for some time after moving to a new posting. We were told that there are waiting lists on those bases that have a nursery/childcare facilities on or near the Defence estate, and some of these have waiting lists of between 12 and 18 months. This has serious implications for the continuity of childcare.

As a result of the variability in the availability and cost of childcare in different parts of the UK, decisions about whether to work can be particularly challenging for military partners and for children who move

182 Harding, C. and Cottell, J. (2018) *Childcare Survey 2018* – Family and Childcare Trust, Coram Family and Childcare.

183 See Lyolette et al (2018) op.cit.

184 RAF Families Federation (2016) *Childcare Survey Report*.

about a lot. Families have pointed out that when moving between the Devolved Governments of the UK they experience different approaches to childcare provision and to other support such as free school meals. Regional variations can result in uncertainty about what is available, what the costs might be and how this will impact on both spousal/partner employment and on children themselves. Children usually benefit in respect of their socialisation and self-confidence from early years learning provision, so moving in and out of different systems can disrupt this experience and the positive benefits for child development. We note that Scotland will introduce an early years offer in August 2020 which has parity with the hours currently offered for 3 and 4 year olds in England. Additionally, this offer will not require both parents to be in employment.

Another added pressure and, arguably, the most challenging factor for military families can be locating childcare services that offer extended hours during the school day and coverage during school holidays. During deployments the parent left at home may well need to find childcare that covers unsociable hours and continues throughout the school holidays. Not only can this be expensive, but because childcare seems to be scarce in some locations parents may find that they are on a waiting list for extended provision when they move to a new area. This disrupts their ability to find work and the child's continuity of childcare. Even if families are able to take advantage of the early years free childcare offers, this may not be sufficient to enable them to work during school holidays, and we know that the childcare available does not necessarily meet the demand for it.

This situation is similar to that faced by single civilian parents who also have to find and pay for more childcare if they want to continue working. We would suggest that schools could do much to help with this concern by providing before and after school clubs, particularly for military families and single parents. We have been told by Service families that there is often a waiting list for these facilities. We are aware that parents do have a Right to Request extended provision if a group of parents in a specific school can demonstrate a need for before- and after-school care. This Department for Education policy may not be well known or well understood by military families, however.

The RAF Families Federation has argued that the RAF and the MOD need to ensure that sufficient childcare is available for RAF families, and that the variations in cost are moderated while, at the same time, standards are not compromised.¹⁸⁵ In their view, unless the childcare issue is tackled it will ultimately impact negatively on recruitment and retention. The cost of childcare was cited as the problem by 75 per cent of families who logged a childcare issue with the RAF Families Federation in 2018.¹⁸⁶

The availability of suitable childcare has been raised during all our visits to bases, garrisons and stations and remains a concern for many families, including dual-serving couples, and for the Chain of Command. Some military bases provide crèche facilities and nurseries, and all RAF stations provide nursery facilities, but we were told at every base we visited that there is a waiting list for nursery places. The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019 reports that childcare facilities are provided at 95 of the 119 military bases in the UK that have more than 100 Serving personnel on their establishment, but the offer varies between bases. The childcare tends to be provided by recognised external organisations such as Action4Children. We understand that a Defence Instruction and Notice is being drafted to give direction and guidance as to how units should establish childcare facilities.¹⁸⁷

We have been informed that childcare provision in local communities is at a premium in many areas and may be located some distance away from where Service families are living. We know from our visits that a lack of transport or a partner's inability to drive can render it impossible to maintain a job and manage childcare:

“As a general rule, spousal employment comes down to childcare, childcare, childcare. While I have been very lucky to have a profession which is mobile, being married into the Royal Navy has meant that my career has suffered. I am expected to work antisocial hours, causing problems if there is no childcare at weekends or after 6pm. In addition I am required to undertake a certain number of hours of professional development per year which is also a challenge with no childcare ... Working fulltime has not been an option.”

(RN non-serving partner)

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ RAF Families Federation Submission to this review 2019.

¹⁸⁷ The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019, Crown Copyright.

We have been impressed with the childcare provisions on military bases but the level of provision and the costs to parents are variable. For example, RAF Waddington has a nursery looking after 250 children and 90 percent of them are military children. The eight garrison nurseries in the Tidworth and Bulford areas are all full with waiting lists and there is little if any other provision nearby. Nursery staff in all the childcare facilities on the Defence estate pointed to high demand for places and the nursery being over-subscribed. Commanding Officers and welfare staff are very aware of the childcare deficit and the impact of this on partner employment and, ultimately, on the Serving partner's views about whether to stay in the Services. Staff on all the bases said that they regard better childcare provision as a key priority:

“There are just not enough facilities, there is no support for younger children, and employment is good for mothers' mental health.”

(Army Garrison Commander)

In its 2018 report about meeting the needs of RAF families,¹⁸⁸ the RAF Benevolent Fund lists 'wanting but not being able to work' as the fifth in a list of top five major problems most reported by RAF personnel. In a parallel survey, the partners of RAF personnel list 'finding a suitable job' as the second highest major problem, and 'finding suitable childcare' as the fifth. Interviews with non-serving partners highlighted the restrictions they face in accessing employment and finding suitable childcare. The high cost of childcare can result in employment being uneconomic, thereby influencing a decision to give up work altogether but not as a matter of choice. Constant moves add to the difficulties of finding work and childcare. These factors are closely intertwined.

The importance of comprehensive policies and initiatives to assist with childcare

The MOD has recognised that mobility and repeated transitions can have a seriously detrimental impact on partner employment and, therefore, has included the employment of spouses and civil partners as one of seven priority areas of activity within the Families Strategy. This recognition is clearly welcomed by Armed Forces families and raises questions about how assignments can be re-organised to reduce the constant upheaval for families who want to live together, to support partners to pursue meaningful employment, and to deal with the challenge of constantly having to look for childcare and being placed on a waiting list over and over again. It also raises sensitive questions about how to address the seeming disadvantage that military partners experience in being able to access and afford childcare every time they move, and the potential disruption to children's own developmental needs when they move in and out of early years' provision.

Many Commanding Officers on bases with inadequate childcare facilities have expressed their desire to provide more childcare facilities wherever possible, and many can identify buildings on the patch which would be suitable. One of the challenges they face is assessing the nature of the demand among their Service families and the extent to which this can be reasonably met by existing childcare providers in the local community. If there is a demand for additional provision then it is necessary to determine who might be able to offer the appropriate high quality childcare and how it is to be paid for. Childcare provision is regulated through national registration in the different nations of the UK, and each nation operates its own inspection body in order to ensure that required standards are met. It follows, therefore, that any provision on a military base must conform to the standards set and be registered appropriately. It is not simply a matter of providing a room and opening the doors.

We would suggest that Commanding Officers on each military base should take steps to assess the demand for childcare, whether this can be met locally outside the military estate, and the benefits of establishing childcare and nursery provision on their base, through the Community Needs Analysis and Childcare Sufficiency Reports. It is important also that local authorities carry out Childcare Sufficiency reports which detail the availability of childcare provision in their area. We appreciate that they may need support in appropriately gathering and articulating the unmet demand for childcare places. While the Community Needs Analysis is a mandatory action it is not universally completed and it focuses on the

¹⁸⁸ RAF Benevolent Fund/ Compass Partnership (2018) *Meeting the Needs in the Serving Community*.

supply of childcare locally. This process needs to better mirror childcare sufficiency processes carried out by local authorities (in England and Wales), which seek to evidence local demand vs local supply, thereby identifying gaps in provision which can be addressed with Sufficiency Action Plans. We have also wondered about the potential for the MOD to develop Framework Agreements with a range of providers which could result in a common pricing structure across the Armed Forces bases and more universal provision.

A more thorough assessment of childcare demand and supply should lead to the development of an action plan for meeting the needs of the military families for whom Commanding Officers have a responsibility. In our view, it makes sense for the Armed Forces to develop local partnerships and work together with local authorities and childcare providers to provide the childcare needed. This will benefit children and enable greater spousal and partner employment. It should help further when the MOD has developed a clear policy and guidelines for the provision of childcare on military bases in order to encourage consistency of approach and arrangements. This would be of enormous benefit to families moving from one military establishment to another and address some of the reported inconsistencies families are facing. The military families we spoke to during the review told us that they expect to have to pay for childcare, just as civilian families have to, but the lack of sufficient supply and variations in cost when they move from base to base cause considerable frustration and can interfere with the ability of non-serving partners to work. It also impacts on the ability of dual-serving partners and single Serving personnel with childcare responsibilities to undertake their Service duties effectively.

The differences in government policies relating to child care across the UK mean that Service families experience significant variations in the availability, accessibility and costs of provision as they move from one area and one nation to another. Given the limitations on career progression for Service partners the availability and affordability of childcare can be a deciding factor in decisions not to seek employment even if this has severe consequences for a partner's long term career opportunities. Because there are waiting lists for good quality providers when military families move they are often at the bottom of the list again. Several parents told us that they are not looking for special treatment in comparison with civilian families, knowing that childcare can be a major difficulty for civilian families as well. Nevertheless, many feel that because of the disruptions to their employment and the lack of geographical stability, there should be some childcare support offered to military families to enable both partners to work and to maintain continuity of provision for children. We would urge the MOD to continue to work closely with the Devolved Governments to find ways of harmonising the arrangements for childcare. This would assist civilian families as well as military families who move between the nations of the UK.

The beneficial effects of there being sufficient childcare facilities for families and the military are seen as being far wider than simply helping non-serving partners to work and ensuring child development opportunities for children:

“ [It will mean] more spouses able to return to work earlier giving them some independence, help the local economy, help spouses mental state...I feel that the mental health of both the Serving person and the family is a massively under-estimated and resourced area. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

“ What the military fails to appreciate is that the dissatisfaction amongst the spousal community causes retention and mental health problems for Serving personnel too, because it takes a very particular sort of person to shut out the upset and disruption that their career causes their loved ones day in and day out. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

The link between mental health and wellbeing was made by many military partners when talking about the issues they face in securing appropriate work and childcare. Being able to develop and maintain a meaningful career is vitally important to many partners who believe that this assists them to better support their Serving partner and contribute to a financially secure household. Welfare Officers have endorsed this view and would be keen to find better ways to support non-serving partners. We examine mental health and wellbeing issues in the next chapter.

Because the availability of childcare is such an important and widespread concern within the military, we believe that the time has come for the MOD to fully assess the childcare needs of Serving families, taking account of geographical location and local provision, and to develop a blueprint/action plan for future provision which will meet the identified need. Working in partnership with local authorities, Devolved Governments and professional providers, this exercise would benefit everyone involved. In addition, there needs to be close cooperation with the Department for Education in England to consider how best to provide continued wrap-around care for older children through before- and after-school activities and clubs. In order to take forward these initiatives, we suggest that a specialist team within DCYP should take on the responsibility for this aspect of policy and practice development, thereby assisting Commanding Officers with their assessments and engaging with local authorities, Devolved Governments and childcare providers. We have noted that in the US, the Defense Department has developed a universal approach to childcare provision, ensuring fairness and parity for military families across the States, and has commissioned childcare services that can both maintain standards and keep the cost of provision as low as possible.

We also suggest that childcare providers should be supported in understanding the specific needs of military children and the military lifestyle, so that they can be better informed about the child development challenges and opportunities for Service children. In the previous chapter we have recommended the introduction of CPD modules for teachers and others within the education system, and believe these should be extended to the professionals working in childcare.

The AFF study¹⁸⁹ cited earlier, reported that amongst those they interviewed it was felt that the military could do more to help partners with childcare, either by providing it on all military bases or subsidising nursery fees. We recognise that this is a difficult issue in respect of military spend and prioritisation, however, and it may be that a more in depth evaluation of the childcare demand and supply issues facing military partners is needed. It is also important to consider the implications of some kind of allowance which could be subject to tax or be regarded as a benefit-in-kind. This was an unintended consequence of the MOD Spousal Employment Support Trial which offered training courses and other taxable benefits.

While it is clear that locating affordable and accessible childcare is a significant concern for mobile military families, more information is needed about the demand and supply across the UK. It is important that the Armed Forces work in partnership with local authorities, childcare providers, the Families' Federations and military charities, to develop an Action Plan to meet the childcare needs of Service families and which supports the military lifestyle. Schools also have an important role to play through before and after school clubs which can offer wrap-around activities for military children.

The Armed Forces should ensure that local authorities are provided with the evidence they need to incorporate the childcare needs of Service children within their statutory sufficiency assessment processes and action plans. This requires suitably skilled early years' professionals to ensure that appropriate provision is established that meets the local regulatory requirements and which is tailored to the local evidenced and expressed needs of the community. Furthermore, the extension of the Community Needs Assessment process should incorporate an assessment of demand, which mirrors the sufficiency assessment processes of local authorities. The mandatory completion of the Community Needs Assessments should be enforced, and Commanding Officers should be given support to do this from relevantly skilled and trained personnel.

Initiatives to address childcare concerns

CASE STUDY: The RAFA KIDZ project

During the review we have been told about various initiatives being developed on military bases to better support childcare and family life. It is obvious that Commanding Officers are keen to embrace these and to support their military communities. The RAF Benevolent Fund and the Royal Air Force Association, for example, have supported a number of initiatives to mitigate the problems experienced by partners who want to work but are hampered in doing so by a lack of local childcare appropriate to the military life

189 Lyonette et al (2018) op.cit.

style. These programmes are welcomed by RAF families and Station Commanders. We have visited two air stations (RAF High Wycombe and RAF Wittering) where childcare initiatives are taking place and they seem to us to be excellent examples of good practice which can assist with the demand for childcare and, at the same time, enable some non-serving partners to find and sustain employment.

The Royal Air Force Association has pioneered childcare training for military spouses and partners in the childcare facilities on a number of stations. We met several partners who had trained or were in the process of training in childcare and/or training in child-minding and they were extremely positive about the opportunity and the experience. Being able to gain a qualification and develop skills in a job that is portable is considered to be extremely valuable. These partners were able to bring their own children to the nursery, thus ensuring they could manage their childcare themselves while training.

RAFA KIDZ Project

Aim

The aim of the project is to offer childcare and childminding training to Service partners in order to address some of the challenges Service families face, RAFA works in partnership with a childminder provider organisation.

Training

RAFA has provided childminding training to over 100 spouses and partners and has encouraged them to support local Service families once trained. The training is provided free of charge for those that are eligible for support from the RAF Association (the Serving person must have served for one day and received one day's pay). Spouses/partners of Serving personnel and children up to the age of 18 are eligible for support. RAFA also funds the DBS check, Ofsted Registration and a paediatric first aid course. This takes the attendee from no previous experience to a qualified registered childminder. Although there is no cost the partner/spouse is expected to sign an agreement that they will complete the training.

All those who have trained so far have a Serving partner, except for one 18 year old daughter of a Serving partner.

The training currently consists of

- an Introduction session – face to face 1 hour group session. This session outlines the content and course programme and highlights the commitment required
- online training modules. The main bulk of the training is undertaken online. There are a number of online modules which need to be completed within 6 weeks. This can be monitored by the provider
- a two- day paediatric first aid course, run over a weekend
- on completion of the training trainees undertake a DBS check, and are assisted with the Ofsted registration process.

Future Developments

In total, 9 RAF Stations have requested training, with 3 requesting more than one session. The demand for training as a childminder and to provide high quality childcare is continuous. RAFA is responsible for running two nurseries on RAF Stations. This provides new opportunities to offer employment to the partners and spouses of Serving personnel.

We have been very impressed with the potential of the RAFA KIDZ programme and note that childcare courses were also popular in the MOD Spousal Employment Support Trial, discussed later in the chapter. They could be a solution to several problems for military partners interested in pursuing childcare as a career, and enable many other non-serving partners to find work and to access high quality childcare for their children.

Whatever way our recommendations are taken forward it is essential that local garrisons, naval bases and air stations work closely with their respective local authorities and Service Champions to alleviate local childcare issues, particularly with respect to the provision of wrap-around childcare. During our visits around the UK we met a number of highly committed local authority champions working closely with the Armed Forces to support children and families, encourage partner employment and deliver childcare.

For example, the local authority Liaison Officer in Rutland had been to Cyprus to meet families returning to Kendrew Barracks and was very aware of the insufficient provision of childcare locally. The resolution of partner employment difficulties and the continuity of provision of high quality childcare require committed partnership working and strong leadership at national and local levels across the UK.

Creating new employment opportunities for non-serving partners

Recognition of the importance of spousal and partner employment has begun to take account of the wider benefits of supporting partners to be able to build careers which can fit with the military life style and the obligations on Serving personnel to put duty first. Finding a job is about more than securing an additional income, however important that is. While partners referred to the need to have a second income, the driver for many in seeking employment is the importance of maintaining their own identity, to be recognised as a career person in their own right, and not to be financially dependent on the Serving partner. Employment provides partners with a sense of purpose which is very important during long periods when their Serving partner is away from home and they have to cope with everyday life on their own. So while the challenges of working are greater for Service spouses and partners during periods of deployment and training, the benefits of having one's own employment are considerable, particularly in being able to deal with loneliness.

Not being defined solely as someone's wife/partner is very important for personal identity and self-esteem. We return to this in Chapter 10. Partners who have worked or want to work who have specific qualifications and careers are particularly committed to finding ways to ensure that their hard work and expertise are not diminished or lost completely as a result of their somewhat nomadic lifestyle. It is important that their skills and expertise are not wasted. Several non-serving partners pointed out that 'being married to the Armed Forces' does not mean they have subjugated their identity to their Serving partners. Employment also gives them an opportunity to develop support and friendship networks beyond the military and 'off the patch' if they are living in SFA. This ability to develop professional and social networks through employment is even more significant for Service partners when families decide to move away from the patch and live in non-military communities. Not being defined by their Armed Forces connection allows the family, and especially the non-military partner, to integrate with the wider community and cope with the emotional challenges of loneliness. This will be important for those families who participate in the FAM offer.

The AFF research¹⁹⁰ reported on the need for more training for partners, particularly for those with lower levels of educational qualifications, while those with higher levels of education could be supported to learn new languages if they were being posted overseas, or be able to undertake CPD courses and develop their skillset. Several partners mentioned to us that they would appreciate being allowed to undertake some of the courses open to Serving personnel. We met non-serving partners in Devonport who were using the education centre to undertake GCSEs and A levels, higher degrees and other training that is on offer on the base. This was highly valued by both Serving and non-serving partners. It was suggested that given that these educational facilities already exist on some bases then, if there is sufficient resource, they could be open to non-serving partners where appropriate.

The MOD Spousal Employment Support Trial

Following the publication of the Armed Forces Families Strategy in 2016, the MOD launched a trial to offer support to Service partners. In 2018 The Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) published the evaluation of the MOD Spousal Employment Support (SES) trial¹⁹¹ which ran between 2015 and 2017 and was offered to 200 RAF spouses at RAF stations throughout the UK and to 240 spouses in Joint Forces Command, Cyprus (including all three services: Army 60%; RAF 37%; and Navy 3%). The participants came from a variety of nationalities, although the majority were British, and their partners came from across the ranks.

¹⁹⁰ Lyonette et al (2018) op.cit.

¹⁹¹ Caddick, N., Godier, L., Sanchez-Vazquez, A., Ivory, C. and Fossey, M. (2018) *Evaluation of the MOD Spousal Employment Support Trial*, FiMT.

The purpose of the trial was to help spouses optimise access to employment and to help them find better employment at a level that is commensurate with their skills, knowledge, and experience and/or accord with their aspirations and ability. The aim was not specifically to get spouses into work but to optimise their career opportunities.

The trial was delivered by Right Management Ltd as an element of the Career Transition Partnership contract. It consisted of:

- job readiness and career support (similar to that offered to Service leavers)
- a training grant up to the value of £879 per person (£1000 before tax taken directly from the Serving partner in respect of a benefit-in-kind) to pursue training and skills-based qualifications in their chosen field of employment.

The evaluation addressed three questions:

1. What are the employment support needs of spouses of Service Personnel?
2. What is the capacity of the SES trial to meet employment support needs of spouses?
3. How does the SES trial influence Service families' preparation for transition from military to civilian life?

Importantly, the evaluation attempted to measure outcomes on mental wellbeing. Despite the low numbers in the trial and at the follow up stage, this was an important study as it provided a wealth of information about the views of partners who took part. In the UK a higher percentage of partners were of Serving personnel in officer ranks (22% officers, 78% other ranks) than in Cyprus (11% officers, 89% other ranks). Also a higher percentage of spouses/partners in the UK were educated to degree level than in Cyprus (39% to 26%). Officer ranks' spouses were more likely to have a degree. The partners who took part were classified into three groups: unemployed seeking work (USW) (Cyprus 52%, UK 24%); employed seeking betterment (ESB) (Cyprus 41%, UK 45%); and economically inactive, those unable to seek work owing to personal circumstances (EI) (Cyprus 7%, UK 31%).

The most popular types of courses in the UK were education-based and childcare-based courses, followed by beauty therapy and hairdressing, hobbies and crafts. In Cyprus the most popular courses were also education and child care based, followed by health and social care courses. In the UK, 50 per cent of spouses used the training grant and 62 per cent of spouses in Cyprus took up the offer. Spouses used the training grant as a contribution to existing tuition fees, including university degrees. The courses undertaken ranged in cost from £249 to £5600, and the contribution from the MOD ranged from £249 to £879 (the maximum available). The training for many spouses was a central component of their career development plans and without the grant they would not have been able to afford it.

While the trial did not demonstrate an impact on the spouses' mental wellbeing because it was not set up to evaluate this, the spouses' belief that they could achieve positive job search outcomes increased during the trial. They were generally satisfied with the one-to-one support they received and were particularly happy with access to the training grant. Relatively few spouses accessed the workshops on offer, with problems relating to childcare, location and travel cited as the most frequent reasons for this lack of take up. This supports all the evidence about problems with childcare. Nevertheless, the majority reported that the trial had had a positive impact on their lives: it had increased their confidence in seeking employment and had enhanced employment opportunities. The trial appears to have had no impact one way or another on the Serving partner's future Service plans. It would seem that the trial had enabled spouses to build on their skills and increase their confidence.

There were, however, unintended consequences relating to tax issues. Because the MOD had to adhere to HMRC tax rules, the training grant was regarded as a taxable payment to the Serving partner. This was not necessarily anticipated by the Serving partners and was considered unfair by many spouses and, indeed, their partners. A tax contribution was deducted from the Service person's pay cheque which rendered the grant less attractive than it might have been, although there is no evidence that it detracted from the offer. Nevertheless, several participants questioned whether such training offers in future could be exempt from tax when they are clearly devised to aid the non-serving spouse/partner to secure employment.

We have discussed this with experts in HMRC and understand that the taxable treatment as to whether the trial was a contribution to earnings or a benefit-in-kind will depend on the precise details of the scheme. To make a case for an exemption for military personnel whose partners benefit from the scheme, there would need to be tangible evidence that the training was effective in, for example, enabling spouse/partners to obtain employment or that it had a material impact on retention of the Serving partner. In other words, a case would have to be made for a tax exemption by supplying hard outcome data. If the aim is to facilitate partners into work, then HMRC would need to monitor the scheme to ensure that payments were being made for courses that supported partners into work.

This UK trial has again highlighted the barriers to finding employment that is commensurate with partners' skills and experience. Issues of mobility, lack of stability because of moves, lack of affordable childcare, and the often isolated, remote locations of bases had all added to the employment deficit and under-employment. Issues securing child care emerged in the narratives as a common difficulty as they have done in our review. Moreover, as many people have pointed out to us, job opportunities are limited overseas and often narrow in respect of the kinds of jobs available. The study underlines the finding that personal confidence is weakened when spouses/partners are out of the job market for prolonged periods.

Spouses in the trial talked about the need to pursue employment for their own personal development and wellbeing and to have an identity beyond that of a military spouse. They were provided with opportunities to change careers and follow long held interests. They indicated after the trial that they wanted to make the most of these opportunities, using the trial as a springboard to career development. An unexpected but very important finding was the sense of being valued and supported, receiving recognition for the sacrifices they make as military partners. Given that many spouses have reported feeling undervalued in our Call for Evidence, this is a positive finding and one to which we return in Chapter 10.

In terms of employability, those who took part saw the trial as a catalyst to being more pro-active in seeking employment or furthering their career. In other words, they were re-energised. Spouses in Cyprus regarded the trial as useful preparation for seeking work on their return to the UK. It would be interesting to know how many were able to secure employment, and further research is clearly needed.

A number of lessons have been learned from this trial which echo the findings from our review. These included the following:

- one of the most effective ways to support spouses/partners to enhance their career and employment prospects appears to be provision of opportunities to train and to increase their skills, knowledge and qualifications in their chosen field
- spouses/partners would benefit further from services and support tailored to their individual needs and circumstances (one size does not fit all)
- employment support can provide military spouses/partners with the tools and the confidence they need to pursue employment.

Nevertheless, these spouses/partners will still struggle to look for and maintain work if other issues such as appropriate child care and frequent moves are not addressed. It is reasonable to conclude that efforts to support military partners must be considered as part of a more holistic approach to supporting military families. The findings from the trial are relevant to those from this review. An indirect effect of the training offered was to engender a more positive relationship between the spouses/partners and the Armed Forces which we discuss more fully in Chapter 10.

The evaluators made a number of recommendations, including that the MOD should: continue to provide support and assistance to help military spouses in the employment market by embedding the trial into practice; recognise the contributions and sacrifices made by spouses and that the lack of childcare and isolated postings act as barriers to employment and continue to provide training grants to spouses/partners and enable them to choose and manage employment-related training opportunities, such as accessing those offered to the Serving partner.

We understand that the MOD have been developing a revised spousal support programme which will take note of the lessons learned from this first trial and extend the trial beyond its previously rather narrow focus. One of the ways in which the tax penalty would not fall on the Serving partner would be to 'gross up' the amount paid to them. The amount of the tax to be paid would be added to the grant payment to the Serving partner. In essence this means that the amount of the tax payable would fall on the MOD (or MOD might in turn recoup this from the provider of the programme) rather than falling on the Serving person. This is a recognised way used by employers to ensure that taxable payments do not fall on the recipient of the grant, thereby ensuring that the appropriate tax is paid and the Serving partner is not out of pocket as a result. Any future trial might wish to take this option into account or consider how evidence could be collected that could allow a case for exemption to be considered.

We are aware that HMRC have recently introduced an accredited life chances programme, which is a new internship for Service leavers in the resettlement period. This is an eight week internship, which can be followed by a fixed term appointment that can (in some cases) become permanent after a qualifying period. The programme is not open to family members but we would suggest that its extension might be a consideration in future and could possibly include the spouses/partners of Serving personnel. We suggest that HMRC continue to monitor this possibility.

Barclays Military Spouses/Partners Programme in HMNB Clyde

A new pilot initiative which began in October 2019 in conjunction with the Naval Families Federation aims to offer opportunities for remote working. Barclays is providing a two week course for naval spouses/partners based at HMNB Clyde. The programme has developed from the Veterans' Employment Transition Support (VETS) Programme run by Barclays which is a founding partner of the VETS programme. The programme is a coalition of willing partners from the business sector, charity sector and the MOD to improve outcomes for veterans. It allows veterans to connect with mentors from business, attend ready to work initiatives and apply for veteran targeted jobs. Barclays sees VETS as key to its strategy in employing more ex-military into the bank by ensuring that candidates are well prepared and applying for the right jobs.

This successful programme has now been extended to offer support to spouses/partners of currently Serving personnel. The two-week course gives partners the opportunity to get involved in a wide range of work activities which will help them to learn more about Barclays business and culture. Importantly it is a chance to learn new skills, participants are expected to become more confident, and take a step on the career ladder. Throughout the course, participants meet a variety of people who assist them in their development.

Twelve non-serving partners and one partner of a veteran enrolled on the first course, two of whom had taken jobs part-way through the course. Early reports suggested that the course was increasing the confidence of the attendees and helping them to feel more positive about finding employment within the first week of the course. The NFF reported that some of the Serving partners had commented that their partners 'seemed brighter in themselves' since starting the course.¹⁹²

Twelve weeks after attending the course, the participants were asked to undertake a survey to gain their feedback and find out how the course had helped them. The results were overwhelmingly positive with all of the partners rating the course as good or excellent, and saying that they would recommend the course to other spouses/partners. Of particular importance is that six of them were now in employment and one was in education. Two more participants were awaiting interviews with Barclays itself and the rest had submitted applications for jobs. We met with a group of these spouses/partners in January 2020 and all of them said that the biggest gain was that their confidence to apply for jobs and go back to work had increased hugely. Other outcomes they talked about included:

- a renewed enthusiasm for work
- having clearer direction about a career
- gaining skills in writing a CV and interviewing
- learning networking skills.

¹⁹² Information from Wendy Quinn, NFF Families Engagement Officer Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The participants also spoke about the friendships they had forged and the ability to provide peer support for each other in future. Above all, however, was their view that the course had given them confidence that they had not had previously. They overwhelmingly said that they would encourage other non-serving partners to take the course and we understand that more partners have already applied to undertake it. As one spouse told us:

“ I love my husband, he loves the Navy, and so I need to love the Navy, and this course has given me my confidence back. I am happy and can support his career and we can stay here now and all be happy. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

Their enthusiasm for and delight at having undertaken the course was evident as the photo below indicates.¹⁹³



Photo 5.1 Barclays Course graduates, HMNB Clyde, January 2020.

The NFF team will stay in touch with those who have completed the course and offer one-day events and networking sessions. At the request of the spouses/partners, NFF will be facilitating an online group for them as they continue on their employment journey, further enabling them to not only tap into the peer to peer support from each other but from NFF and those who delivered the programme also. Barclays are now looking to provide a working from home pilot and will trial this with HMNB Clyde spouses/partners. This initiative will hopefully encourage other national employers to train non-serving partners to be able to gain employment in what is a fully transferable role. Non-serving partners who were already engaged in remote working had commented during the review that it is an ideal way to maintain employment while the family is mobile.

The NFF team are in discussions about offering the course in other parts of Scotland and looking to develop complementary opportunities in partnership with other providers and business sponsors. The initiative in Helensburgh has highlighted just how important it is to offer support to partners/spouses in preparing them for employment and in boosting their confidence. The NFF team are now looking to develop more robust evaluation of future courses to build up the evidence base and encourage other national and international employers to take part in new programmes. Given the success of the Barclays programme we would urge Barclays and other employers to promote the Covenant and to develop initiatives in partnership with the Armed Forces.

¹⁹³ All the spouses/partners we spoke to gave their permission for their photograph to appear in this report as a way of encouraging others to enrol on the course.

During the review we have been impressed with the initiatives being spearheaded by members of the Armed Forces, notably Service partners who have taken it into their own hands to increase the support offered to non-serving partners. We refer to some of these here with the hope that the MOD will consider whether and how best to encourage them. We are aware that many of the programmes have not been evaluated as to their effectiveness and the costs associated with them. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more robust evaluation of these programmes if they are to flourish and to be recognised as worthy of endorsement by the MOD and the Armed Forces generally.

CASE STUDY: Co-Working Hubs

One of the programmes we visited is the Co-Working Hub in the Leuchars Station, established by the wife of a Serving member of the Army and her colleagues in 2017. We understand that the development of co-working hubs was inspired by CAN DO Places, a Scottish Government programme aimed at helping community groups transform redundant buildings and spaces into venues where local people can work together. In addition, the Scottish Government has continued to work with the Royal Navy and the Army to promote and develop links with the newly-launched Scottish Libraries Co-working Hubs.

Co-working is defined as being where two or more people are working in the same space together, but not for the same company. It offers flexibility, networking opportunities and productivity benefits. The idea is that people come together in a shared space to work on their own projects with a sense of community. The values underpinning the concept are collaboration, community, sustainability, openness, inclusivity, empowerment, innovation and accessibility. Military life is 'left at the door' and the Serving person's rank is unimportant. The hub offers complete flexibility for partners to work there whenever they wish.

In Leuchars, the hub is located immediately outside the wire, enabling easy access for partners without the hassle of getting in and out of a military establishment. It is based in a relatively small room which is part of the Defence estate, and wifi connectivity is provided by the local base/station funds at a cost of c £700 per annum. Other running costs are covered by a £20 membership fee per annum for all those wishing to use the hub as often as they like.

The Leuchars hub had 19 members when we visited in summer 2019, but it is growing as the benefits become known. With support from the Chain of Command and greater advertising, membership is expected to increase further. During a visit to the hub at Leuchars we heard from some of those who had used it, including the wife of a soldier from the Commonwealth who was using it to study, other members who were working remotely, and several who were running their own businesses, one of whom had been working in a wardrobe in the bedroom of her SFA before being able to work in the hub alongside other members. This was clearly quite a shift for her in being able to develop her business. These spouses/partners were obviously benefitting from the hub and enjoying being able to network with others.

We were particularly impressed with a number of junior NCOs' wives who had successfully established local businesses such that they were putting pressure on their husbands to stay in the Army. This contribution to retention was confirmed by the Station Commander who believes there is a strong case to support the hub on retention grounds as well as its ability to provide unique opportunities for Service partners to be in employment and develop their own businesses if that is what they choose to do.

Users of the hub have expressed their sense of feeling valued by the military rather than being seen as just a Service partner. The hubs are a tangible sign of the value the Armed Forces place on the commitment to support non-serving partners. One NCO's wife told us that, up to the point she had joined the hub she had lived in her husband's shadow. The hub was providing her with an opportunity to bring an income into her family in a way that was very compatible with Service life. One of the important outcomes in the Spousal Employment Support Trial was the sense of being valued and appreciated by the Armed Forces who were willing to invest in non-serving partners as well as those Serving. We also saw how the hub was enabling a soldier who was leaving the army to establish his own business. So there are benefits to harness which have positive impacts on various aspects of Service life including transition to 'civvy' street. We look at this more closely in Chapter 7.

Co-Working Hubs: the Military Co-working Network

The hub provides

- a place to work flexibly
- a supportive, encouraging, networking environment in which to set up a business or work freelance
- a place to study, access information and training opportunities
- access to local business support and organisations providing skills, training, employability and business start-up
- fast broadband, telephone, scanner and printer, desks and kitchen facilities.

Members can access

- online and social media promotion for their business
- membership of the Federation of Small Businesses and local business clubs
- invitations to networking and business events locally
- a business start-up mentor, courses and support
- links with local Chambers of Commerce
- members Company profile, logo, website linking.

The hub is run on a cooperative basis by Service partners with a governing body and, in addition to the annual fee, members are expected to commit to volunteering their time, skills and resources to helping run the hub and support other members. All the income is reinvested in the hub.

The benefits are

- enabling self-employment which fits with a military lifestyle
- improved job continuity when families move around
- making it easier for employers to employ military partners remotely
- improved focus and productivity for partners resulting in higher earnings
- gaining new skills and personal development
- encouraging entrepreneurialism
- decreasing isolation, loneliness, loss of identity and low self-esteem
- reducing economic dependency of military partners
- promoting retention
- building better links with local businesses and the local community
- encouraging local businesses to sign the Covenant and fulfil their obligations
- easing transition to civilian life
- creating new jobs and businesses.

The vision of the founders of the co-working hub is to promote the establishment of a network of enterprise hubs in all military bases across the UK and overseas which will enable non-serving partners to have independent careers.¹⁹⁴ By October 2019, two additional hubs were up and running at Bovington Camp and RAF Leeming. Two more were planned for non-serving partners at HMNB Clyde and at RAF Brize Norton for the end of October and five more co-working hubs were due to open between November 2019 and January 2020 at the Defence Academy, Shrivenham; RNB Chivenor; RAF Valley; Aldershot Garrison; and HMNB Portsmouth. A further 15 hubs are in development for 2020. This marks considerable progress relating to a seemingly valuable programme of support for military partners.

In the early stages of development there were no clear guidelines about the process for establishing a co-working hub on a military base. It is clear that there has to be senior level commitment and buy-in from the Base Commander or above and sufficient support from the non-serving members in the base community. The hubs are designed to be integrated into the infrastructure of the base and to be an asset for the MOD and a benefit to the whole military community. At the current time, Unit/Base Commanders decide whether or not to support the initiative.

¹⁹⁴ Discussions with Sarah Stone, Founding CEO.

The single Services have asked the MOD for guidance and consideration is underway to consider the most appropriate vehicle for the hubs. They currently operate on encroachment licences, which are subject to strict criteria, including that the use is temporary and not for operating a business. There is the potential for exemptions to be made and policy to be designed which facilitates this very worthwhile initiative, and the MOD is considering what is possible, in the context of the need to protect public money and ensure the appropriate use of Defence assets. The hubs are a non-commercial operation run by volunteer Service spouses/partners.

As co-working hubs are being set up in a variety of bases in the three Services it is essential that their usage and impact are properly evaluated. Evaluation must include an assessment of their potential for alleviating the difficulties faced by Service partners in finding employment and progressing their careers. Initial success with relatively small numbers in Leuchars Station is evident but it is now important to assess the demand for such hubs and then to assess how they may be established and maintained if the demand warrants them being rolled out across the whole Defence estate, and their longer-term impacts evaluated.

Recruit For Spouses

Recruit for Spouses (RFS) was established initially as a social enterprise company in 2012 by the wife of an Army officer, to act as a gateway to the job market for partners of any Serving member of the Armed Forces. The goal is to give partners the tools to gain confidence to re-enter the workplace. One of its aims has been to create opportunities for military partners to work from home, working around the constraints of belonging to a military family. RFS has created what it refers to as the Liquid Workforce, a paid at home role working for many different companies. The social enterprise attracted LIBOR funding.

A separate Community Interest Company was established with the support of BAE systems in 2017 which has three main strands: coaching, mentoring, and career/job readiness. Towards the end of 2018, we understand that the first pilot with five coaches was completed and within 12 weeks of the official launch 35 volunteer coaches had been recruited. The RFS Academy is working with spouses/partners in 7 countries and has been expanding its coaching programme with the support of BAE. RFS also offers CV clinics and webinars.

We understand that between 2016–17 RFS attracted some 400 partners to webinars covering life coaching, business start-up and brand promotion; was awarded £6,500 in social media training bursaries; put 55 attendees through nationwide digital skills workshops, and sent newsletters to 3,000 contacts. One of the difficulties RFS has experienced is not being able to fully evaluate the programme to measure its effectiveness in enabling partners to seek sustainable employment. However, we were given the following statistics for RFS in May 2019.¹⁹⁵ We were told that RFS:

- had registered 4,795 candidates over the last 12 months
- had communicated with 3,837 spouses/partners within the previous six months
- were actively engaged with 977 spouses/partners currently.

In terms of outcomes, we were told that:

- 767 spouses/partners had been shortlisted for a job
- 116 CVs had been sent to clients
- 67 spouses/partners had been interviewed
- 46 spouses/partners had been placed in a job
- 21 spouses/partners had expressed interest in coaching.

¹⁹⁵ Submission from Heledd Kendrick, CEO RFS, May 2019.

It is difficult to assess in any detail from these statistics the outcomes achieved from the various aspects of the RFS programmes, but we understand that some evaluations are in process. The AFF study¹⁹⁶ indicated that because RFS charges for their service some employers are reluctant or unable to participate. We have not been able to explore this observation further. Nevertheless, the AFF research heard positive comments about RFS and the efforts they make to reach employers.

We received 20 case studies/submissions from the CEO of RFS written by military spouses and partners about their experiences of seeking employment and the challenges in pursuing their careers, all of which highlight the same issues that were raised during our review and are discussed in this report. The case studies underscore the need for greater coordination of support initiatives for non-serving spouses and partners.

Supporting the Unsung Hero

Supporting the Unsung Hero (SUH) is a business start-up programme delivered by the University of Wolverhampton and Black Country Chamber of Commerce. Originally supported by LIBOR funding, since 2013, SUH has been offering training courses and mentoring to members of the Armed Forces community to turn bright ideas into successful businesses. The programme, sponsored by HSBC is open to non-serving partners, reservists and veterans, but the focus is on partners of Serving personnel. We were informed that SUH has delivered 30 courses to 750 people at MOD bases throughout the UK and overseas. It offers a free business programme designed specifically to meet the needs of members of the Armed Forces. The programme is extensive.

A survey conducted in 2018 received 150 responses and indicated that 90 per cent of participants felt more confident about how to start and run a successful business; 87 per cent go on to start their business or continue to trade; 70 per cent register within 3 months of starting their business; and 61 per cent see a consistent increase in yearly turnover.¹⁹⁷ There is evidence from the responses that being able to start a business gives people a sense of purpose and a better work-life balance. A case study provided by SUH features an ex-naval officer and then Navy non-serving partner who started a laser hair removal business after attending a SUH course in 2013 and is now the Company Director of a thriving company with two clinics which employ many Royal Navy spouses and partners.

A full evaluation was expected at the end of 2019. This initiative would seem to fit well with the vision of the Co-Working Hubs.

The Independent Spouse

The Independent Spouse which began as a podcast series by a non-serving partner has evolved into a network for all military spouses ready to be inspired in business or to develop their own projects. The podcast series is continuing and online 'Virtual Networking' events are offered monthly. These take place online in the morning and evening via video links for partners to work from home and not have to worry about finding childcare. We were told that over 150 spouses/partners had registered for the next planned event. The networking events also encourage new friendships and local real-life networking groups on a variety of local bases. The hope is that these networking groups can be linked to the new co-working hubs. Collaboration seems very constructive.

¹⁹⁶ Lyonette et al (2019) op.cit.

¹⁹⁷ Briefing from Sarah Walker, SUH Project Manager and Armed Forces Champion, September 2019.

Forces Families Jobs



A new online one-stop shop for employment and training opportunities was launched in September 2019. The Forces Families Jobs platform¹⁹⁸ is being delivered by AFF, working with the Navy and RAF Families Federations. Partners of Serving personnel can register a profile and search for jobs by sector, salary range, role type, and location, in the UK and overseas. The platform is designed to help everyone regardless of their level of work readiness and employment history. There is also information about local events, insight days and personnel development opportunities. The AFF is working in partnership with the Unsung Heroes business support programme at Wolverhampton University.

In order to advertise on the new platform, employers must have signed the Armed Forces Covenant and several large companies are supporting the programme. For example, the National Express Group has introduced a guaranteed interview scheme, and Amazon is keen to employ military partners. We have been told that this is proving to be enormously helpful for families posted to Cyprus. The platform also offers the option to search for roles that have received an award for the support they have given to the Armed Forces community.

We note that Defence Relationship Management are working with employers to adapt their human resources policies and practices to make robust spousal employment pledges, and that this is rewarded via the Employer Recognition Scheme. This is a very important activity which will encourage companies to take the Covenant seriously. The Military Spouse Employment Partnership Career Portal in the US allows employers to list jobs directly to military spouses/partners. In the three years between 2011 and 2014 employers had listed more than 1.3 million jobs on the portal and hired more than 55,000 military spouses.¹⁹⁹ This would seem to indicate that the new Forces Families Jobs portal in the UK has considerable potential to assist military partners, especially if it is offered alongside programmes that provide personal assistance, such as co-working hubs and other initiatives. Evaluation will assess the effectiveness and success of the platform. In March 2020, there were 1,409 live jobs on the platform.²⁰⁰

We understand that HMRC has recently registered with Forces Families Jobs and will advertise roles on the portal. This is an excellent example of the government leading by example. It has been suggested that all government departments should comply with the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant although they are not eligible to sign it. The way forward might be for a Civil Service Armed Forces Covenant, which sets out standards and expectations for the Civil Service as an employer and service provider. This could

¹⁹⁸ Illustration taken from cobseo.org.uk

¹⁹⁹ Military OneSource (2014) *Spouse Education and Career opportunities*, Factsheet cited in Blaisure et al (2016) op.cit.

²⁰⁰ Statistic taken from fofesfamiliesjobs.co.uk, end March 2020.

then be supported by a strategy and an action plan, including initiatives to actively encourage and support applications from the Armed Forces Community with metrics to measure performance. Performance monitoring and reporting could then be introduced, providing a performance and process benchmarking mechanism which could be reported to the Armed Forces Covenant Reference Group and included in the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, hopefully ensuring accountability and the sharing of best practice.

Promoting joined-up working

The number of programmes to support Service partners is increasing and the various initiatives are to be warmly welcomed. Many of those who have contributed to this review have noted that military partners have been unsung and hidden for far too long. It is concerning to learn from the AFF study²⁰¹ that the majority of spouses surveyed were unaware of any support programmes for spousal employment. Very few of those who responded to our Call for Evidence had sought help with or received support with employment. Those that had, often spoke of the low level nature of the support, such as writing CVs which was not what they had needed. The AFF study heard the same criticisms, and only 10 per cent of those who knew about some of the programmes had attended one, and spouses of junior ranks were the least likely to have done so.

The limited awareness of support opportunities points to an urgent need for better information for spouses and partners and a more joined-up approach to coordinating it. Providing information on bases is important but there needs to be a far more comprehensive way to ensure that all partners of Serving personnel are given information about what support exists and how to access it. Hopefully the new online platform can become the 'go-to' place for all the information everyone needs. While local initiatives are helpful, there must be more effort made to join-up the offers. Some people have suggested to us that while the various initiatives are helpful they would be more influential and effective if they worked together. There is a perception that they appear to be competing with each other to gain recognition and to secure funds rather than joining forces to support as many spouses/partners as possible. Maybe the new platform and the co-working hubs will provide a mechanism for encouraging a more joined-up approach. Equally, employers need to know what military spouses and partners need and want from them, and they should be encouraged to use the new platform accordingly. The Covenant is the obvious mechanism for promoting joined-up working.

The importance of culture change

An important culture change is underway in so far as the MOD and the Armed Forces themselves have recognised the critical importance of addressing the concerns of Service spouses and partners who have felt forgotten when it comes to understanding their employment aspirations and making sure that support is available for them to pursue their own jobs and careers. We know from the US evidence that employment support programmes can have a positive impact on spousal employment outcomes, and on the wellbeing of the family as a whole.²⁰² We consider this further in the next chapter.

A paper by the US National Military Spouse Network²⁰³ describes the changes taking place in patterns of employment with a growing trend to develop portable businesses which allow non-serving partners to manage military life and have a successful career. There has been increasing recognition that promoting entrepreneurship and removing barriers to starting small businesses is a vital component to military retention and a successful transition into civilian life.

Military families in the US move frequently and many find it difficult to obtain work which is aligned with their education, work experiences and expectations. As in the UK, military partners encounter employers who are hesitant about employing them in jobs that require training investment. Supporting employment opportunities and encouraging entrepreneurship also requires close partnership working with employers and business organisations to help them to see the hidden talents of military partners.

²⁰¹ Lyonette, et al (2018) op.cit.

²⁰² Burke, E. and Miller, A, R. (2018) *The effects of job relocation on spousal careers: evidence from military change of station moves*, *Economic Inquiry* 56(2), p1261–1277.

²⁰³ Chrisinger, D. (2019) *Military Spouse Employment: 5 recommendations for removing barriers to entrepreneurship*. US National Military Spouse Network.

The Australian Government²⁰⁴ has recognised the importance of addressing the needs of Service spouses and partners and taken steps to:

- minimise disruption to employment due to relocations
- help connect the partner with community resources and support networks
- provide the partner with support when the Serving person is away for Service reasons
- help the partner develop stress management strategies and build on their strengths and resilience.

Funding is provided for initiatives aimed at contributing to the employability of military partners when they are relocated as a consequence of their partner's Service, or for medical reasons. The Partner Employment Assistance Program (PEAP) provides funding towards initiatives to assist partners with the difficulties of finding employment when the member is relocated on posting or medically transitioning. Partners can apply for funding up to \$1500 Australian to access:

- mandatory fees for professional re-registration required under legislation
- professional employment services
- development of a personalised resume and/or resume coaching
- identification of transferrable skills
- employment options and job placement advice
- job search techniques and strategies
- development of an online employment profile
- application and selection criteria coaching
- preparation and presentation coaching for interviews.

Partners may also apply for ongoing funding towards previously approved education to contribute to the employability of partners when they are relocated as a consequence of their Serving partner's military service. As in the UK in respect of the spousal support trial, payment of this benefit may result in a reportable Fringe Benefit Tax amount being recorded against the Serving partner. Partners wishing to undertake higher education courses can apply for funding support through a range of Government-funded programs. The Australian Ministry of Defence also offers job-matching platforms and opportunities for business start-ups.

In the UK the Chief of Defence People has directed that Defence will provide spousal/civil and long term partners support into employment through the Career Transition Partnership (CTP). This follows an announcement from the then Secretary of State for Defence in September 2018 of a new scheme to help partners of Service personnel to find the jobs they want.

Developing a more holistic approach

Spouses and partners no longer wish to be classed as 'dependents' and this term has been repeatedly rejected by the contributors to our review as irrelevant in the 21st century. Instead, they argue that planning in the military must take account of the whole family and not simply prioritise the Serving person. The MOD provides welfare support as a core business function. It recognises that welfare supports operational capability and, in this respect, provision of coordinated support for Service families, including with respect to partner employment is essential to provide timely assistance which contributes to operational effectiveness.

We return to the provision of welfare support in Chapter 8, but there would appear to be an unambiguous responsibility on the Armed Forces and Government to promote a more family-oriented approach to supporting the whole military family. Given the changing expectations of military spouses and partners, support for their wellbeing should extend to taking measures to protect and enhance their employability. In turn, spouses and partners are committed to supporting the Serving person in their employment and, in so doing, are contributing to operational capability.

204 Department of Defence, Australian Government Defence Community Organisation. <https://www.defence.gov.au/DCO/Family/Partners/PEAP.asp>

A comparative study of spousal support in Australia, Canada, the US and the UK²⁰⁵ referred to the 1986 Hamilton Report in Australia²⁰⁶ which identified the problems military spouses have in securing and sustaining meaningful employment. The Hamilton report recommended that military postings and promotions policies should be reviewed to try to achieve some geographical stability for families so that spouses could develop their own careers. The Hamilton report, published over 30 years ago, addressed all the same issues that we have discussed in this chapter: frequency of moves; lack of employment opportunities, discontinuous employment history, qualification portability, childcare, and perceived employer discrimination.

The uniqueness of military life is widely acknowledged and the problems of spousal employment have continued. The Canadian Defence Ombudsman identified three aspects that shape the life of Service families: mobility, separation and risk.²⁰⁷ The Ombudsman pointed out that while none of these characteristics alone may be unique to military families, when combined the difference is more obvious:

6 Few occupations or professions expose the overwhelming majority of its people to recurring geographic relocation, relentless separation and elevated levels of risk as a matter of course throughout much of their careers. 9

The evidence from the Australian comparative study shows that unemployment and underemployment have serious financial, health, and wellbeing consequences for individuals and their families. The study recommended that addressing the career development of military spouses and partners should be an essential element of support for military families and an issue of concern in its own right. Work is a recognised social determinant of health, and Service partners expect acknowledgement that their career is as important as that of the Serving person. Family readiness also impacts military readiness and performance²⁰⁸ during a military career, and is a crucial part of the successful transition to civilian life, which we explore in Chapter 7.

A small qualitative study of military spouses in the UK²⁰⁹ found that employment contributes positively to spouses being able to develop an independent identity, enables social connectedness and provides a sense of self-confidence and feeling valued. These outcomes, in turn, can positively influence mental health and wellbeing. Having one's own identity beyond that of being a military spouse is important to many spouses and partners. We return to this issue in the final chapter. It is also very important to recognise that some non-serving partners choose to stay at home and commit to bringing up children full-time. This in itself can provide a valued identity as a parent and an important sense of self-worth. Parenting is an important and valuable role and we recognise that some non-serving partners would like to choose this role full-time but are not able to afford to make this choice when two incomes are necessary. Remote working or running a business at home might provide a useful opportunity for these parents to be able to stay at home and still engage in worthwhile employment.

There is a strong evidence that spouses who want and are able to work should be supported to be better able to mitigate the disruptive transitions associated with military life. Partner employment is a complex issue given the wide range of skills, experience and aspirations among non-serving members of the Armed Forces community. Evaluation of the initiatives being launched should facilitate better information about the needs of different groups of partners to ensure more targeted support. Not everyone wants to start a business and not everyone wants to take courses, so it is important to have a more detailed picture of what works for whom. The MOD Partner Employment Steering Group has a significant role to play here.

205 McCue, A. L. (2017) *Military IADF Spouse Employment and Career Development*, The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

206 Hamilton, S. (1986) *Supporting Service Families. A report on the main problems facing spouses of Australian Defence Force Personnel and some recommended solutions*. Department of Defence, Australia.

207 Daigle, P. (2013) *On the Homefront: Assessing the Wellbeing of Canada's Military Families in the New Millennium*, National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman, p10.

208 Department of Defense (2016) *Annual Report to the Congressional Defense Committee on the DoD Policy and Plans for Military Family Readiness*, US Department of Defense.

209 Gribble, R., Goodwin, I., Oram, S. and Fear, N. (2019) 'It's nice to just be you': the influence of the employment experience of UK military spouses during accompanied postings on wellbeing, *Health Psychology Open* 1–10.

Our Recommendations

Spousal/partner employment: short term

Recommendation 46

The Ministry of Defence and Devolved Governments to continue to raise awareness amongst employers through the Employer Recognition Scheme of the significant skills and expertise offered by military spouses/partners and about the commitment in the Armed Forces Covenant that Service families should be treated fairly and not be disadvantaged.

Recommendation 47

The Ministry of Defence to strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme by requiring employers to support the whole military family and giving awards only to those who provide tangible demonstration of this commitment through job interviews and job offers.

Recommendation 48

The Ministry of Defence to challenge the FSB, IOD, CBI and Chambers of Commerce to:

- apply the Armed Forces Covenant more effectively to partners of Serving personnel,
- facilitate continuity of employment when spouses/partners are relocated
- eliminate real and perceived discrimination.

Recommendation 49

The Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that staff in JobCentrePlus offices understand the challenges that mobility and frequent relocation create for military spouses/partners seeking employment, and to advise and support them appropriately.

Recommendation 50

The Armed Forces to enable non-serving partners to take advantage of training opportunities which are already available on a base, where resources allow, to advance spousal/partner employment opportunities.

Recommendation 51

The Ministry of Defence to encourage Barclays and other employers to promote the Armed Forces Covenant, and promote partnership with the Armed Forces to develop employment initiatives for non-serving spouses and partners.

Recommendation 52

The Ministry of Defence and Devolved Governments to support the development of Forces Families Jobs to become the 'go-to' place for high quality information, advice, guidance, training and job opportunities, and partner employment support.

Recommendation 53

The Ministry of Defence to undertake comprehensive evaluation of the revised spousal support programme that allows further understanding of the drivers for participation, the outcomes in respect of employment uptake, sustainability and satisfaction, and the impacts on retention.

Spousal/partner employment: medium term

Recommendation 54

The Ministry of Defence to enable military partners to apply for 'gapped' civil service jobs via the Forces Families Jobs portal where appropriate and when a post remains vacant.

Childcare: short term

Recommendation 55

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

- undertake an assessment of the demand for childcare by military families living on or in the vicinity of each UK military establishment
- encourage the establishment of affordable nursery and child care facilities at every military establishment wherever the demand is shown, and where it would enable continuity of childcare provision and facilitate non-serving partners to seek and take up employment
- work closely with local schools in the provision of before- and after-school clubs
- support families with 'right to request' applications, and provide evidence that articulates to schools the needs of the local military community
- provide local authorities with the evidence to incorporate childcare needs of Service children within their statutory sufficiency assessment processes and action plans
- enforce mandatory completion of the Community Needs Assessments by Commanding Officers.

Childcare: medium term

Recommendation 56

The Ministry of Defence to consider ways in which the variations in childcare costs in different bases and localities can be addressed so that families who are moved around the UK are not disadvantaged and spousal/partner employment is facilitated.

Recommendation 57

The Department for Education and Devolved Governments to ensure that child care professionals are provided with information/training to enhance understanding of the needs of Service children and the specific challenges of the military lifestyle.

Recommendation 58

The Armed Forces to encourage and facilitate military spouses/partners to train in child care and/or train in child minding if they wish to do so as supported by the Defence Childcare Strategy.

Postings and relocation: medium term

Recommendation 59

The three single Services to:

- take account of the nature of a non-serving partner's employment when relocating the Serving partner and to ensure that a period of time is allowed in which to manage a shift of employment (including retaining SFA)
- review the necessity for frequent postings every two or three years and consider whether the current military model could be redrawn to allow families to stay longer in one location or commutable area without compromising operational effectiveness.

Evaluation/research: medium term

Recommendation 60

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to encourage research to understand the needs of early years Armed Forces childcare and to discern the most appropriate evidence-based practice which should be employed by the sector to enhance the positive aspects of childcare provision, mitigate any risks, and encourage the sharing of good practice across the Armed Forces community.

Recommendation 61

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to ensure robust evaluation of the individual employment initiatives to assess the role they play in supporting non-serving partners, the resources they need, the numbers of partners they are able to support and the demand for using them, their effectiveness in promoting and sustaining employment and other outcomes in respect of partner satisfaction and wellbeing, the appropriate governance structures, and their impact on retention.

Recommendation 62

The Ministry of Defence, through the Partner Employment Steering Group, to develop greater understanding of what works best for which military partners/spouses, and foster collaboration and joined-up initiatives to enable better coordinated partner employment support across the nations of the UK.

Chapter 6

Health and Wellbeing: Looking After Military Families

The primary healthcare, including community mental health of Serving personnel is taken care of by Defence Medical Services (DMS) who provide an all-inclusive, comprehensive package of health services. The health of their family members, however, is a different story and reflects a mixed economy of provision. For families accompanying the Serving person overseas, primary healthcare for the whole family is delivered through DMS facilities or in combination with host nation health facilities and local contracts where appropriate. Overseas, DMS medical and dental staff are responsible for providing a comprehensive healthcare service broadly equivalent to that provided in England by the National Health Service. While the DMS provide healthcare for Serving personnel across the whole of the UK, their families experience healthcare delivered variously in the different nations.

The health of non-serving partners and children is the responsibility of the health services provided by the different nations of the UK. Each nation sets its own health policies and priorities independently. In England, the National Health Service England and Improvement (NHSEI), has the lead responsibility for military families and DMS facilities are used only on the small number of bases where there is a training value for the DMS healthcare staff and spare capacity exists. The health services in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all adhere to the principles of the National Health Service as set out in 1946, but the approaches in the four nations have diverged somewhat since devolution in the UK. Each nation uses General Practitioners (GPs) to provide primary healthcare and make referrals to secondary services, but while prescription medicines are provided free in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the majority of adults in England are required to pay for them.

In England, healthcare is provided mainly by NHS England which has now combined with NHS Improvement (NHSEI). Primary care is delivered by independent contractors including GPs, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists. The majority of secondary care is delivered in NHS facilities. Clinical Commissioning groups (CCGs) commission most of the hospital and community NHS services in the local areas for which they are responsible. The CCGs are overseen by NHSEI.

Healthcare in Scotland is mainly provided by Scotland's public health service, NHS Scotland. It provides healthcare to all permanent residents free at the point of use. Private healthcare is also available for those who wish to pay. Unlike in England, primary and secondary care are integrated and delivered through fourteen regional health boards which are subdivided into Health and Social Care Partnerships. The Health Boards are responsible for all the healthcare services in their local geographical area. Each Health Board has an Armed Forces and Veterans Champion who is expected to step in to support patients and resolve any issues. Healthcare policy and funding is the responsibility of the Scottish Government's Health Directorates. The Scottish Government has committed to providing free prescriptions, eye tests and free social care for people over 65.²¹⁰

Healthcare in Wales is mainly provided by NHS Wales, the Welsh public health service. NHS Wales provides healthcare to all permanent residents which is free at the point of use. Private healthcare is also available for those wishing to pay for it. Prescriptions are free for all patients registered with a GP in Wales. Healthcare services are delivered through seven local Health Boards and three NHS Trusts. Public Health Wales is the unified public health organisation in Wales. Community Health Councils are statutory lay bodies which represent the interest of the public in a local district. In April 2019, an £11 million fund was announced to transform health and social care services in North Wales, and mental health practitioners work with ambulance crews and in police control rooms. Early intervention services for children and older

²¹⁰ Mackinnon, S. (2019) *Scotland's NHS outperforms the rest of the UK – here's why*, Business for Scotland, www.businessforscotland.com

people are also being strengthened. For example, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board announced in May 2019 that it would be the first health board in Wales to extend its commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant by offering priority access to NHS Mental Health services for Service children with mental health issues in the same way as Armed Forces veterans where their conditions (mental and/or physical) are likely related to, or have resulted from their military service.

Healthcare in Northern Ireland is provided by Health and Social Care Northern Ireland and it does not use the term, 'national health service'. As elsewhere across the UK, healthcare is provided free at the point of use, and Health and Social Care also provides social care services, family and children's services, day care services and social work services. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has overall responsibility for health and social care services.

So while Serving personnel have all their primary healthcare needs met wherever they are posted and can expect continuity in their medical care, their partners and children are required to make their own arrangements via the national health services in whichever country they live in the UK unless they happen to be assigned to one of the DMS medical training bases or an overseas posting. This is a very different pattern of primary healthcare provision than most civilian families' experience. It is usual for all members of a civilian family to be registered at the same General Practice (GP) surgery and to use the same dental practice. Indeed, GPs were historically referred to as 'family doctors', an approach which many of the Defence medical staff we met valued and appreciated as having distinct benefits, especially in the treatment of family members with mental health or chronic conditions.

Not surprisingly, the evidence from the families who contributed to the review is somewhat polarised, with the Serving partners expressing general satisfaction with the quality and level of health provision from DMS and family members frequently finding access to healthcare challenging, largely due to the mobile military lifestyle. There are additional challenges for dual-serving partners and single Serving members of the military with children, where parents receive care via the DMS but have to find NHS provision in their local community for their children.

The Defence People Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2016–2021²¹¹ put forward a vision as follows:

- “ All Defence People to enjoy a state of positive physical and mental health and wellbeing, feeling connected with, and supported by the military and wider community, enabling them to contribute to the delivery of Defence outputs, including operational capability, as part of the whole Force. ”

It recognises that many members of the Armed Forces community, notably spouses, partners and their children rely on external services to access health and wellbeing support, in particular the provision of healthcare services.

In this chapter we examine the challenges partners, spouses and some Serving personnel face, and make a number of recommendations that we believe could improve their experiences in accessing and maintaining continuity of healthcare.

Serving personnel

The quality of care received by Serving personnel within the Armed Forces was described as being 'excellent' by those who contributed to our review, as these comments testify:

- “ I have no issues with the health services of the military. The help I have received through multiple injuries, operations and mental health has been outstanding. Even on operations I have always received high quality care and treatment. ”
- (Army Serving partner)

211 MOD (2016) *Defence People Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, Crown Copyright.

- “ The provision of healthcare within the Army is a very positive thing, especially given the length of wait times at civilian doctors' surgeries! Couldn't Army healthcare be extended to all members of the family? ”
- (Army Serving partner)

- “ Military provided health services are excellent...Health service provision for families is less good. ”
- (Army Serving partner)

- “ I have zero complaints about the healthcare I have been provided with whilst serving. It seems that no chances were taken or brushed off...every possible scenario would be looked at and tested for. ”
- (RM Serving partner)

This man went on to add:

- “ I am based at an RAF camp and ...Service families can come in to camp and be seen by doctors from the Regional Medical Centre, yet when my family and I have been based at Royal Marine camps we have had to go down to register with civilian doctors' surgeries...Why is this not implemented across the whole of defence? Is it just the RAF who do this? ”

While Serving personnel from all three single Services showered praise on the medical care they received and said they had been well looked after, most drew unfavourable comparisons with the medical services offered to their families, unless they happened to be stationed on one of the few bases where the DMS staff were able to see the whole family. We heard similar comments about the different experiences of healthcare at all the military bases we visited, including from the DMS staff. The experiences reported by Serving personnel contrast starkly with most of those recounted to us by their partners and children. We were keen, therefore, to understand why the experiences were seemingly so contrasting. Why were many families feeling negative about their healthcare provision while their Serving partners were so positive?

Challenges for military families

The split system of healthcare is a concern that has been raised by the three Families Federations for some years. The Army Families Federation's analysis of enquiries received between January and June 2018²¹² reported 693 enquiries about health and health-related issues in the UK and a further 91 overseas. This represented a higher number of health and additional needs enquiries compared to the same period in the previous year. The main challenges related to:

- registering with and accessing GPs and dentists
- waiting lists, particularly for mental health services
- continuity of treatment
- assessments for special educational needs and disability
- the timely transfer of patient records
- variations in healthcare provision in different localities and in the Devolved Governments.

In 2019,²¹³ the AFF reported a further rise of 9 per cent in health enquiries (786) during the first six months of the year. In respect of family members, the main issues related to mental health; overseas medical/dental concerns; waiting lists; and accessing dentists and doctors. The AFF noted that a key priority for 2019 was continuing to work with the NHS in England and with the Devolved Governments and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to explore options for improving the continuity of healthcare for families. All the concerns raised by Army families are heightened by the frequency of relocation and the need for family members to undergo repeated transitions to new healthcare practices.

From 1 April 2019, NHS England and Improvement took up its full duties to ensure that the NHS in England delivers better outcomes for patients within its available resources.²¹⁴ As a single national organisation,

212 AFF (2018) *Army Families' Concerns, Jan–June 2018*.

213 AFF (2019) *Army Families' Concerns, Jan–June 2019*.

214 NHS England, <https://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/armed-forces/#mh>

NHSEI is responsible for ensuring that services are commissioned in ways that support consistency in ensuring high standards of quality across the country. NHSEI works through its national, regional and area teams to discharge these responsibilities. Section 15 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 in England gives the Secretary of State the power to require NHSEI to commission certain services instead of clinical commissioning groups (CCGs). These include services or facilities for members of the Armed Forces and their families. These regulations define the scope of responsibility as being for any Serving member of the Armed Forces stationed in England and any family dependents who are registered with a Ministry of Defence, Defence Medical Services (DMS) Medical Centre. In addition, reservists in England who require NHS health services while mobilised will be the commissioning responsibility of NHSEI. For those stationed overseas who return to England to receive health services it is the responsibility of the NHS in England to provide them and will depend on what service is needed and where.

NHSEI is responsible for ensuring that services are commissioned to support consistently high standards of quality across the country, and this is in line with the commitments made by the Government under the Armed Forces Covenant. In terms of healthcare, the key principle is that Service families experience no disadvantage in accessing timely, comprehensive and effective healthcare. The families and dependants of serving Armed Forces members have health needs typical of their age and gender. Maternity services and children's health services in particular must be planned and commissioned with the needs of military families in mind where they are present in large numbers in a community.

The Partnership agreement between the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and NHSEI for the commissioning of health services for the Armed Forces sets out a partnership approach, which enables the Ministry of Defence to work with the NHS in England to plan and organise the delivery of healthcare for the Armed Forces community and support the best outcomes and experience for patients and their families and carers. As part of this commitment to work together to ensure safe and effective services, which improve health outcomes for the Armed Forces community, these services must:

- be tailored to the needs of the Armed Forces community, in accordance with the Armed Forces Covenant
- ensure that patients experience a seamless transition between services, minimising any risks associated with accessing care commissioned and provided to the Armed Forces community
- provide as a minimum the same standards and quality of care that can be expected by the civilian community.

In order to support fair access to treatment, the Armed Forces Covenant sets out a number of health commitments for the Armed Forces community. They include the following:

- the Armed Forces community should enjoy the same standard of, and access to healthcare as that received by any other UK citizen in the area in which they live
- family members should retain their place on any NHS waiting list, if moved around the UK due to the Service person being posted.

There are very clear guidelines in respect of the healthcare military families can expect to receive. However, our review shows that access to healthcare varies across the country and between the four nations of the UK, and families often feel disadvantaged. Moreover, we were informed that many family members lose their relative place on waiting lists when they move areas. Clearly, retaining one's place on waiting lists is a complex expectation as much will depend on the actual size of the waiting list in each location. The aim would appear to be best expressed as enabling some element of parity/equivalence when families move.

The expectation needs to be carefully explained to families. We were informed by the DHSC that Top Tips²¹⁵ briefings about providing NHS care to the families of Serving personnel are sent out to primary and secondary care providers. The briefing states that those in the Armed Forces and their families should not be disadvantaged in accessing health services in the area in which they live. It also lists the additional pressures that military families experience that may make them more vulnerable. The list includes the stress associated with the cycle of deployment; repeated periods of family separation; social isolation, additional

²¹⁵ DHSC Top Tips for providing NHS Care to the Families of Serving members of the British Armed Forces. NHS England.

caring responsibilities; and bereavement. The briefing also advises GPs when they refer a military family member for treatment to state that the patient is a member of the Armed Forces community. GPs are also charged with ensuring continuity of care when family members move to a new area and that there is no disruption in planned medication or treatment. Importantly the briefing states:

“ Service families on average move every two to three years, however they should not be disadvantaged by losing their place on any NHS waiting list when this happens, (as stated in the Armed Forces Covenant).²¹⁶ ”

Moreover, the briefing suggests that GP practices are encouraged to appoint an Armed Forces champion to act as a point of contact for both staff and patients. It would appear that not all healthcare providers have taken note of the points made in the briefings. We return to the issue of continuity of care later in the chapter.

Accessing GPs and dentists

There is a good deal of evidence from spouses/partners who contributed to the review who had found it very difficult to register with a local GP when they moved to a new area. This difficulty was recorded in many replies to the Call for Evidence and was raised with us by families and by the Chain of Command during our visits to military bases:

“ When my wife and I moved to the area, my wife struggled to register with a GP practice and a dental centre. This was due to high demand in the area. Having registered with both she still struggles to get appointments in a relatively quick time. ”
(RN Serving partner)

This man told us that while he is away on deployment and his wife is complaining to him that she cannot get an appointment for herself or their daughter, then he stops thinking about doing his job properly and starts worrying about his family. He described this as a huge distraction for him. His solution:

“ If my family had access to the medical and dental facilities that I have access to this would stop there being an issue. ”

We know that some civilian families also find it difficult to get appointments at their GP practice but for military families this experience contrasts starkly with that of Serving partners who have no difficulty accessing the DMS. The problem, therefore, can seem even greater in comparison.

Other Serving partners pointed to the different experiences their family had endured:

“ The medical facilities in Catterick Garrison are second to none. I live very close to the medical centres. However, my wife is required to register at the nearest civilian dental centre which is some miles away. ”
(Army Serving partner)

“ My wife invests hours in reapplying for medical and dental services every time we move. ”
(Army Serving partner)

Several people related the time spent 'running around' to find a doctor and a dentist every time they moved. Some put their names on waiting lists and others simply gave up:

“ Our main issues have been finding an NHS dentist. Frequent moves mean joining waiting lists over and over again. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

²¹⁶ Ibid.

“ My children and I don't have an NHS dentist because they either only take private patients or are full. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

This wife made the strong plea that

“ Defence health services should be offered to children and non-service partners. ”

Difficulty gaining access to a dentist was a common theme in the Call for Evidence and in all our visits to military bases. One mother said she had waited well over two years to get a dental appointment. The shortfall in NHS dentists is clearly a national problem faced by civilian families as well. The difference for a military family, however, is that because of the frequent moves it is almost impossible to reach the top of a waiting list before having to start all over again in another area. One mother told us that because of this she had not seen a dentist in six years. Commanding Officers on military bases are acutely aware of this problem and expressed their powerlessness to do anything about it.

Some families perceived that their transitory lifestyle meant that they were 'discriminated' against:

“ We [families] need to have access to dentists and not be discriminated against because we move around. Mine and my daughter's teeth have suffered as when we have moved it's always been virtually impossible to register with a dentist. When you do eventually find one you are on the waiting list for up to six months or more. One dentist in Lancashire wouldn't even take you on as an NHS patient if you were part of the Army. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

“ My husband has access to free dental care and onsite medical provision with every posting. Meanwhile I have to scabble around signing myself and our children up to a new doctor's surgery and dentist with every move. I went for about three years without seeing a dentist because of waiting lists and house moves. At every posting there are medical professionals available to the serving person, why can't these be made available to the families? We are being forced to move house yet no provisions are made to assist our transition. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

The difficulty in registering with NHS doctors is exacerbated by the relative isolation of some bases. This means that families might have to travel some distance to see a doctor or dentist, even if they can find one. Since not all non-serving partners are able to drive or have a car they are reliant on public transport, which can be poor. We heard accounts of mothers and children taking long bus journeys to see a dentist or doctor which meant mothers taking time off work and children being taken out of school. Welfare Officers in one garrison in Wiltshire which was not isolated but situated such that families had to travel in one direction to access GPs and another direction to access dentists, had considered whether there should be some sort of military transport available for families to use or whether they could make a case for free bus passes to be given to military partners who have to spend a considerable amount of money on bus fares every time they access facilities off the patch. Many partners in this garrison are not able to drive or do not have access to a car. On many occasions the comments from welfare staff were along the following lines:

“ We could improve these areas if the medical services that we receive were extended to spouses and children. With work schedules and the ferocious demand for doctors' appointments means that especially in the case of children, an appointment can be more thorough and hopefully deliver a much more accurate and speedy diagnosis. ”
(Army Welfare Officer)

Families who had experienced an overseas posting were keen to point out just how helpful the medical services had been while they were abroad and that it had been a shock having to search for primary care practitioners on return to the UK.

“ We [the family] had clinics and a CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service] service in Germany run by SSAFA and physio on camp. We lost all this coming back to the UK. Children get pushed around when you come back and have to start tests all over again. It's a real problem. ”
(Army Serving partner)

Registering with a GP was found to be even more difficult for dual-serving couples and single Serving parents who need to find a civilian practice for their children. We were given examples of GP surgeries refusing to register children unless at least one parent was also registered with the practice:

“ Trying to find the children a GP and dentist is a challenge with no parent registered locally. It takes a lot of running around and if I was not a medic I wonder if I could have negotiated the system. ”
(RN dual-serving parent)

It also means that one of the Serving parents has to find time from their duties to take a child sometimes some considerable distance to a civilian practice. A dual-serving naval family said that one of them had to travel some 20 miles in order to take their child to a dentist. While this may be the case for civilian families also, Serving parents pointed out that it is not always possible for them to take time out from military duties to take children to medical appointments during the day.

We have been told by the DHSC that GP regulations were updated two years ago to ensure that children can be registered with a GP when their parent(s) is registered with DMS. It is clear that this regulation has not been fully understood or acknowledged by some GPs in England. It was suggested to us that it is not helpful for children to be registered completely separately from their parents: a point raised by DMS medical officers on military bases and welfare staff. There is considerable risk to the child from being registered as an 'orphan' from the parents' registration as the GP is unable to provide any oversight of any child protection concerns, and these are just as important in military families as they are in civilian families. Registering children and their parent(s) with the same GP allows any child protection or safeguarding issues to be flagged up much earlier as the whole family is being cared for by the same team.

An Army Welfare Officer also indicated that:

“ Boarding school children are disadvantaged regarding registering with local doctors when returning home during school holidays. Every holiday we are required to register children as temporary patients and experience rude and uncooperative personnel in the surgery. ”
(Army Welfare Officer)

The Army staff at the Infantry Battle School in Wales believe that a discussion is needed about whether local civilian GPs could be allowed to come into camp to hold a surgery for family members given the shortage of GPs in the area and the distance families have to travel to access a GP and collect medication. In their view, there would be a case for being granted rural practice status which allows GPs to hold surgeries in remote villages, run their own pharmacy and to dispense medication. This would be very beneficial for military families, especially as many spouses and partners based in Brecon have no transport of their own:

“ Driving is essential here. We have a medical centre but no care for families. A pregnant wife cannot get help locally and has to travel 30 miles for check-ups. There is a mental health nurse in the camp but there is no support for family members. ”
(Army staff, IBS Brecon)

Access to medical practices presents serious difficulties for some families. The 2019 FamCAS survey found that the majority (93%) of respondents to the survey had required access to GP services in the past year, and 83 per cent had required dental treatment.²¹⁷ The survey suggests that the majority of those requiring GP services were able to access them but those seeking dental treatment experienced greater difficulty. Nearly a quarter of those needing dental treatment found access difficult and 10 per cent were unable to access any treatment. Families posted overseas were able to access dental treatment without any difficulty

²¹⁷ FamCAS Survey (2019) op.cit.

while military families living in Wales experienced the most difficulty. The difficulties about accessing GPs and dentists were repeated at every military base we visited across the UK apart from those few where family members were able to use Defence medical services on the base: RAF Lossiemouth, for example, has isolated station status which allows family members to access medical appointments.

An Army Senior Medical Officer who had previously worked in Germany where families are included in the Defence health system said that he would like to see a more comprehensive offer to families in the UK. Although there would be capacity issues at the present time the provision of healthcare for all the family should be a realistic vision for the future, especially in respect of mental health services. DMS doctors believe that there are significant benefits associated with families being able to access their services: partners and children do not have to search for a new doctor every time they move; the healthcare facilities are on the spot; and the Defence doctors are able to get to know the whole family, which can be very helpful when the Serving person is sick and needs family support, or there are mental health concerns in the family. We agree with this view and urge that consideration is given to the development of an integrated model of healthcare as is offered to military families in the US for example.

Furthermore, DMS staff have suggested that a more holistic medical offer is regarded as being attractive in the recruitment of medical officers in the Armed Forces as it allows them to treat a larger variety of conditions, including those specific to children. We have been told that there is a shortage of doctors in the Armed Forces and a more inclusive approach to caring for the whole family would almost certainly increase recruitment and retention.

The military health system in the US provides the oversight for all military medical programmes, including the medical care of military family members. The three single Services in the US each have medical departments that operate hospitals, health and dental clinics on US military installations across the world. These are coordinated by a TRICARE healthcare system. We understand that this holistic approach to providing healthcare to military families is much valued. It ensures timely access and choice.

We acknowledge that arguments for more holistic care for Armed Forces families are complex in the UK as families have access to a free national health service in each nation, albeit provided somewhat differently across the Devolved Governments. As we have seen, the DMS already provides care for families at selected bases in the UK. This primarily supports the training of new General Practitioners and Primary Care Nurses and allows DMS primary care clinicians to maintain their family medicine skills in order to remain suitably experienced to be assigned overseas where family support is necessary or to deploy to operational theatres where treatment of the local population may be required. In addition, we were informed by staff in DMS that in a limited number of UK locations, DMS doctors have provided primary healthcare to families when civilian primary care services have not had the necessary capacity. This integrated system of medical care was regarded by many families contributing to the review as being enormously helpful since it enables doctors to be aware of the issues facing families in respect of the health and wellbeing of each member, an advantage which is lost when non-serving family members are obliged to register with a completely different practice. Furthermore, DMS staff indicated that it is extremely difficult to ensure that families receive the necessary support from the Chain of Command if civilian GPs feel unable to share concerns with DMS staff.

The Catterick Medical Model

It would seem that there are moves towards a more integrated approach in the UK which is much welcomed. The NHS needs to replace its health centre building in Catterick Garrison and the MOD's current healthcare facilities there are not considered to be fit for purpose. This has led to the development of an innovative healthcare system which will cater for all the family. The Catterick Integrated Care Centre scheme²¹⁸ aims to provide safe and effective primary care to some local residents in Richmondshire, including Service personnel, veterans, reservists, families of Serving personnel and the wider civilian local community. It represents an opportunity for the NHS in England and the MOD to work collaboratively to deliver a unique model of healthcare that meets the needs of both the military and civilian populations, offering high quality healthcare and value for money. By working together there will be many positive benefits including the sharing of best practice, knowledge, education and training between Defence

²¹⁸ Information from the DHSC, meetings with NHS England and DHSC officials and our visit to Catterick Garrison.

medical and civilian doctors. It will operate a flexible delivery model to meet changing demands and a purpose-built facility. The scheme should be operational in 2022/3: a location has been identified for the co-location of primary care services; and NHSEI and MOD are making an investment in the Catterick partnership model of healthcare.

Since NHSEI and MOD are already making an investment in this partnership model of healthcare, other military bases have told us that they are keen to roll out this model. It would seem to offer a constructive way forward for developing an integrated model of health provision for the whole family. It should also go a considerable way to removing the somewhat unhelpful distinction between the Serving person and their family in the provision of care and offers a valuable holistic approach. This is to be much welcomed. We recognise that DMS doctors currently have a capacity issue and would need to increase the number of doctors within the military estate to include family members. The Catterick model would seem to address this capacity concern.

We are aware that the Catterick Integrated Care Centre project is in its early stages and it is not the only model. Garrisons at Aldershot and Larkhill provide different styles of partnership. These partnerships may well offer an exciting method of sharing best practice and may be a model for other locations to follow in the future. We understand that these models probably represent the most achievable way of providing more holistic care for military families. However, we acknowledge that the infrastructure costs are significant and will need new funding, not only for these larger projects but also for the smaller extensions to existing facilities to cope with the additional demand. Nevertheless, we believe that the various models for providing more integrated care should be pursued and evaluated.

We understand that the MOD, UK Departments of Health Partnership Board and the UK Service Families Health Working Group, which sits underneath it, are focused on considering how to improve healthcare support for families, particularly those who are more vulnerable, in line with the Armed Forces Covenant which states that Service families should not be disadvantaged. This may involve making greater use of specific healthcare pathways, similar to the model used with Veterans. The MOD has confirmed that it will continue to work with the NHS in England to improve access generally.

NHSEI has worked with the Army Families Federation to produce a guide relating to orthodontic treatment specifically for Armed Forces families, which has been posted on the Families Federations' websites. In other parts of England, for example in Wiltshire, Kent and Sussex, the local Clinical Commissioning Groups are working with the Armed Forces Military Alliance to focus on improving health services for military families. There are a number of positive initiatives around the military estate which now need some consistent planning for the future, with clarity about who is responsible for which aspects of delivery. Accountability is critical.

Awareness of the health needs of Armed Forces families

A number of family members and medical officers commented that there is a general lack of understanding amongst civilian GPs and dentists about the health needs of military families and the kind of lifestyle they lead. Better understanding should make it easier for family members to access primary care services. We saw a number of leaflets prepared by NHSEI but they referred to Armed Forces veterans and not to Serving members and their families. In short, there needs to be better education and information provided for all members of the healthcare profession and for families.

We understand that military and veterans' health needs and information about military families have been a part of the national curriculum for GPs across the UK for the past four years and a part of the qualifying examination for membership of the Royal College of General Practitioners. The Health Education England e-learning Armed Forces community modules are available to all, including GPs and GP staff and are being updated. Nevertheless, it is clear from our review that not all GPs are aware of the issues associated with a military lifestyle. There is a need to ensure that all GPs and not just those who have qualified in the past four years are aware of the requirement. A number of families said that they had seen doctors and other medical professionals who had never heard of the Armed Forces Covenant when challenged about family members, especially children, going to the bottom of NHS and CAMHS waiting lists when moving into another area.

NHSEI, together with the Royal College of General Practitioners, have launched the veteran friendly GP practice accreditation scheme to help improve the care and treatment of UK Armed Forces veterans in England. This is an NHS Long-Term Plan priority, which commits to rolling out the scheme across England by 2023. We understand that by early 2020 some 800 GP practices had signed up. Whilst accreditation is voluntary, it is strongly encouraged as evidence shows that GPs are unsure of how many ex-forces patients are registered with their practices and want more information and guidance on how to meet their health needs. There is also a need to improve the identification and coding of veterans in GP computer systems, with a linked aim of further increasing awareness and understanding of their health requirements and ensuring appropriate referrals which, in some cases, will be to dedicated NHS services for ex-forces patients. There are a number of examples of good practice relating to veterans in GP surgeries across the country. We believe that this accreditation scheme must be reinforced to ensure that it includes the families of Serving members of the Armed Forces.

In a paper in Pulse,²¹⁹ a magazine for GPs, Dr Jonathan Leach, a GP and retired Army Colonel and Chair of the NHS England Armed Forces and their Families Clinical Reference Group, listed a number of top tips for GPs as to how they should work with veterans, all of which would be pertinent to looking after Service families and should be extended to this population of patients. Dr Leach also recognised that:

the families of Service personnel may feel disconnected from the local population and can be disadvantaged as a consequence of the need to frequently move house. This often means having to arrange a new school for their children, register with a different NHS GP and dentist, and sometimes rearrange hospital appointments upon moving. ... Feedback from patients is that frequently NHS care works well and patients receive high quality care, but a constant theme is that NHS staff do not necessarily understand the differences between members of the Armed Forces community and civilian equivalents.²²⁰

This is clearly evidenced in our review. It is also highlighted in the FANDF review of families with a member with additional needs or disabilities²²¹ which recommends that mental health specialists could benefit from better awareness of the mental health needs of military families.

Dr Leach referred to an e-learning package launched by Health Education England and NHSEI designed to address and highlight both the similarities and differences between members of the Armed Forces community and their civilian counterparts, help increase understanding of the Armed Forces population, and to improve care and treatment. The free programme which is being updated includes six sessions, which cover current Serving personnel, the families of Serving personnel and veterans. It is accredited for continuing professional development, and all health and social care staff who are likely to see members of the Armed Forces Community are encouraged to complete it. This should be a mandatory requirement.

It has been suggested by the NHS England Public Participation Involvement Group for the Armed Forces that all GP practices, particularly those that look after Armed Forces families, should identify a member of the practice to be an Armed Forces Care Coordinator who would be the point of contact for partners and children of military families, which will align with the Royal College of General Practitioners GP accreditation process currently being rolled out. The Care Coordinator would be responsible for the health, social care and education in the case of military children with complex health needs, including dental treatment. This is extremely important for families when the Serving partner is away from the family home and/or on deployment. We are uncertain as to whether it is reasonable or necessary for each GP practice to appoint an Armed Forces Care Coordinator but believe that there should be a nominated person in this role in practices in or near each military base for families to consult if they need help accessing primary care services.

219 Leach, J. (2016) *What GPs can do to help ex-military patients*. Pulse.

220 Leach, J. (2016) *I salute the new e-learning programme*. NHS Blog, 28 June 2016.

221 FANDF (2020) op.cit.

Mental health: care and wellbeing

The 2019 FamCAS survey identifies that 19 per cent of families had required mental health treatment in the past year, an increase of 5 percentage points since 2016. Officers' families were less likely to seek mental health treatment (14%) than families of Other Ranks (21%). About half of the 19 per cent seeking mental health treatment, had either experienced difficulties in accessing treatment (34%) or were unable to access it at all (17%).²²² The proportion of families experiencing difficulty in accessing mental health services has increased since 2015.

We understand from NHSEI and welfare staff at military bases that there has been a notable rise in mental health issues, particularly relating to military children. One of the key challenges is the long waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS) in England so that by the time a child gets to the top of the list they may well be moving on to another area. This means that they will fall to the bottom of the list and that assessments will have to be redone. This should not happen and they should be able to transfer to the relevant place on the waiting list when they move to a new area. The evidence from families in the review is that the policy is not being implemented as expected.

In its 2018 Evidence of Need, the Naval Families Federation reported that one in eight 5–19 year olds in Serving Naval families in England had at least one mental disorder when assessed in 2017.²²³ Emotional disorders including anxiety and depression were the most prevalent. The rates of mental health issues increased with age. These statistics include children of Service families although data relating to the mental health of Service children are not collected as a separate category.

A study published in 2016²²⁴ aimed to establish the prevalence of serious illness and disability among the children of military families. Information was provided by parents for 610 children. Overall one in ten children had experienced emotional or behavioural difficulties, although fathers were more likely to report difficulties than mothers. Determining accurate rates of illness pertaining to children in military families is far from straightforward, however. This study did not have access to clinical data and relied on parental reports, but it indicates the need for further investigation as to whether military children have higher prevalence of serious illness and/or mental health conditions than their civilian counterparts. It also suggests that both parents should be involved in medical appointments with their children wherever possible and not just mothers.

A NFF survey of mental health in Naval families²²⁵ reported that 11 per cent of the 540 members of the Naval community who responded to the survey had sought help from mental health services for a child or young person in their family. Of these, 55 per cent had sought help through a GP; 49 per cent had sought help through their child's school; and 37 per cent received a referral to CAMHS. Of significance is that only 16 per cent of those seeking NHS help were certain that their child was recorded as being a member of an Armed Forces family, and some 70 per cent said that their GP or other NHS professional was not sufficiently understanding of their circumstances as a military family.

Not only does this survey underline the importance of GPs identifying members of Armed Forces families, but also the need for GPs and other medical professionals to receive training about the specific experiences of military families and the potential impact on health. Because many children and parents in military families regard their experiences as 'normal' they do not always raise issues with medical professionals that could be significant for their mental health. The survey also reported that parents believe there is insufficient support for children who self-harm and there is not enough information provided about where to go for help.

We received a number of detailed responses from military parents who were frustrated by the difficulty in securing mental health support for their children:

222 FamCAS Survey (2019) op.cit.

223 NFF (2018) *Summary of NFF Assessment of Need*, December 2018.

224 Khera, C. K., Stevelink, S.A.M., and Fear, N.T. (2016) *Parental Reports of Serious Illness and Disability among children aged 3–16 years from Military Families*, BMJ Military Health; see also, Fisher, S. D. (2017) *Paternal mental health: why is it relevant?* American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine, 11(3), 200–211.

225 NFF (2018) *Royal Navy Families Mental Health Survey*, NFF.

“ I have first-hand experience of trying to secure mental health education and social support for my daughter who aged twelve was diagnosed with autism. Of note is the exacerbation of her mental health symptoms every time we moved and each time my husband was deployed ...we have been to hell and back to secure the right services for her to ensure her survival, safety and wellbeing. I realised that the professionals working with her had no concept of what the stresses and struggles might be for a military family. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

This mother went on to say that in her view there is a lack of service provision for children with additional needs and a lack of evidence about good practice for professionals working with military families. She also highlighted the disparity in care between that provided to her husband and that given to his family:

“ Military families live in an unusual healthcare system. My husband can access psychiatric care whenever or wherever he might need it through the military. Military families cannot. Military children cannot access any sort of psychiatric care in any timely way. There are disadvantages as ... they often fall through waiting lists due to frequent relocations and the current NHS is under such strain and mental health resources are few. My daughter has been unable to secure any mental health provision since aged 18 and moving from child to adult services. ”

“ This is a massive issue! My children are under paediatrics, CAMHS and other health professionals. When you move they close the case and then you have to go all the way back through the system which takes forever. By the time you get in, you're moving again! There needs to be either health professionals specially for military children with extra needs or proper continuity through the NHS. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

Military families also highlighted the stigma of discussing mental health issues which can act as a barrier to seeking help. We were told by a number of people that families are scared to admit to mental health issues in case this has a negative impact on the Serving person's career prospects. The NFF have also commented in their assessment of need report that children and young people with mental health issues may feel that they need to protect the non-serving parent from additional worry so are reluctant to admit to feelings of anxiety and depression.²²⁶ Young people are very aware that when one parent is away from home all the responsibility falls on the other parent so there is a tendency to minimise or hide any problems the young person may be having. Parents also feel inhibited by the perception of stigma and are reluctant to disclose mental health concerns. A non-serving partner with two children told us:

“ I have been on medication for mental health problems for over four years, and without a doubt my husband's military service puts additional strain and impacts on my mental health. While much of this is part and parcel of being in the military (separation, constant changes of plan etc), I think there could be and should be more help provided for partners and children. My husband too, though he has never felt able to seek medical help due to concerns that he would lose his medical category, has had periods when his mental health has been affected. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

This mother told us that her husband had handed in his notice and was leaving the navy although 'he loves being in the navy' rather than admit there was a problem. She felt strongly that there should be dedicated mental health professionals on bases who are trained to support both the Serving person and their family, and also an app or online course for military couples who are struggling with issues that are threatening to break up the family:

“ I will be very sad to no longer be a military family, but I would rather we stayed together as a family and were out of the military, than ended up separated. ”

This couple had decided that the toll on their health and relationship was such that leaving the Armed Forces was the only sensible decision. We look in more depth at the decisions taken to leave the Services and the transition to civilian life in the next chapter.

²²⁶ NFF (2018) op.cit.

The NFF has pointed to the association between family functioning and the presence of mental health problems in children and young people. While the Armed Forces Mental Health Strategy focuses on the Serving person, it is crucial that mental health issues need to be considered in the context of the whole family as mental ill-health tends to impact on every member of the family. It is not possible or helpful to separate out the Serving partner from the rest of the family when addressing mental health issues. Non-serving partners, for example, described the anxiety, depression and unhappiness they sometimes experienced when their partner was away. The NFF's 2018 mental health survey found that 65 per cent of spouses/partners in Royal Navy families felt that being part of an Armed Forces family had a negative impact on their mental health. Children in these families will be aware of this impact. More research is needed into the impact of military service on the mental health of spouses, partners and children.

In the general population it is widely documented that paternal depression is associated with adolescent depression and anxiety and, in turn, adolescent depression and anxiety are associated with both paternal and maternal mental health.²²⁷ In other words, mental health issues reverberate throughout the family, and more research is needed to understand how mental health issues in military families are affecting the children and young people in those families, and how the young people's own mental health concerns impact on the wellbeing of their parents and siblings.

A systematic review²²⁸ which looked at the association between military parental PTSD and child outcomes in 20 studies, highlighted the consensus that in active duty military parents, parental PTSD symptoms have a negative effect on children's social and emotional adjustment. Moreover, this review delineated several ways in which PTSD symptoms may directly influence the parent-child relationship, by linking specific symptoms of PTSD to areas of difficulty. However, the studies reviewed did not provide any insight as to whether child outcomes are impacted differently if the active duty parent is the mother or the father. In the light of increasing numbers of women in active military service, this is an important area that future research needs to address.

The SPACE study at Kings College, London, has examined the impact on children and young people in UK Service families who have a father who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).²²⁹ The findings tentatively suggest that fathers' depression was associated with affective and anxiety disorders in adolescents, and impaired family functioning. The findings from a range of studies would suggest that ensuring adults and children in military families have adequate and timely access to mental health services is essential for the wellbeing of the whole family. From the evidence we received adequate and timely access is not always provided, in part because mental ill-health still carries a stigma, and much remains hidden.

A report by the Centre for Social Justice²³⁰ emphasised that families are self-reinforcing units: what benefits one member is often good for the whole family. So supporting and promoting the health of spouses and partners and their children adds to the resilience of the whole family. It is well known that poor mental health can undermine people's ability to work effectively and has negative consequences for the entire family. Partners can feel the strain of Service life and this undermines the stability of the family unit. Serving partners may also experience their own mental health issues.

Between 2007 and 2013 up to 11,000 Serving members were diagnosed with mental health conditions which included depression and PTSD.²³¹ Their mental health problems also impact on their families as the SPACE study has shown. Research has also shown that good mental health for the non-serving partners is vital in supporting the Serving members through difficult periods. If partners are also experiencing poor mental health then they are less likely to be able to offer the support the Serving partner needs. This makes a strong case for ensuring that non-serving members of a military family also receive good mental healthcare and treatment.

²²⁷ Fisher (2017) op. cit.

²²⁸ Creech and Misca (2017) op. cit.

²²⁹ Fear, N., Reed, R., Rowe, S., Burdett, H., Pernet, D., Mahar, A., and Wessely, S. (2018) *Impact of paternal deployment to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and paternal post-traumatic stress disorder on the children of military fathers*, The British Journal of Psychiatry, 212(6), 347–355. Fear, N.T., Leightley, D., and Wickersham, A. (2018) *Understanding the Impact of Having a Military Father on Adolescent Children: the SPACE study*, Kings College, London.

²³⁰ Centre for Social Justice (2016) *Military Families and Transition*, CSJ.

²³¹ Defence Analytical Services and Advice (2015) *Annual Mental Health Report*.

A recent systematic review²³² of wellbeing in military children compared with civilian children set out to explore the relationship between military family membership (e.g. parent or sibling in the military) and child wellbeing compared to non-military connected controls. Nine studies undertaken in the US and published between 2007 and 2016, were identified, eight were cross-sectional and all of them utilised self-report measures administered in US school settings. The review found that, on the whole

- 6 military connected youth were not found to have poorer wellbeing than civilian children, although those with deployed parents and the older military-connected children were at greater risk of some adjustment difficulties (e.g. substance use, externalising behaviour). Although only assessed in two studies, having a sibling in the military and experiencing sibling deployment was statistically significantly associated with substance use and depressive symptoms.²³³ 9

The results from the review indicate that some children from military families may require additional support, and the authors suggest that given the adverse impact of poor mental health on child functioning, additional research is needed to ensure appropriate, evidence-based interventions are available for youth in military families.

A meta-analysis of parental military deployment as a risk factor for children's mental health²³⁴ describes the association between deployment of at least one parent and the impact on children's mental health as assessed by depression/anxiety, hyperactivity/attention problems, and aggressive behaviour. It was based on US studies published between 2001 and 2017. The findings indicated that:

- 6 children of deployed parents have higher rates of mental health problems compared to civilian or normative samples as assessed by several measures. Significant differences were seen on some of the comparisons, with effect sizes that reached values ranging from small to moderate. The largest effect sizes were found for the internalizing symptoms of anxiety and depression, which would arise from the existence of fears for the deployed parent's safety. There is also a possibility that the burdens and worries of the remaining parent are somehow transmitted to children, whether in actual words or via non-verbal indications...Children have reported that following deployment of one parent, the other parent shows increases in depression, anger, and stress.²³⁵ 9

The authors concluded that:

- 6 Parental military deployment was found to have a negative impact on children's mental health as indicated by assessment of several psychopathological symptoms.²³⁶ 9

Although the analysis has several limitations and was based on US families, the findings nevertheless offer some insight into children's mental health issues that are closely connected with military life in most other countries and suggest the need for interventions designed to prevent and support military children:

- 6 The increased risk to children whose parents are in the military needs to be addressed by the healthcare system as well as through preventive approaches. The results of this meta-analysis stress the continuous need for awareness, especially with regard to internalizing symptoms, of how children in this situation are coping in everyday life, in both family and school settings.²³⁷ 9

A number of parents in our review described the level of anxiety experienced by some children and young people during periods of deployment. Furthermore, some non-serving parents talked about their own mental health issues and their own difficulties in managing separation from their Serving partner.

232 Williamson, V., Stevelink, S. A. M., Da Silva, E. and Fear, N.T. (2018) *A systematic review of wellbeing in children: a comparison of military and civilian families*, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 12(1), 46.

233 Ibid. p1.

234 Cunitz, K., Döhlitzsch, C., Kösters, M., Willmund, G-D., Zimmermann, P., Bühler, A.H., Feger, J.M., Ziegenhain, U. and Kölich, M. (2019) *Parental military deployment as risk factor for children's mental health: a meta-analytical review*, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 13(1), 26.

235 Ibid. p7.

236 Ibid. p8.

237 Ibid.

It is highly likely that these concerns and issues will have had an impact on their children. The research on military families shows clearly that mental health issues can be triggered by the military lifestyle and deployments which can impact on every family member. Studies have looked at the impact of military families with a Serving parent deployed to the conflict areas of Iraq and Afghanistan. A study of UK military families²³⁸ found that paternal post-traumatic stress disorder was associated with hyperactivity among children overall and specifically among younger children and boys. These results also highlight the importance of ensuring appropriate evidence-based interventions for military families.

The Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017–2022²³⁹ recognises that mental health problems are the second most common cause of medical downgrading and discharge in the Armed Forces. The strategy emphasises health promotion and prevention activities to prevent mental ill-health, in addition to early identification of mental health issues and expert treatment. In his Preface to the Strategy, Lt General Nugee, the then Chief of Defence People, wrote:

- 6 The next five years will see a period of sustained focus on mental health and wellbeing. We need to engage everyone in Defence, at all levels, if we are to maintain a mentally healthy population. ... Working with our partners outside of Defence is critical to getting this right.²⁴⁰ 9

The strategy recognises that Defence People includes family members as well as those Serving, that mental health provision for them is provided by the NHS, and that the Armed Forces Covenant embodies a commitment to ensure that Serving personnel and their families are not disadvantaged. Nevertheless, the stigmas associated with mental ill-health remains a negative factor in the quest to tackle and prevent mental health problems. This is a challenge across the whole of society, despite increasingly extensive and high profile public campaigns to bring the issues into the open and reduce stigma and perceived prejudice. The stigma is not specific to the military, but admitting to mental health issues does not sit easily with a military culture which promotes personal strength, courage and resilience. The MOD strategy requires the Chain of Command to endorse the approach to promote, prevent, detect, and treat mental health issues and to open the dialogue on mental health and wellbeing. Positive perceptions of leadership and better unit cohesion are associated with lower levels of stigma and a willingness to discuss difficult issues.²⁴¹ The strategy states that:

- 6 Tackling stigma is one of the highest priorities for MOD health promotion activity.²⁴² 9

There is no doubt that the MOD strategy has galvanised considerable actions and initiatives to meet its objectives within the military with Serving personnel, but it is clearly a greater challenge to extend the approach to Service families. Increasing the awareness of mental health issues, preventative strategies, the early signs and how to respond, as well as communicating the extent of available support to family members, is a much harder task. Engaging family members, particularly spouses and partners, remains an urgent challenge.

Our review suggests that not many of the non-serving partners who contributed were aware of the measures being taken within the Services to tackle and support mental health issues nor did they appear to be aware of the range of support available to them and their Serving partners. While it is clearly important to support Serving personnel with their mental health and wellbeing, it is equally important to ensure that spouses and partners are supported not only to be able to assist in the promotion of positive mental health of the Serving partner but also to receive the appropriate care and support for their own mental health and wellbeing. There needs to be a systemic and holistic approach to mental health support.

238 Fear, N.T., Reed, R.V., Rowe, S., Burdett, H., Pernet, D., Mahar, A., Iversen, A.C., Ramchandani, P., Stein, A. and Wessely, S. (2018) *Impact of paternal deployment to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and paternal post-traumatic stress disorder on the children of military fathers*, *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (2018) 212, p347–355.

239 MOD (2017) *Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017–2022*, MOD.

240 Ibid. p4.

241 Jones, M., Campion, B., Keeling, M., and Greenberg, N., (2015) *Cohesion, Leadership, Mental Health Stigmatisation and Perceived Barriers to Care in UK Military Personnel*, *Journal of Mental Health* 27(1):10–18.

242 MOD (2017) op.cit. p17.

Good leadership, which the MOD strategy highlights as a key ingredient, needs to extend to consideration of the Serving person's family circumstances. We welcome the focus on health promotion and education, as did several Serving personnel in the Call for Evidence, and the understanding that:

- Good career management will include employment, leadership development, opportunities and geographical and family considerations. It will embrace new and modern ways of working such as flexible working.²⁴³

Families will welcome an approach that takes account of their needs and finds better ways of supporting and communicating with them. We look more closely at communication concerns in Chapter 8 and Chapter 10. It is heartening to note a clear statement in the MOD strategy that:

- Military families are one of the most important contributors to the military effectiveness of Serving personnel and are pivotal to successful transition from deployment.²⁴⁴

Partners and spouses commented frequently to us that the periods before and after deployments are particularly stressful. Children and young people also spoke about wanting more information about deployments and what their parent would be doing. They too find the transitions difficult to handle. While the strategy refers to the importance of deployment briefings and post-operational decompression, it is not clear how family members can be involved, especially when they are living remotely from the base. A number of RN spouses/partners pointed out that they miss out on briefings because they are not living on the patch or near the base. Modern technology ought to be able to provide a solution to communication issues in these circumstances.

While Defence Medical Services provide comprehensive mental healthcare for Serving personnel the same easy access to mental healthcare may not exist in the community, as we have seen with respect of access to CAMH services for example. Moreover, if GPs are not aware of the stresses experienced by military families they may not pick up on the need for specialist treatment and support. A study published in 2019²⁴⁵ examined mental health outcomes, probable depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol consumption among UK military spouses/partners, compared to women in the general population. This is the first study to examine the links between alcohol consumption and mental health issues in UK military spouses and partners, and the associations with military and socio-demographic characteristics were also examined. Using robust outcome measures the study found that:

- The significantly higher prevalence of probable depression, hazardous alcohol consumption, and binge-drinking among UK military spouses/partners compared to women in the general population indicates there may be additional mental health needs and problematic drinking behaviours within this population that may be the result of exposure to Service life.²⁴⁶

Discussion of the findings indicates that:

- alcohol behaviours may be poorer among military spouses/partners compared to other women in the UK as spouses/partners were significantly more likely to report binge-drinking and consumed a significantly higher number of alcoholic drinks when they did drink than women in the general population, despite consuming alcohol significantly less often.²⁴⁷

The authors suggest that the increased prevalence of binge-drinking among spouses/partners represents an important public health issue for the military community given the potentially adverse influences on physical and mental health arising from this pattern of drinking.²⁴⁸ Moreover, the study found a significant

243 Ibid. p27.

244 Ibid. p29.

245 Gribble, R., Goodwin, L. and Fear, N.T. (2019) *Mental health outcomes and alcohol consumption among UK military spouses/partners: a comparison with women in the general population*, *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 10(1), 1654781; See also, Kulak J.A., Fillo, J., Homish, D.L., Kahn, L and Homish, G.G. (2019) *Substance Use and Mental Health Among Military Spouses*, *Military Behavioral Health*, 7:3, 257–267.

246 Gribble et al (2019) op.cit. Sect 5.

247 Ibid.

248 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2017; Public Health England, 2016.

association between binge-drinking among spouses/partners and the Serving partners' separation from their children and their family for two months or longer during the previous two years. The study suggests that this may reflect maladaptive coping strategies among spouses/partners during longer and repeated absences of the Serving partners from home.²⁴⁹

Despite a number of limitations, this study is important in that it indicates that GPs and healthcare professionals should be made aware of the potential for increased probable depression and alcohol consumption among Service spouses and partners, and should attempt to encourage spouses/partners to disclose any issues they may be experiencing. This adds weight to the recommendations about increased training for GPs and health professionals and the need for them to be able to identify Service families. In conclusion, the authors advocate that:

- The provision of online support and improving access to face-to-face services should also be explored to help identify ways to alleviate stress and anxiety that may arise as a result of military life, especially with the increasing trend towards greater geographical dispersal away from the military community on bases and the impact this can have on spouse/partner wellbeing. Recent attempts to modify alcohol behaviours within the military community, including pilot studies of alcohol advisors to reduce consumption among military personnel should be widened to target and improve the health and wellbeing of military families.²⁵⁰

There is good evidence that support for veterans has increased significantly in recent years and that additional funds have been allocated to support veterans' mental health.²⁵¹ The NHS Transition, Intervention and Liaison Veterans' Mental Health Service is designed to act as a gateway to a range of mental health and social care services. The devolved administrations have also invested in psychological therapies and other specialist services for veterans. This investment is warmly welcomed and we would argue that specialist support should also be made available for the families of Serving personnel. Not only is this important for the health and social care of military families while they are still serving but it will aid a smoother transition for these families when they eventually move into civilian life.

Currently, the onus is on non-serving partners to have to ask for help with mental health concerns, a step most people take only when the problem has escalated to crisis point. We heard from some partners who described being on the edge of a mental breakdown, struggling to cope with military life and, sometimes, struggling to cope with the Serving partner's mental health issues. Knowing where to turn for information and support without fear of damaging their partner's military career is essential. The Big White Wall, for example, which was launched in 2015, provides an online platform that supports people with mental health problems and is freely accessible by and available to Serving personnel and their families. More needs to be done to ensure families of Serving personnel have information about the support on offer.

The CSJ report,²⁵² referred to earlier, advocated the further development of 'Mental Health First Aid' courses already available to military spouses/partners on some bases to assist towards a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to combatting mental health issues in military families. We note that RAF Wittering, for example, has opened a mental health awareness course to partners and other members of the Armed Forces community. The MOD Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy should be well able to promote an inclusive approach to understanding mental health issues and reducing stigma. The Strategy operating model emphasises the importance of mental health promotion which relies on

- strong and compassionate leadership, a stable career structure, strong unit cohesion and a clear cultural message that our people are our single most important asset.²⁵³

249 Gribble, R., & Fear, N. (2019) op.cit.

250 Ibid p17.

251 MOD (2015) *Defence Annual Health and Wellbeing Report 2015*.

252 CSJ (2016) op.cit. p76.

253 MOD (2017) *Defence Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, p26.

Good mental health promotion also depends on the support and mental health of spouses/partners and families and a multi-organisational approach. The integrated approach heralded in the strategy must include the non-serving partners of Serving personnel. The Strategy points to a marked change in the level of esteem in which health is now considered in the Armed Forces community. The priorities up to 2022 focus on:

- 6 Promoting positive wellbeing; preventing mental illness; reducing the need for medical services and ensuring those in need of mental healthcare receive timely, safe and effective treatment.²⁵⁴ 9

We welcome the establishment in 2019 of 59 new Mental Health Support Teams in England to deliver evidence-based interventions in or close to over 1,000 primary and secondary schools, colleges and alternative providers for those with mild to moderate mental health issues, in trailblazer areas across England. Some of these sites are also testing what is required to achieve a four-week waiting time to access children and young people's specialist mental health services. The plan for the next five years is to increase the number of Mental Health Support Teams to cover 20–25 per cent of the country. While the location of these teams is primarily a decision for local health and education leads, Service children are highlighted as a group likely to experience higher need and greater challenges in accessing health services.

The Green Paper on children and young people's mental health in England aims to improve the provision of mental health support through its three key proposals: incentivising every school or college to identify and train a Designated Senior Lead for Mental Health; creating new Mental Health Support Teams in and near schools and colleges; and piloting a four-week waiting time for specialist NHS services, so that there is swifter access to specialist NHS services for those who need it. Furthermore, the five year forward view for mental health sets out the ambition to have at least 70,000 more children and young people accessing mental health services. The Long-Term Plan commits to expanding access further, so that by 2024 at least 345,000 additional children and young people aged 0–25 will be able to access NHS mental health support.

We note that the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019 highlights the work of the Contact Group which is a collaboration of military mental health service commissioners, providers, policy-makers and researchers in the UK. The Contact Group is working towards consistency in the definition of services across the UK, the DMS, Service charities and the independent sector. Its priorities are to gather mental health data, develop a common assessment framework, case management, and an accreditation scheme. We would urge that the work includes Serving personnel and their families as well as veterans.

Continuity of Care

One of the most difficult and upsetting experiences for non-serving partners and their children is the repeated disruptions to their treatment and care when the Serving person is assigned to another area. We received a large number of examples of disruptions to healthcare when the family transitions to another area. We heard examples of records being lost or taking months to reach a new GP:

- 6 *The transfer of records between health professionals is fraught with difficulty, and lost records have resulted in a requirement for identical tests to be conducted on my children to verify a previous diagnosis.* 9
(Army Serving partner).

This delay should surely be easily remedied.

The most serious disruptions have had considerable consequences for family members' health:

- 6 *My husband has served twenty-two years in the Armed Forces. We have moved every two years. I have had ongoing health issues which involved regular consultant appointments. Every move we have I have to firstly register with a GP and then be referred to a new gastrologist and rheumatologist. I'm currently on a forty week waiting list. So this reoccurs every time we move. The lack of treatment has a detrimental effect on my health.* 9
(Army non-serving partner)

254 Ibid. p36.

- 6 *My daughter suffered from glue ear as a child and as a result has scarring on her ear drums and my son has limited vision in one eye. Change from one hospital to another, especially from England to Wales, causes all sorts of issues, the main one being that on the initial move we had to start again, being looked at by a different doctor and the devolved nations all do things differently. So the children have to adjust to this plus the level and quality of healthcare differs from place to place.* 9
(Army Serving partner)

- 6 *One of my sons has developmental delays, particularly in speech, understanding and physical. We've already experienced an extended wait for review by ENT as we moved between England and Scotland. The transition in care should be seamless but I doubt it will be.* 9
(RN non-serving partner)

- 6 *My wife was undergoing treatment under the York healthcare service, I was drafted to Scotland relocating my wife to a different health care trust. It took four months before we could be seen by the Edinburgh NHS trust [sic], and we had to start at ground zero... I am due on draft in five months and to prevent a repeat of starting the whole process we have made the decision that my wife will remain in Scotland. The lack of coordination between health services and different IT systems makes it very difficult to provide continuity with healthcare. This places additional strain on families forcing decisions and cost to the individual. It would be my hope that the Armed Forces Covenant would ensure that the transfer of care between trusts would allow seamless transfer, unfortunately this isn't the case.* 9
(RN Serving partner)

- 6 *When moving to a new area it took twelve months for Health Visitors to get in touch with us. In similar vein ... the children's vaccination requirements have not been passed on from one doctor to another.* 9
(RN dual-serving partner)

- 6 *I needed an operation, was put on a waiting list in Oxford but had moved to Wales by the time I was given a date for the operation. Welsh hospitals did not do the operation I needed so I travelled back to Oxford, a five hour journey, leaving at two in the morning only to have it cancelled and having to repeat the journey again weeks later. The journey home after the operation was extremely painful.* 9
(Army non-serving partner)

These examples are but a few of those we received which referred to delays and difficulties in accessing continuing care. The 2019 FamCAS survey shows that just under a half of those who were undergoing treatment when they had to move location were able to continue their treatment without difficulty. Between 2015 and 2019 the proportion of families able to continue hospital treatment without difficulty decreased from 60 per cent to 47 per cent.²⁵⁵

In a recent review of the experiences of military families with a member with additional needs or disabilities²⁵⁶ FANDF found that medical diagnoses from Clinical Commissioning Groups and NHS Trusts in England are not being accepted by another CCG when a family is relocated and patients are often placed at the bottom of waiting lists when they move, regardless of how long they have already been on a waiting list for diagnosis or treatment. Families talked about having to 'start from square one' when they moved. The review also points to the lack of consistency in access to treatments, medication and therapies between different areas. The review refers to a 'constant fight for healthcare services' which can be 'a nightmare' for families every time they are relocated. The Care Act 2014 states that:

- 6 Continuity means making sure that, when an adult who is receiving care and support in one area of England moves home, they will continue to receive care on the day of their arrival in the new area. This means that there should be no gap in care and support when people choose to move.²⁵⁷ 9

255 FamCAS Survey (2019) op.cit.

256 FANDF (2020) op. cit.

257 The Care Act 2014, Fact Sheet 9 – Continuity of care when Moving Between Areas.

Of course, military families usually have no choice about moving, so it is even more critical that they can be sure that their care will be continuous. Since 2013, the responsibilities of NHS England also include commissioning directly all secondary and community health services for members of the Armed Forces and for their families who are registered with NHS GP Practices. The Partnership agreement between the MOD and NHSEI for the commissioning of health services for the Armed Forces, explicitly states that in order to support the best health outcomes for the Armed Forces community, health services must:

- be tailored to the needs of the Armed Forces community, in accordance with the Armed Forces Covenant
- ensure that patients experience a seamless transition between services, minimising any risks associated with accessing Care commissioned and provided to the Armed Forces community
- provide as a minimum the same standards and quality of care that can be expected by the civilian community.²⁵⁸

The Armed Forces Covenant clearly states that 'Family members should retain their place on any NHS waiting list, if moved around the UK due to the Service person being posted.'²⁵⁹ Adherence to the Armed Forces Covenant must be a health and social care priority.

The FANDF report recommends that, in line with the legal requirements of the Care Act 2014 in England and the expectations articulated in the Armed Forces Covenant, Service personnel and their families who have a member with additional needs and/or a disability should receive continuity of care from day one of a posting to a new area. We very much support this recommendation. It is important to note that similar difficulties relating to continuity of care will almost certainly be experienced by civilian families who move from one place to another. However, most civilian families do not have to relocate every two years and the choice about moving while waiting for or in the middle of treatment is likely to be greater. This reinforces the fact that military families experience a number of stressors that civilian families do not. Hence, ensuring that military families are able to transfer care as seamlessly as possible and maintain continuity does not amount to special pleading but merely acknowledges the potential additional disadvantage they face.

Following a meeting with the Independent Chair of NHS England Public Participation Involvement Group for the Armed Forces we were given a case study which highlights the problems associated with continuity of care in respect of a young child who has needed complex and constant medical care from a range of medical professionals since shortly after her birth. The daughter of an Army family, the constant moves have resulted in several delays in her treatment and care, and difficulties making the transition from one hospital trust to another. This child needs the support of paediatricians, feeding and speech therapists, physiotherapy and various consultants. Her mother catalogued many months of delays every time the family was posted to another camp. Not surprisingly this has had an adverse impact of the child's health and on the wellbeing of the whole family. While her parents have nothing but praise for the specialists who care for their daughter, they said that:

“With the waiting times for care at each new posting, [our daughter] has seen a regression in her physical and mental health caused by the impact of not being able to access services for relatively large periods of time. ... NHS systems are not joined up. An understanding of the unique difficulties military families have in accessing care, and the awareness of the Covenant itself is severely lacking...I would like the NHS in regard to the Covenant agreement for people to keep their place on waiting lists...this is not preferential treatment. This needs to be understood and not seen as queue jumping.”

(Army non-serving partner)

This mother went on to suggest that there should be some kind of liaison officer to whom military families can be sent when they arrive in a new area who will then coordinate the transfer of complex healthcare, help with appropriate referrals and ensure that people are put on the correct place on waiting lists. This could well be the role of the Armed Forces Care Coordinator located in the local GP surgeries who would oversee the appropriate transfer of care and ensure that families have all the information they need to

258 NHS Commissioning. Services for members of the Armed Forces england.nhs.uk

259 www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk

assist them in locating all the health and social care services when they move to a new area. It is important that families have someone to go to and a proper appeal mechanism, particularly if the Covenant obligations are not being met. In Scotland, the Armed Forces and Veterans Champion in the local Health Board would also be able to help with this kind of difficulty.

The suggestion to appoint a single point of contact to manage the speedy transfer of care was made by others who had experienced long delays and lack of continuity of care with respect to speech and language therapy and other specialist treatments. We note that the UK Service Families Health Working Group which was established in 2019, aims to tackle health issues relating to the Armed Forces community collaboratively. The new Group will work across the UK to address health issues that impact Service families. This is very welcome and should facilitate greater collaboration between the nations of the UK in providing healthcare for families who move from one healthcare system to another and have to ensure continuity of care. Furthermore, we welcome the launch of the NHSEI's initiative to better understand the health needs of Service families with a view to commissioning a support service for them.

The transition to parenthood

Research has demonstrated that having a baby and the transition to parenthood can seriously derail couple relationships and it marks a change in the family dynamics which can have positive and negative consequences for families.²⁶⁰ These changes in relationships and family life that occur when becoming a parent were talked about during our visits to military bases and concerns were raised in responses to the Call for Evidence. While the challenges are felt by civilian families these can be aggravated by deployments and separation at crucial times.

Some non-serving partners suggested that it would be helpful to let them know where they can get support when they are having a baby and advice about how to manage separation times in future. There are a number of external organisations and agencies providing parenting support during pregnancy but we do not know of any programmes that specifically address the challenges that will ensue for a military family. This could be an important development for these organisations in future:

“I was 38 weeks pregnant when I relocated to Portsmouth and found being referred to a midwife a stressful and complex process, despite having a medical note from my previous midwifery team stating an urgent requirement for me to be seen by a midwife. This was an additional stress that was not helpful at this stage in pregnancy and I would expect an area with high levels of Armed Forces families and associated movement of these families to have processes to deal with this.”

(RN non-serving partner)

“When pregnant in Plymouth and my husband was deployed I was told that my fifteen month old would have to be referred to social services to be fostered as I didn't have anyone I knew to look after her if I went into labour. This caused me untold stress.”

(RN non-serving partner)

One partner who wanted to have her baby in another part of England when her husband was away from home so that she could be near her family when giving birth was told that it is not possible to receive anti-natal care in another region. We have been assured by DHSC²⁶¹ that the Better Birth report of the National Maternity Review set out clear guidelines that the NHS should provide personalised care, centred on the woman, her baby and her family. This implies genuine choice about the provider of anti-natal, intrapartum and post-natal care through NHS Personal Maternity Care Budgets. We understand that this provision is being tested to inform national developments for improving choice in maternity services.

260 Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

261 DHSC correspondence, June 2019.

An Army partner referred to the dearth of research in the UK about the transition to parenthood by military spouses:

“ *The reports mostly address the negatives of being pregnant while a spouse is deployed and the negative effects. I do feel that we need to address this transition, as the majority of Service personnel are under the age of forty and will be having children while serving. Maternal and infant health are entwined and we need to ensure we are addressing this vulnerable population and meeting their needs.* ”
(Army non-serving partner).

CASE STUDY: The Devonport Parental and Maternity Care Programme

During our visit to HMNB Devonport we were introduced to a service offered to pregnant members of the RN and to non-serving partners during pregnancy. For the last 3 years the Royal Navy has employed Parental Support Senior Rates (Chief Petty Officer rank) in both the Portsmouth and Plymouth Naval Base Personal Support Group areas. We met with the CPO running this service in HMNB Devonport and several Serving and non-serving partners who had received her support.

In the last three years, the current Parental Support Senior Rate in the Plymouth area has managed and supported 304 personnel and their families with their pregnancy, paternity, IVF and adoption needs.²⁶² In addition the South West Area Subject Matter Expert (Chief Petty Officer) provides direction, advice and support to line managers and Service parents on Service policy during and post birth, including maternity packages from the Service, covering maternity, paternity and shared parental and adoption leave, child tax credits, flexible working and Serving with Dependent Children.

The team have established excellent partnership arrangements with external agencies and medical services and this relationship has led to the establishment of dedicated timings on specific days for Service Personnel to gain support from the NHS Maternity team (outside of emergencies). The main benefit to the Royal Navy in providing this level of service in the preceding three years has been the considerable fall in Service mothers opting to leave the service post maternity leave which is now down from 16 per cent to 3 per cent annually.²⁶³

Parental Support Programme (PSS) for Serving Parents and for Non-serving Partners in HMNB Devonport

Aims of the Service

In the absence of any formal midwifery services in the Royal Navy the Parental Support Senior Rate in Devonport acts as a single point of contact and liaison officer with local external agencies, including the local NHS teams and the Green Ark Midwife Derriford Hospital Maternity teams and the Drake Medical Centre (all in compliance with Caldicott requirements).

The PSS provides support with pregnancy, paternity, IVF and adoption. The team identify parents who may require additional support or services during their pregnancy.

The Programme

The programmes includes:

- a weekly programme of activity that the pregnant Serving Parent or non-serving pregnant partner including a ‘bumps and babies group’ and pre-maternity baby and toddler swimming lessons.
- external agencies provide baby first-aid training, breastfeeding and weaning advice and baby sensory activities.

The weekly sessions allow parents-to-be and new parents to interact and provide a space for children to interact and play.

²⁶² Captain of the Base HMNB Devonport, written submission, September 2019.

²⁶³ Ibid.

The Parental Support Senior Rate supports expectant parents throughout their journey, catering for each family's specific needs. This includes:

- support to pregnant women and their partners at medical appointments and scans
- support during birth due to the Serving partner being deployed or unavailable at the time
- post-natal home visits to monitor and support the new parents and baby, raising any concerns and obtaining additional support through the Naval Base or NHS Services as required.

Although the RN measure the benefit in terms of retention of female Service personnel who take maternity leave to have a baby, it is clear that offering this programme to non-serving partners who are having a baby is very much valued. It offers a much-needed support group to both sets of expectant mothers and brings the Armed Forces community closer together.

Both Serving and non-serving mothers we spoke to on our visit to the Naval base described the CPO running the service as:

“ *• someone to turn to*
• someone who makes families feel valued
• a lifesaver when the going gets tough. ”

The Devonport Parental Support Programme:

- provides a good example of integrated care and support from within the Armed Forces in partnership with external providers, including healthcare
- helps non-serving partners who are having a baby to feel valued by the military
- helps new fathers to support their partner
- encourages both parents to take an active role in preparing for the arrival of a new baby.

We understand that the Royal Navy would be extremely happy to work with MOD to provide physical education advice as part of this initiative. Many Naval Establishments already provide ‘bumps and babies’ sessions and also ‘private’ gym facilities for parents who may not wish to conduct exercise in the main gyms. Many physical trainers are trained in maternity fitness and a new Defence Maternity Fitness course is being developed by the RAF with RN and Army input.

Two other issues were raised with us: the difficulty of accessing IVF treatment in different parts of the country and different policies about the storage and usage of embryos in different nations of the UK:

“ *When something specific is needed, e.g. IVF, being moved around the country and starting again from the bottom of the heap is really limiting and demoralising.* ”
(RM non-serving partner)

The AFF recently reported on fertility treatment²⁶⁴ and gave an example of a couple who started IVF treatment in Scotland and subsequently learned on their posting to England that NHSEI will not fund transfers of frozen embryos from Scotland or any other country. The MOD has written the Assisted Conception and Fertility Policy to support the case for geographical stability while the family is undergoing assisted conception treatment. Moreover, the Families Federations have a formal escalation route to the Armed Forces team in NHSEI which is able to resolve these kinds of issues.

²⁶⁴ AFF (2019) *Making Families. Army and You*, Autumn 2019.

Promoting a more comprehensive healthcare service for non-serving partners and their children

During the course of the review we have heard many examples of the difficulties many military families face in accessing adequate and timely healthcare in the UK as a result of the moves they are required to undertake. It is easy to view the concerns raised as being a litany of complaints about the healthcare provided in the UK. It is important to stress, however, that it is not the quality of care provided that is at issue, but the difficulties in accessing it when the family is moving frequently and having to start all over again. Our review shows that the continuity and transfer of care is less than ideal for many non-serving partners and their children. The difference in the experiences of Serving personnel in accessing healthcare are stark. A seemingly continuous and comprehensive transition from one base to another allows the same high quality of care to be provided to Serving personnel wherever they are posted. This is not usually the case for their families.

In summary therefore, our review has highlighted three key areas:

1. Difficulties experienced with maintaining continuity of care
2. The need for greater awareness and understanding amongst healthcare professionals about the specific healthcare needs of military families
3. The need for common pathways and transfers between the nations of the UK, and, in particular, with respect to mental health issues.

In all these areas, partnership working and collaboration between the Armed Forces, MOD DMS and the various national health services of the UK is essential. If the Armed Forces are able to reduce the number of postings and enable greater stability in living arrangements, many of the healthcare concerns would be addressed. Moreover, initiatives which promote integrated care between DMS and national healthcare providers would reduce the perceived discrepancies between the care provided to Serving personnel and that provided to their families, and have the additional merit of allowing medical professionals to have a more holistic overview and approach to family health and wellbeing. It would also improve oversight of safeguarding, intimate-partner violence, and domestic abuse concerns, and promote stronger multi-disciplinary working. We look more closely at concerns relating to domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence in Chapter 8.

We have learned about a number of policies and new initiatives designed to develop a more coordinated approach to health and social care for all members of Service families and these are to be welcomed. We have not attempted to refer to all of them in this review. We have pointed to the perceived differences in the quality of integrated care offered to Service families located overseas and the lack of integration in the UK. This results in challenges for the spouses/partners and children of Service personnel and a perception that they are disadvantaged at times. The Armed Forces Covenant should be the vehicle to address many of the challenges families are facing and the obligations of civilian medical and care professionals should be re-emphasised. It may be that the Covenant itself needs to be more explicit about the provision of healthcare for military families. The same continuity of high quality healthcare offered to Serving personnel must be offered to their families if military families are not to feel that they are disadvantaged.

We were told by some Serving personnel who had decided to leave the Armed Forces that this was because of their inability to manage and ensure the healthcare needs of their families. It becomes very difficult for the Serving partner to commit to the military lifestyle and sustain operational effectiveness when they are worried about a partner or child with serious and/or chronic healthcare needs. Hopefully, flexible working and a more comprehensive healthcare system for family members may alleviate this problem and aid retention. In previous chapters we have made a plea that the Armed Forces should take account of children's education and spouses/partners' employment when taking decisions to relocate a family.

In the next chapter we consider the views of Serving personnel and their families about transitioning out of the military. Although this was not a central focus of our review the issues raised in this and previous chapters all featured in the consideration being given by some families to leaving the Armed Forces.

Our Recommendations

Access to GPs and dentists: short term

Recommendation 63

The National Health Service England and Improvement (NHSEI), NHS Scotland, NHS Wales and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland to ensure that information leaflets, guidance and top tips for delivering healthcare to Service families are provided to all GPs in the UK.

Recommendation 64

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Devolved Governments to require GPs to transfer records speedily when Service families are relocated.

Recommendation 65

The NHSEI, NHS Scotland, NHS Wales and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland to require GPs to:

- reinforce the veteran-friendly GP practice accreditation scheme to include Serving military families
- routinely ask whether adults and children are members of a Serving military family
- identify previous GP/dental practices for transference of health data relating to military families, upholding the requirements of confidentiality, as stated in the Armed Forces Covenant.

Recommendation 66

The Royal Colleges to require medical and healthcare professionals across the UK to undertake an accredited programme of training to increase awareness and understanding of the health needs of military families.

Continuity of care: short term

Recommendation 67

The Ministry of Defence to continue to work with the national health services across the UK to ensure that an Armed Forces Family Code articulates what is required to deliver appropriate continuity of care for Service families as they move around the UK, and to ensure that information is available to advise families about maintaining continuity of care on posting to a new area or healthcare system.

Recommendation 68

The DHSC in England and national health services across the UK to ensure that family members of Serving personnel are able to retain their relative place on waiting lists when they move to another area, and that GPs and other healthcare professionals support their transition from one area to another, in line with the commitments made in the Armed Forces Covenant.

Recommendation 69

The Clinical Commissioning Groups in England to be required through the Armed Forces Covenant to ensure timely access to CAMHS and paediatric services and that children and young people maintain their relative place on waiting lists when their parents are required to relocate to another area.

Recommendation 70

The Ministry of Defence to take account of the healthcare needs of military families when posting Service personnel to a new area.

Continuity of care: medium term

Recommendation 71

The NHSEI, NHS Scotland, NHS Wales and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland to ensure that all Armed Forces families have access to an Armed Forces Care Coordinator or an Armed Forces Champion if they need support and help in accessing healthcare services.

Integrated care: medium term

Recommendation 72

The Ministry of Defence to work with the providers of national health services across the whole of the UK to evaluate new models of integrated primary care being established in some military bases and consider how to extend effective models to other military bases.

Recommendation 73

The Ministry of Defence and the Defence Medical Services (DMS) to consider allowing family members to access Defence primary care services wherever possible and appropriate, and particularly when national health facilities are not easily accessible in the immediate locality.

Mental health: medium term

Recommendation 74

The Ministry of Defence to consider how families of Serving personnel can be more involved in breaking down the stigma of mental health issues, and can benefit from the comprehensive activities and treatments to support Serving members of the Armed Forces in order to promote better mental health and wellbeing for the whole family.

Mental Health: longer term

Recommendation 75

The Ministry of Defence, in consultation with the DHSC and the Devolved Governments, to ensure that future mental health and wellbeing plans include mental health awareness activities and communication strategies aimed specifically at families of Serving personnel, perhaps via a designated App.

Recommendation 76

The Ministry of Defence and Defence Medical Services (DMS) and the national health services across the UK to explore ways in which a range of mental health services could be better integrated to provide holistic care for Serving personnel and their partners and children.

Parenting support: medium term

Recommendation 77

The Ministry of Defence and the Defence Medical Services (DMS) to consolidate and refine a Parental Support Programme and facilitate roll out to bases in all three Services.

Chapter 7

Returning to Civvy Street: The Ultimate Transition?

A tri-service research report by the Naval, Army and RAF Families Federations²⁶⁵ reminds us that:

6 The Service Families of today are the Service leavers' families of tomorrow and the veteran families of the future. As such, 'transition' is the common denominator between the Armed Forces Covenant, the Families' Strategy and the Veterans' Strategy. Helping families make more successful transitions, based on genuine options, may help them avoid making sub-optimal choices, which can re-emerge as problems tomorrow.²⁶⁶

The term 'transition' is used by the Armed Forces and the MOD to describe the period of reintegration into civilian life from military life. Although the MOD Transition Policy takes a 'transition through life' approach, this focuses on preparation for and awareness of future civilian challenges after the Serving person and the family leave the military. We have taken a broader view of the meaning of transition and what it means for members of the Armed Forces community. Our review has demonstrated that military personnel and their families face multiple transitions from the moment they join the Armed Forces until the day they leave and beyond. Being in the military denotes a very specific way of life for the Serving member and for his or her family. By understanding the nature of these different transitions within the military way of life, which includes relocation from one military base to another, it should be possible to ensure that families are given the support they need, when they need it, throughout their life journey in the Armed Forces. This would enable them to manage all the changes/transitions they experience with as little stress as possible. This would also minimise the challenges associated with what is usually the ultimate transition to civilian life. We suggest that if the number of transitions could be minimised to give families more stability during the military career, then the ultimate transition back to civilian life may itself be relatively stress-free also. We recognise that mobility is a feature of military life and we return to consider the need for frequent relocations in Chapter 10.

The evidence suggests that the majority of Serving personnel and their families manage the ultimate transition well, but there is a minority who do not.²⁶⁷ Some struggle to find work, some have mental health problems and others may have alcohol or gambling addictions. The Tri-Service review²⁶⁸ placed families in transition along a continuum according to the level of challenges they experience during the move into civilian life. At one end are those at most risk of a challenging transition and at the other are those who are likely to have less difficulty because they have planned for the transition and for life afterwards. The Tri-Service review found that the majority of people experience a successful transition even though they may face some hurdles on the way. Others need to be better prepared and require considerable support. The term 'resettlement' is used to describe the formal processes and procedures through which the Service Leaver's transition is managed and aided by the Armed Forces. They are inevitably inter-connected.

The increased focus in recent years on the transition out of the Armed Forces and on some of the difficult issues veterans have faced afterwards has led to a widespread governmental and societal effort to provide much greater levels of support to veterans and their families. The public recognition of what members of the Armed Forces have done for the country and the sacrifices they have made has galvanised a campaign to support veterans and render them more visible. This is to be much applauded. Our review, however, has not delved into the veteran space and we have focused on exploring the lived experiences of currently Serving personnel and their families. Therefore, we did not set out to look in depth at transition out of the

²⁶⁵ Heaver, L., McCullough, K. and Briggs, L. (2019) *Lifting the Lid on Transition: The families' experience and the support they need*, Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT).

²⁶⁶ Ibid. p4.

²⁶⁷ Centre for Social Justice (2016) *Military Families in Transition*, CSJ.

²⁶⁸ Heaver et al (2019) op.cit.

Armed Forces or invite contributions from those veterans who had been through it. Nevertheless, in the Call for Evidence we asked Serving personnel and family members to give us their views and thoughts about leaving the military. While the majority of those who responded were not thinking about the time when they would be transitioning out and so had little to say on the topic, some were planning to leave and a few had already taken steps to leave. Additionally, a few currently Serving personnel had been through the experience of leaving only to re-join again, having found life in 'civvy street' less than appealing.

Early in the review we received a submission from the War Widows 'Association which seeks to campaign, care for those where death of a spouse or partner has been attributed to, caused or hastened by their Service life, and remember those who have lost their life in Service. The submission highlighted the difficulty some widows experience in establishing a career after the death of a Serving partner. The death of a Serving partner inevitably involves a period of transition which also involves strong emotional responses and grief. The war widows regard themselves as veterans because they have lived the military lifestyle and then are faced with adapting to civvy street at one of the most traumatic and difficult times in their life. The challenges they face are recognised by the MOD and we understand that the new Families Strategy will consider the needs of the bereaved more generally. The MOD will engage with stakeholders through the MOD Bereaved Families Working Group.

The War Widows Association pointed to the financial penalties they face when remarrying and when needing social care, and to the inconsistencies in services to support them when their status as veterans is not well-understood in society generally. The Armed Forces Bereavement Scholarship Scheme will provide funding to children who have lost a Serving parent whose death is attributable to Service in order to complete further or higher education courses. Nevertheless, it is clear that there needs to be greater public and wider government awareness of the needs of this very specific group of people whose sacrifice for the nation has been total.

During our visits to bases some spouses and partners expressed their hope that their Serving partner might leave the military sooner rather than later as they were finding it difficult to continue with a Service lifestyle and the repeated deployments and separations. It was not uncommon for spouses/partners to make comments such as 'I can't wait for him to leave'; 'I am really looking forward to the day we can leave the military and settle down to a family life'; and 'we don't have long to go now, thank goodness'. Despite such sentiments, they were always incredibly proud of their Serving partner and of the job they were doing.

From these various contributions we gained many insights. Serving personnel who were planning to leave explained the reasons behind the decision, and non-serving partners talked about the aspects of Service life which they find challenging – the push factors – and the concerns they have when thinking ahead to the time when they would be leaving the military.

Making the ultimate transition

We know that some 15,000 personnel leave the Armed Forces every year, with the greatest number coming from the Army, thus reflecting the fact that the Army employs far more people than each of the other two Services. Just over half of those leaving are married or in a civil partnership and there will be others who are in a cohabiting relationship who are not captured in the statistics. Given the increasing numbers of couples who chose to remain in a cohabiting partnership long-term, in future the statistics relating to this group of families should be recorded.

A RAND Europe review of evidence²⁶⁹ suggests that the experiences of family members, their roles in the transition process and their needs are not well-documented. For some time the research focus has been on understanding the experience of the Serving partner with less emphasis on understanding the experience of their partner and family. The 2013 Transition Mapping Study²⁷⁰ defined a successful transition as one that enables the Serving person to be sufficiently resilient to adapt successfully to civilian life and which safeguards the financial, psychological and emotional health of the individual and those family

269 RAND Europe (2016). *Families Support to Transition: a systematic review of the evidence.*

270 FiMT/Futures Company (2013). *Transition Mapping Study*, FiMT.

members closest to them. To a large extent the measure of success has been whether the Service Leaver can move into alternative employment in civilian life. We know rather less about how well family members adapt.²⁷¹ This is a gap in the knowledge which should be addressed.

The 2017 Transition Mapping Study²⁷² which updated the 2013 study to look in more depth at the journey from military life into the wider world of work, indicates that family breakdown adds to the financial cost of poor transitions. This underlines the importance of ensuring that the whole family is supported in the ultimate transition to leave the military if breakup of the family is to be prevented. It is not just the Serving person who leaves the Armed Forces but the whole family gives up a distinct way of life. Moreover, every family is unique and their experience and approach to leaving the Services will be influenced by a range of factors, including the reasons for leaving the military, their financial situation, the health of family members, spousal/partner employment, the family's ambitions for the future and their ability to adapt and change.

Reasons for leaving the Armed Forces early: understanding the push and pull factors

The RAF Leavers Survey 2017–2018²⁷³ reports a number of push and pull factors. The most common push factors included: the incompatibility of Service life with family life; dissatisfaction with pay and allowances; lack of job satisfaction; lack of promotion and career progression; poor work-life balance; and feeling undervalued. The most common pull factors included: the appeal of a civilian lifestyle; perceived better career opportunities and employment; greater choice and control over their life; more stability; and more time to spend with their family. These push and pull factors featured clearly in our Call for Evidence, although the push factors outweighed the pull factors, as the following extracts show:

“ My husband has just put in his notice to leave the military due to the detrimental effect that its having on our family life. ... There is a huge retention problem throughout the military, more acute than ever in aircrew. Family life is the reason why. If you want to solve that problem, make the military a good thing for families, not the negative thing it currently is. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

This wife told us that she had had to give up a highly paid specialised career as a result of moving around to accompany her partner, she had experienced mental health issues which she put down to the strain of military life, and was bringing up two young children on her own while her husband was away on long deployments. Another family told us:

“ My husband didn't want to leave the military. It [leaving] was really hard for all of us, me for my employment, my eldest with school and I can see the biggest change in my husband. Amey forced us into a position where the poor housing had affected us mentally and financially...our daughter knew the workmen by their first names because of how often they were at the house...rats were in the walls of the house, the loft was a blanket of rat droppings; sitting at night for two years, listening out for the rats chewing the joists, wondering if they would chew through the plastic water pipes or the electricity cables. And even after two years of complaining and getting them [rats] on camera...not one person listened to us. ”

(RM Serving and non-serving partners)

This family described how the Serving partner had given up the offer of promotion because of the stress his family were experiencing. They logged 350 workmen visits to their SFA in a two year period before being moved to another property. Life in 'civvy street' was not going as well as they had hoped, however, as the wife could not get a job due to her employment gaps and they had difficulties obtaining a mortgage. This family would fall into the category of having experienced a poor transition from military life, at the more vulnerable end of the continuum.²⁷⁴ It would seem that a number of pressures and stressors had built up over time during the husband's naval career such that transition into civilian life was a challenge.

271 CSJ (2016) op.cit.

272 FiMT/Kantar Futures (2017) *Continue to Work: The Transition Mapping Study 2017*, FiMT.

273 Communication from Air Commodore Alan Opie.

274 Heaver et al (2019) op. cit.

Some people referred to something which happened that they perceived as being 'the final straw' which pushed them into taking a decision to leave:

“ I have resigned after almost 34 years' Service all over the world. ...My wife has dutifully followed me and, at best, has managed to pick up unpaid, voluntary jobs ...She cannot re-establish her [NHS] career because of the regular moves, hence another reason I have decided to leave prematurely. ...The final straw for me was being diagnosed with Stage IV cancer and being off for two and a half months, including a long stay in hospital. ”

(RAF serving partner)

Although this family owned a house they pointed to what they described as 'arcane rules' preventing them from living in it. They had been allocated an unmodernised SFA property on an estate in 'managed decline' with numerous maintenance issues. The cumulative impacts of poor housing, his wife's inability to gain meaningful employment, together with what this Serving partner described as a complete lack of support from the RAF and MOD when he was ill, had caused him to take the decision to leave the Forces. This story indicates the critical importance of pro-active welfare support being available and the challenges associated with diagnoses of acute ill health. We look more closely at the provision of welfare support in the next chapter.

There was rarely one single factor that had prompted the decision to leave the military. A number of the responses highlighted cumulative factors that had ultimately led to the decision, and these often related to poor housing, concerns about children's education and problems associated with spousal employment, all of which were placing stresses on family life and increasing the desire for family stability. It would seem that there is often one final issue which is regarded as being 'the final straw' and which tips the family over the edge. This is resonant of research which demonstrated that divorce and separation usually occur after a series of stressors have put pressure on the couple relationship, and then something happens which signals the point of no return.²⁷⁵

What almost all the review responses had in common was an obvious sense of regret from Serving personnel at leaving the military:

“ Children's education has always been our biggest worry. We have had a mixed experience especially in the UK with our children being allocated to sink schools five miles away from home... Ultimately we opted to board using CEA but this became a huge problem when we were given postings within fifty miles of each other. Because we could theoretically reach the duty station within one hour we lost entitlement to CEA... The stress of this almost caused our marriage to fail ... Families worry about the school in the next posting. ...The upshot of the sorry affair was to end my family's commitment to the Forces, a sad reflection for an officer whose family Service goes back to the Boer War and a wife who was a Service child. None of my children will join the Forces, ending over 200 years of family Service ... Have I loved Army life, absolutely. Would I recommend it to anyone else now, sadly not. ”

(Army Serving partner)

Despite feeling 'bitter' with respect to his children's education, this Army officer said that his family were excited about leaving the Army, and he was feeling upbeat and enjoying the transition process. In his view, the transition package had been 'excellent'. He was keen to emphasise that it was not Service life that 'broke' his family but the decision about CEA which he regarded as being taken without any understanding of the impact.

Others were clear that the incompatibility of Service life with family life was the reason for leaving:

“ I have recently retired from the RAF. I look back at my time with enormous pride and affection. I have had wonderful experiences, achieved a great deal... In many ways I regret leaving the RAF and I have taken a civilian role very closely associated with the RAF because I love the work and the people. ... The blunt truth is that continuing my RAF career was incompatible with family life. ... The strains of life as a career-minded officer were a significant factor in the breakdown of my first marriage and

²⁷⁵ Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

I did not want to repeat the experience ... Following the birth of my son I was no longer prepared to plan to be at home only at weekends. ”

(RAF recently retired Serving partner)

This man's wife had a successful career that she did not want to give up which meant that she stayed living in their private family home while her husband commuted weekly. He went on to add that he was not prepared to choose his career at the expense of his family life. He offered some thoughts as to the measures that could have aided his and others' retention. His list included:

- ending short-notice assignments
- ensuring much better medium-term career planning so that there is a chance that a spouse/partner can maintain their career
- making SFA an aspirational choice
- making it more affordable to move one's private home when posted some considerable distance away if the choice is to leave SFA
- ending an Edwardian career structure that still assumes that the Serving person is male and the sole breadwinner in the household.

His views were echoed by others:

“ Serving in the RAF has always been a dream of mine and I am thankful that I have been given the opportunities I have. I always said I would do a full career, however the recent pay changes, changes to pensions, increase in housing costs and overall reductions in the RAF manning strength, I am now in a position where a life in the RAF does not look so appealing: increased workloads and deployments take a massive toll on Service families, and I need to put my wife first. I will be looking to leave in the next eighteen months, which is sadly what many of my peers are also looking into. The Forces is no longer a career for life but a way of experiencing new things when you are young. Not enough is being done to retain the more experienced cadre of the military. ”

(RAF Serving partner)

“ I am married and own my own house with my wife. ... I commute home on my rest days and live in the mess otherwise. I feel that the military encourages us to buy a house while we are serving (quite rightly) but then punishes you financially for doing so. I have to pay my mortgage and also my mess accommodation fees. On top of a mortgage, council tax, bills etc its hard on stomach. In this respect I feel the military is stuck in a rut of 'the partner will follow the Service person'. I feel that a discounted rate for those who live in their own property would be a good compromise, rather than paying the same as those who just live in the mess I am now about to do a shift pattern...working effectively ten days for two days off [one night at home]. Working eighty per cent of my time for three months is unsustainable. It is with regret that this issue will push me to leave prematurely, despite loving my job. I refuse to sacrifice my marriage for my cap badge. ”

(Army Serving partner)

We note that there is awareness within the three Services and in MOD that it is important to give as much notice as possible about assignments, and that a more holistic approach to decision-making would ease a number of difficulties. The FAM should provide greater choice about accommodation choices but there are likely to always be compromises families have to consider given the nature of the operational demands of the military.

Worries about the future

Family members may experience a range of emotions when they leave the military community. These may include, sadness, happiness, relief, excitement, pride, anxiety, a sense of loss, and worry about the future. Looking ahead, some families in the review were worried about the future when they leave the Armed Forces even though they may well have felt relieved that the demands of Service life would be over. These concerns tended to be expressed more often by non-serving partners than by Serving personnel. The following comments are typical of the concerns several people raised during the review:

“ I have been married into the military for twelve years ... Although I am extremely proud of my husband and the job he does, I feel that the military in this country are poorly cared for or supported.... Leaving the military, we are about to be starting on this milestone shortly and due to the housing situation, ie. not owning a house and the way the final payment is made we are quite worried about what we are going to do house wise. We require the terminal payment for the deposit on a house but that payment isn't made until the Serving person has left. This is not helpful when starting civilian life where there is a lot of setting up home to do.... The level of stress my husband is feeling is already rising at the thought of leaving. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

This Army spouse described her experience of being ‘married into the military’ as: living in SFA riddled with damp; coping with a mental health diagnosis for one of her sons; being allocated SFA off the patch without any support network; being unable to follow her own career; getting through deployments that meant her husband had spent more nights away than at home; and watching her husband dealing with very responsible high stress jobs and missing most of his children’s formative years and milestones. She went on to say:

“ There doesn't seem to be any information or guidance for people at the start of this [transition] process. There are courses they can take during the resettlement period but no-one to talk to as regards finances, housing, the best way to leave with the minimum amount of stress. ”

The decision to leave the military was clearly causing some concern for both partners. The Serving partner was described by his wife as ‘feeling stuck’ between the uncertainty about getting a house, finding a job and the children’s schooling when he leaves the military and what he regards as the inability to stay in. Undoubtedly she was looking for support in managing this process which was causing stress for both of them.

Another concern reported to us related to the disclosure of mental health issues:

“ I have been diagnosed with PTSD ... I face going into the civilian world not sure if or when I should tell my employer I have PTSD and how that will affect my job prospects. ”

(Army Serving partner)

Other people also mentioned that the ‘mental health side of things’ should be more closely considered on transition and that more support is needed. We noted in Chapter 6 that mental health issues are still subject to stigma and secrecy across society generally and not just in the military. There is work being undertaken in MOD to address this issue through the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Again, there needs to be a concerted effort to encourage people to seek help when they need it without fear that it will impact negatively on military careers.

Civilians can face long waiting lists for treatment and so it is essential that Serving personnel with mental health issues can transfer to NHS support seamlessly and with continuity of care on leaving the military and the Defence Medical Services. Registering with a GP will be critical for all Service leavers. The Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017–2022 refers to the transition pathway to ensure that the mental health and wellbeing of Service personnel is protected during their transition to civilian life, in order to ensure the optimum outcome for each individual. Coordination of civilian services for a smooth handover of care will be essential if mental health problems are not to escalate when the Defence medical services are no longer available. Some individuals were worried about how they would deal with health issues such as PTSD on their transition out.

Other people mentioned money worries which they knew could be exacerbated if the Service Leaver could not find work. A recent qualitative study²⁷⁶ recommended that information about social security benefits should be provided in resettlement information and that personalised support is essential for Service Leavers and veterans who need to make a claim for benefits. The report also includes a review of the Armed Forces Covenant commitments with respect to social security. Some of the review respondents

276 Scullion, L., Dwyer, P., Jones, J., Martin, P. and Hynes, C. (2019) *Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers: Social Security Benefits and transitions from Military to civilian life*, FiMT, Community Fund, Universities of Salford and York.

told us about interactions with JobCentrePlus that they had found very unsatisfactory. As one person put it: ‘they were trying to fit a square peg into a round hole with no understanding of the Covenant or life as a military family’. This had caused upset and disappointment about the lack of support being offered. We noted in Chapter 5 that non-serving partners had found JobCentrePlus staff to be unsighted and lacking understanding about military life, and therefore unable to assist them in their job search activities.

We received some positive comments about the transition process although some people in SFA described financial concerns of a different nature:

“ I am currently in the process of leaving the RAF after almost twenty-nine years. In general, I am finding the transition quite easy and feeling relatively well-supported....I am probably in the minority, looking around the Service these days, but I have many happy memories and my family have enjoyed their association with the Service. ”

(RAF Serving partner)

Nevertheless, this man raised a concern about different practices in local authorities in England about the payment of a premium on council tax. He had purchased a house in the north of England ready for when he leaves his RAF post and was living in SFA in the south of the country. He was paying the mortgage on the house in the north which he left empty but

“ we were informed that because we were leaving the house empty for what will be eleven months due to my son staying in the south to complete his GCSEs, we had to pay a premium on our council tax. I understand why this premium exists, to discourage second home owners from being weekend only residents and I agree with it. This is not what my situation is. I go up once a month to progress decorating and to prepare the house for habitation, and the County Council could not fit me into the categories they recognise for council tax rebate....Why am I having to pay more because I planned ahead [for my leaving the RAF]? Surely it should fall under the much vaunted Covenant. I have been told I must ask my current Council where I am living full time in SFA for the rebate...which is more than slightly ridiculous. ”

It would seem from our investigations that different local authorities apply different rules to the payment of a premium on council tax and this is a matter that Service leavers should be aware of if they prepare in advance by buying a home.

Transitioning and re-transitioning

Some respondents to the Call for Evidence had experience of both leaving and re-joining the military. The spouse of a RM Serving partner described how her husband had left the Service and re-joined:

“ My husband left for a year about five years ago. He joined back up because he was unable to find work....I have given up work to move for his career, therefore we rely heavily on his wage. ”

(RM non-serving partner)

However, this family were unhappy because: the Serving partner was ‘miserable in his current position’ and had spent years trying to transfer to a different branch; the SFA was poor; and the deployments meant that they were separated for long periods; and separations were causing strain in their relationship. The accumulating stresses were beginning to take their toll on this family, such that this spouse was very concerned that her husband would leave the military again because of his depression and that he would be unable to find work again. The push factors were the same as had caused him to leave before and his transition then had been unsuccessful. Hence the worry that history would repeat itself.

Another non-serving spouse whose marriage was coming to an end, recounted a story of what she described as an unsuccessful transition and the option of re-joining the military:

“ My husband opted to rent privately when he left the Army, utilising his redundancy payment to pay six months' rent up-front., subsequently becoming homeless after this as he had not secured a job.... The majority of his redundancy money went on online gambling....He was unsuccessful in getting

jobs ... The Army were very much aware of my husband's gambling problem, and I pleaded many times for assistance, but there is such little understanding of gambling as a serious mental health issue, my pleas fell on deaf ears. The support he received to leave the Army was very impersonal and more of a tick-box exercise... I feel the service to successfully assist my husband to transition to civilian life failed him. He is actually looking at re-joining the Armed Forces, which although it seems the only option in his life right now, would not be good for his wellbeing in the long term. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

We are aware that gambling appears to be an increasing concern for the military as it is very easy to become addicted to online gambling which can be pursued anywhere at anytime. The MOD has engaged with professional organisations to address this issue, including the Royal British Legion and BeGambleAware.

Some people had transitioned between different parts of the Service community:

“ Personally, having transitioned from Regular to Reserve both the good and poor parts have been experienced. Despite having completed over thirty-seven years regular service and having a pension, this [pension] is reduced to cover some of the cost of my pay as a reserve!... However, reserves no longer get medical or dental services, so these are additional costs to the household... Home to duty is not paid, again an additional cost. The transition workshops etc were good and provided the required information to move into the civilian sphere. ”

(RAF Serving Reserve).

The testimony given here is positive about the transition information, but includes disappointment about the financial penalty of returning as a Reserve member of the Armed Forces and the subsequent deduction from his pension. His suggestion to encourage others to join the Reserves would be to put the money deducted from his pension, which would have been paid in full had he not re-joined the Service community, into a pot and paid out on leaving the Reserves.

Ensuring holistic support

The Defence Holistic Transition Policy²⁷⁷ is important in promoting holistic support, and the UK Strategy for Our Veterans²⁷⁸ encompasses a ten year vision which is designed to ensure that the transition to civilian life should be as smooth as possible so that veterans can contribute fully in a society which understands and values what they have done and what they have to offer. In order to achieve this it is fully recognised that appropriate support must be in place throughout a person's military career for them and their family. In other words, relevant support needs to be available long before anyone takes the decision to leave the Armed Forces. It also requires a focus on the whole family. The transition policy will be delivered through Defence Transition Services administered through the MOD's Veterans UK, working in partnership with government departments in England, the devolved administrations, local authorities and the charity sector. The policy embraces every aspect of daily life for the Service leaver and the family, including housing, health, finance, employment, education and career management.

This holistic approach should address many of the concerns we heard during the review and serve to reduce the worries and anxieties some Serving personnel and their families spoke about, not only with respect to leaving the military but during their years of service as well. Research demonstrates that families play a key role in the transition into civilian life.²⁷⁹ The FiMT report makes a number of key recommendations about the importance of seeing transition through a wider lens and providing holistic support to families which includes information and guidance from an early point in the Serving person's career.²⁸⁰ The authors of the report stress that it is never too early to plan for leaving the military. We would suggest that planning for a career in the military is essential, and that this should start at day one, continue throughout the changes and transitions which typify life in the Armed Forces, and slide smoothly into

277 MOD (2019) *Defence Holistic Transition Policy*.

278 MOD and Cabinet Office (2018) *Strategy For Our Veterans*.

279 Heaver et al (2019) op.cit.

280 Ibid. p14.

planning for a life beyond the military. Support should be on a continuum which caters for every transition experienced by the Serving person and by their family throughout the military journey.

If this kind of holistic transition planning was continuous, some of the challenges experienced during military life which we have discussed in previous chapters would be alleviated as a result of there having been a clear focus on promoting the wellbeing of the whole family. We recognise that there is an implicit tension here: the MOD has a relationship as an employer with the Serving person and a responsibility for his or her career, while the relationship with the Serving person's family is distinctly different. However, the Families Strategy can set the principles and objectives for a more holistic approach which includes consideration of the welfare of the whole family, on the clear understanding that a well-supported family can better support a fully functioning Serving person. Promoting operational effectiveness does not imply that the focus should be solely on maintaining the wellbeing of the Serving person, quite the reverse. Engaging with families is obviously more challenging for the Armed Forces than engaging with Serving personnel, and barriers to communicating directly with spouses and partners need to be removed. We return to this in Chapter 10. As the FiMT report states:

“ Families want to be involved in their Service leaver's transition and direct communication with them without the need to go via the Service leaver as a 'gatekeeper' would be hugely valuable.”

An AFF survey of Unit Welfare Officers²⁸² highlighted poor communication between the Service leavers and their family as the biggest transition issue affecting family members. Many Welfare Officers in all three Services have told us of their frustration in having to rely on the Serving person to take information home to their partner and that it is clear to them that often information simply does not get passed on. Not surprisingly, therefore, spouses and partners feel that they do not have the information they need and are unaware of the support that is available to them. The FiMT study found that families' awareness of support services is low.

The FiMT study also found that families who have lived on the patch can feel lost and isolated when they move into civilian life and no longer have a network of military families nearby.²⁸³ This was experienced by many partners who contributed to our review where the family has made a decision to move into their own accommodation. This sense of loss is not restricted to the transition into civilian life at the end of Service... many families make this transition while continuing to be part of the military and experience a sense of loss and loneliness. It is important that support is forthcoming whenever that transition is made. This will impact more families in future given that the FAM pilots are underway.

A report by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ)²⁸⁴ identified a number of barriers families face during and after the transition to civilian life. They found that the family can be the most stabilising force during transition: the non-serving member may be able to ensure an ongoing income as well as provide a loving home and continued support to the ex-serving partner. However, US research has shown that while military life can act as a buffer against marital stress due to the support it offers, once military life has ended and the support networks and structures that existed have disappeared, marriages and partnerships may be negatively affected.²⁸⁵ The loss of subsidised housing and financial security can increase vulnerability. Similarly, while long periods of separation place a strain on many relationships, being together all the time after transition can also put a strain on the relationship. Providing relationship support can assist families in becoming more resilient to transitional changes.²⁸⁶

The CSJ study has suggested that spousal and partner employment can be a crucial part of successful transition to civilian life. Our review has revealed just how important partner employment is to the wellbeing of military families and we have recommended in Chapter 5 that the various initiatives to

281 Ibid. p19.

282 AFF (2018) *Online Survey of Army Unit Welfare Officers (worldwide)*.

283 Heaver et al (2019) op.cit.

284 CSJ (2016) op.cit.

285 Kelty, R. and Segal, D. (2013) *The Military as a Transforming Influence: Integration into or Isolation from Normal Adult Roles*; Wilmoth, J. K. and London, A. J., *Life Course Perspectives on Military Service*. Routledge.

286 Keeling, M. (2014) *Military Personnel and their Romantic Relationships: The impact of the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan*, Kings College, London.

support partners should be evaluated. We suggest that these evaluations should also consider the role they can play in supporting spouses and partners toward a smooth transition to civilian life. A number of families expressed concerns about their finances when they no longer had the security of a military income. There is evidence that some military veterans find themselves in debt and for some this can spiral into problem debt, hence the value of partners having meaningful employment.

A study²⁸⁷ which sought to understand why some individuals find it more difficult to handle transition from the military concluded that:

6 Peer support, fulfilling employment and good mental health can contribute to successful transition experiences for Service leavers.²⁸⁸ 9

In addition, family flexibility and a positive approach are also important but certain groups of Service leavers may be more vulnerable than others. The research that exists on the role of resilience suggests that it can both support and hinder transition experiences. Resilience has also been shown to help individuals in a range of other professions and, in various circumstances, to handle transition challenges more effectively.²⁸⁹

In 2018 The Behavioural Insights Team considered the ways in which transition could be improved through behavioural insights.²⁹⁰ Two themes underpin this literature review: the correlation between the likelihood of a 'successful' transition and the Service leaver having a stable, strong family with an independent income and accommodation; and the lack of use of the many support services available. Because families hold the key to smooth transition and adaptation to civilian life, increasing their engagement with the transition process is vital. Transition is not just about helping the Service person make the change from military life, but it involves the whole family.

The Behavioural Insights Team²⁹¹ in two important reports, in 2018 and 2019, have put forward a range of directions for thinking about how structures and processes in the Armed Forces can increase engagement with support services. The suggestions include simplifying processes wherever possible and thinking about how the options can be configured to be more understandable and personally tailored. It is clear that one size and one approach will not fit all families transitioning from the Armed Forces, and it is essential to take account of differences in age, rank, experience, life-stage, and branch of the military. Families who have never lived in SFA and always in a local community are likely to find it easier to manage the transition than those who have spent their life living on the patch surrounded by other Service families and a strong network identified with the military culture. Their key recommendations are divided into four overarching themes:

- reduce information overload
- involve the family in transition support
- tap into social networks
- continue support after transition

Within each of these themes are suggestions as to how to deliver each of these recommendations. These chime closely with proposals for improving transition support for Australian military families. The Australian Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme²⁹² asked ex-service family members what additional supports could ease the transition from military to civilian life. Three main suggestions emerged:

- more targeted, personalised and practical preparations, particularly for those with ongoing medical issues
- clearer and better targeted communications with families
- more responsive and streamlined service provision

287 Forces in Mind Trust (2016) *Life Transitions: What can be learnt across sectors to better support individuals when they undergo a life transition*, FiMT.

288 Ibid. p3.

289 Forces in Mind Trust (2016) *Life Transitions*. op cit.

290 Halkiopoulos, S., Makinson, L. and Heal, J. (2018) *Improving transition out of the Armed Forces: engaging families through behavioural insights*, Behavioural Insights Ltd.

291 Behavioural Insights Team (2019) *Applying Behavioural Insights to Successful Transition: improving successful transition out of the Armed Forces. Engaging Families through behavioural insights*, FiMT, The Behavioural Insights Team, Community Fund.

292 Smart, D., Muir, S. and Daranganova G. (2018) *Family Wellbeing Study: Summary Report*, Dept of Defence and Dept of Veterans' Affairs, Australia.

These reflect suggestions from other studies, including the suggestions we heard during the review. The lack of permitted direct communication with military spouses and partners in Australia mirrors the difficulties experienced in the UK. As a result, families in the UK and in Australia say that they feel ill-informed, that they miss out on being able to attend transition seminars and workshops, and that they have a limited knowledge of the services that are available to help them. Families here and in Australia would like more detailed information about the issues they might face and clearer guidance as to how and where to seek support. The use of social media is an obvious way in which to target personalised support in future. We examine this more closely in the next chapter.

There is general agreement here and in both Australia and Canada that more needs to be done to support military families in transition. A submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Transition from the Australian Defence Force²⁹³ made the following points:

- healthy and well-prepared families can facilitate a positive transition
- the career development and employment of spouses/partners has been a much over-looked component of healthy military families
- partner employment can be a facilitator of successful transition.

The Canadian Ombudsman stated in his 2016 review²⁹⁴ of support to military families in transition:

6 [a] successful transition from military to civilian life is essential to the long-term independence, financial security, health and social integration of the transitioning member and their family. This process affects the entire family....Adequate, accessible support to families is important to their long-term success. 9

The three Families Federations do a great deal to support families in transition and it is vital that the information they provide is made directly available to all families. The NFF, for example, has produced a Transition Guide for Families²⁹⁵ which provides a transition timeline, general information and a list of all the services that are available to support families with housing, finance, employment, education, health and wellbeing. It includes a great deal of practical information which is likely to be of help to most families. It is important that this is routinely given directly to RN/RM family members and not left to chance.

As the research shows, transition is not a linear process and multiple transitions will impact on all members of the family. A more holistic approach to transition and resettlement that involves the entire family is essential. The insights gained during our review of Serving military families demonstrate that the reasons people give for deciding to leave the Armed Forces are various and most decisions involve a number of considerations. For some people, there would appear to be a cumulative impact of disappointments in respect of spousal/partner employment, the lack of educational stability for children, the continuity of healthcare, frequent assignments which require moving around the country, and the multiple separations that are incompatible with a desire to create a stable family life. Often there would appear to be a further disappointment that constitutes the final push factor.

Nevertheless, most people, Serving and non-serving alike, express an element of regret to be giving up a life that they have largely enjoyed and which has provided interesting opportunities. Perhaps the strongest push factor for most people is the challenges they face trying to manage a family life alongside the demands of the military. A recent report by SSAFA²⁹⁶ highlights the fact that more men and women are leaving the Armed Forces at a younger age. It also shows that more than half of SSAFA veterans experienced problems in the first year after leaving the Armed Forces. The most common problems were: mental health or emotional wellbeing issues; difficulties finding or keeping employment; relationship difficulties or breakdown; physical health problems; and general difficulties in transitioning to civvy street. The report concludes that:

6 We need nothing less than a new social contract between the military and society....the military must ...prepare them [serving men and women] more thoroughly and earlier in their service careers.²⁹⁷ 9

293 McCue, A., *Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Transition from ADF*, Communication to the review.

294 Veterans' Ombudsman (2106) *Support to Military Families in Transition: a review*, Government of Canada.

295 NFF *Families Transition Too! A transition Guide for the families of Royal Navy and Royal Marines Service Leavers*.

296 SSAFA (2019) *The Nation's Duty: Challenging society's disservice to a new generation of veterans*, SSAFA/ Compass Partnership.

297 Ibid. p38.

We return to this suggestion in Chapter 10, emphasising that today's Serving men and women and their families are the veterans of tomorrow and deserve holistic support throughout their Service life:

6 Defence needs to ensure that it sets the support in place throughout the careers of our people and our Service families, long before they leave Service.²⁹⁸ 9

Service personnel leaving the Regular Armed Forces are entitled to access Career Transition Partnership (CTP) Resettlement services two years prior to their discharge date and for two years post discharge. The level of service offered varies depending on the Service person's length of service and category of discharge (e.g. medical/normal/compulsory). In addition to all Regular Service Leavers having access to CTP Services, they are also provided with resettlement leave, a training grant, travel costs and specialist briefs. CTP hold nine Employment Fairs a year and Service leavers and their family members may attend. Family members may also attend the specialist briefs. Whether family members always know about the briefings is a matter we address in the final chapter since we know that information designed for family members does not always reach them. Our review would suggest that it is very important that comprehensive information and advice about transitioning out of the military should be available to all Serving and non-serving family members well in advance of them leaving the Armed Forces.

In the next chapter we focus on the support needs of Serving military families and in Chapter 9 we consider some of the initiatives designed to support them.

Our recommendations

Transition and resettlement pathways: short term

Recommendation 78

The Ministry of Defence transition and resettlement pathways should always include family members to ensure a holistic approach to support before, during and after the Service Leaver has exited the military.

Transition and resettlement pathways: medium term

Recommendation 79

The Ministry of Defence to continue to work with other government departments, local authorities, Devolved Governments, the Families Federations, and the private and charity sectors to provide joined-up, consistent and seamless transition and resettlement processes for Service Leavers and their partners.

²⁹⁸ Defence Holistic Transition Policy 2019 op.cit. p5.

Chapter 8

Duty of Care and Moral Responsibility: Supporting Service Families

In Chapter 7 we noted that for some Serving personnel the incompatibility of military life and family life was a key driver in decisions to leave the military earlier than might have otherwise been the case. We stressed the importance of engaging the whole family in the transition and resettlement processes before, during and after the Serving member leaves the Armed Forces. Taking a whole family approach to supporting the ultimate transition in a military career is more likely to promote the best possible outcomes for each member and for the family as a unit, than an approach which focuses solely on the Service Leaver. This is also the case if the whole family is supported throughout a military career and, especially, through all the transitions that they have to negotiate. Research on military families has identified many strengths associated with positive adjustment to the challenges of military life.²⁹⁹ Moreover, as we have indicated, the majority of Service Leavers and their families adjust well to life in 'civvy street'.³⁰⁰

Although military and civilian families experience many of the same stressors in their everyday lives, military families will experience additional stressors. These become the norm for military families as they are absorbed into a military culture and lifestyle which expects operational effectiveness to be the first consideration. Nevertheless, however 'normal' military life becomes, and however well the Serving person and the family adjust to the demands of Service life, these stressors can present challenges which have the capacity to undermine and, sometimes, destroy couple relationships. Therefore, looking after and providing support to military families and ensuring their wellbeing are essential if the Armed Forces are to meet their objectives and mission. Research has shown that:

6 When families are cared for and doing well in the military community, Service members are more likely to stay in the military and to concentrate on their jobs when deployed or away from their families.³⁰¹ 9

In his introduction to the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018, the then Minister for Defence People and Veterans (the Rt. Hon. Tobias Ellwood MP) said:

6 The Armed Forces community is part of the fabric of our society. To appreciate this we need to look past the uniform to the Service person themselves: the family that supports them; and the rich context of the skills and experiences that they bring. To provide effective support, we need to recognise the contributions that spouses, partners and children of Service Personnel make, and reflect this in policy making, so that a stable family life supports our Service Personnel to thrive.³⁰² 9

He acknowledged that

6 we now have a better understanding of the issues our people face and the problems with resolving them. Our understanding is building a picture of how Service life creates issues for our people in a society which doesn't always recognise its specific exigencies.³⁰³ 9

²⁹⁹ Heaver et al (2019) op.cit.

³⁰⁰ Wiens, T. W. and Boss, P. (2006) *Maintaining Family Resiliency before, during and after military separations*. In C. A. Castro, A. B. Adler and T. W. Britt et al (eds) *Military Life: the psychology of serving in peace and combat: The Military Family*. Vol 3.

³⁰¹ Blaisure et al, (2016) op.cit. p260.

³⁰² *The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018* op.cit. p7.

³⁰³ *Ibid.* p8.

Our review has sought to enhance this understanding further. The aims were threefold, to:

1. Consider the diverse needs of Service families
2. Assess whether the current support on offer is meeting these needs
3. Provide evidence which will enable the MOD and the Armed Forces to enhance the delivery of vital support for military families.

In previous chapters of this report we have highlighted the ways in which family life in the UK has changed in recent decades and the implications of these for the Armed Forces with their long history and traditional military cultures. We have examined the key issues and stressors in modern Service life which impact on families and looked briefly at the drivers which cause some Serving personnel to leave the Armed Forces earlier than might be expected. Having discussed some of the thorny issues relating to accommodation, children's education, health and social care, and spousal/partner employment, in this chapter we examine the personal support needs identified by military families during our review, examine the support and interventions available to them, and consider the ways in which their wellbeing is fostered within the three single Services.. We also refer to the barriers military families experience in seeking help for personal issues. While each of the three single Services manages and delivers a variety of support in its own way, they all place great emphasis on being more family-friendly and more family-focused than in times past, and on endeavouring to meet the needs of the Service person and those of his or her family.

In Chapter 9 we look at the additional support that is provided in partnership with the Armed Forces charities, and at a number of initiatives which are offering specialised support, including those funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. We highlight some initiatives in the UK which are clearly valued by members of the Service community, and look at some of the learning from other countries. In both Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 we make a number of recommendations for changes which in our view would offer more consistent responses to the support needs of military families.

During our visits, military personnel in all three Services have stressed how the pressures of Service life can be very demanding for families. Welfare staff in all the three Services have pointed to a range of stressors which, in their view, exert huge pressure on families and disrupt family life. The stressors mentioned to us included the following:

- the current demanding work tempo
- long working hours
- manning gaps
- the isolated location of some military bases
- frequent moves
- restrictive employment opportunities for spouses and partners
- a lack of affordable and accessible childcare in some locations
- long periods of separation
- worries about disruptions in children's education
- ensuring continuity of health and social care
- Serving personnel being asked 'to do more and more with less and less'.

In previous chapters we have explored the specific concerns about the impact of separation and deployments on family life, and the high demands placed on Serving personnel. Several male respondents to our Call for Evidence quoted the mantra 'happy wife, happy life' as a way of describing the extent to which, in their view, home life and military life are interdependent, and to highlight the need for there to be a balance between the two if both the Armed Forces and military families are to thrive:

“... a happy life leads to good retention and dedicated personnel.I have just spent the last four years in the USA with the US Army and I can say that the provision of support for the US Armed Forces both for the Serving person and their family far outstrips that which we receive in the UK.”
(Army Serving partner)

Many non-serving partners described the very specific nature of military life:

“This profession is like no other. It requires a special kind of someone to want to do it, and more so it requires patience, sacrifice, resilience, dedication from both the Serving person and the family. ...My husband loves his profession. I also have a full-time job and it is hard to be married into Army life and lifestyle without any support. I love my husband and I am proud of him and his determination and will continue to support him as best I can. However, it is sometimes overwhelming to be always the second best to the Army. We sometimes struggle to see each other for weeks or months and mental health counselling is not something that is being offered to them or us.”
(Army non-serving partner)

This comment was typical of many, indicating a strong sense of duty and commitment but also highlighting the stresses which can so easily undermine them. We were told about a range of pressures on couple relationships and on families as a whole, the impacts of loneliness and social isolation, and the detrimental consequences of domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence. We examine each in turn.

Family and Relationship Stress

Stress is common in most couple relationships, civilian and military, at some point or other. It is often intensely personal and not a topic that many adults talk about openly. The nature of military life and the repeated separations can exacerbate stress in relationships for many couples and this needs to be acknowledged within the military community and talked about openly. A study undertaken for the Naval Families Federation (NFF)³⁰⁴ found that most Royal Navy spouses/partners perceived non-operational separations to have a negative effect on their employment, family functioning, and their health and wellbeing. Moreover, with an increasing number of RN/RM families choosing to live in their own homes and not on the patch, time spent apart, even when the Serving person is at the home base and not deployed or away on training and other exercises, is greater because of a pattern of weekending. This limits the time families have together, and short-notice changes to work rosters can add to the time spent apart. These repeated transitions for couples with children from being a two-parent to a one-parent household can be difficult for everyone, and can lead to resentment and conflicts about roles and relationships within the home. Many of those who responded to the Call for Evidence explained how difficult it is to manage the constant changes in their relationships with partners and children:

“I believe I have a very strong marriage but being a couple with a spouse in the military has definitely caused us issues. Separation is hard for both spouses and children... This abnormal lifestyle obviously takes its toll on families and relationships...I have had to take on all household responsibilities. I deal with all our financial commitments, all our children's welfare issues, and all the household maintenance. I make most of the decisions as a single parent as, in essence, that is what I have been for the majority of my marriage.”
(RM non-serving partner)

This spouse went on to describe the challenges she experiences when her husband returns home:

“There have been incidents of explosive rage due to where my husband has totally lost the plot. Soldiers/marines are taught aggression and violence but they are not taught how to control it or use it appropriately. ...I am aware that incidents such as this are quite common but are also an unspoken shame.”

Clearly when aggression results in domestic abuse the issue is not only more difficult to deal with but potentially becomes a criminal offence. We turn to this later in the chapter.

The stress associated with the non-serving partner having to take responsibility for everything at home was a common theme in the submissions:

³⁰⁴ Gribble, R. and Fear, N. T. (2019) *The effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy/Royal Marines families*. KCMHR, Greenwich Hospital.

“ In his fourteen year career my husband spent seven consecutive years where the majority of his time was spent away from home....This was despite me having moved to a married patch in his home port to live in the same house as my husband. Several of our friends have left the Service having been unable to cope with the demands of Service life. Any relationship would struggle under those demands. We had two children during that time and the eldest barely saw his father for the first three years of life....our child still remains very emotional at the separations despite this having been our ‘normal’ way of life. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

This Navy partner catalogued the impacts on her and her family as follows:

- exhaustion from being the sole parent for long periods
- resentment at having to shoulder everything for the family on her own
- sadness in seeing her husband’s feelings of failure and guilt at missing out on watching their children grow up
- increased stress as her husband went from one stressful job to another with no respite, which put further pressure on their relationship
- sleep deprivation with a baby that woke hourly for best part of a year.

Other partners talked about the difficulty the Serving person has in ‘switching off’ when they are with the family:

“ My husband’s headspace is occupied with work non-stop. So, often, although he’s here physically, he’s not mentally. One of my children wouldn’t go to him until he was two and a half years old because of a lack of bond and trust.... Having over one hundred and ten days of leave outstanding he’d not managed to take due to the nature and pressure of the job, also takes its toll on all members of the family. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

Some families told us about the high number of days’ leave that the Serving partner had stacked up and, because of frequent trawls for specialist skills/trades, it had been impossible to take the leave owing to them.

Other families told us that their relationship was in danger of breaking down altogether:

“ My relationship with my husband is right near the end purely because of the Army and the Army way of life ... Me being on my own eighty per cent of the time as my husband’s regiment is always away. It’s OK in their {the Army’s} eyes. The wife can just struggle and put up with it. ... The build up to deployments and while he’s away there is no support, no effort or nothing from the Army. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

This partner was caring for children with special educational needs and mental health problems, gaps in their schooling, and her own difficulty in securing work. Other partners talked of the stresses which had just mounted up over the years:

“ I have a professional career and my husband serves in the Royal Marines. We have two children and since our second child was born my husband has been deployed away from his unit for three quarters of the year pretty much every year for seven years....He often returns from a deployment with a week’s turnaround and is off again, so the children’s emotions are like a roller-coaster. This meant I was juggling shift work, running our home, looking after our two children and operating on a few hours’ sleep at night. ”

(RM non-serving partner)

Eventually this partner’s health suffered and she experienced severe migraines. She then heard that her house was to be compulsorily purchased by the local council for road developments, and her daughter was suffering from anxiety which was affecting her son’s behaviour:

“ I worry about what the constant time away is doing to my children’s wellbeing...I do not think my husband’s unit do enough with families in supporting them or arming them with knowledge on where to get help. ...With my husband being away so frequently it has meant we are almost at breaking point both in our relationship and mentally. The support needs to be more consistent. ”

(RM non-serving partner)

Several spouses/partners spoke about the number of special family occasions their military partner had missed over the years:

“ Naval life has given us two main challenges, namely frequent moves and separation. My husband has always been in high stress roles and often in areas of conflict. This has been at the cost of his presence at many significant life events, e.g. seventy-five per cent of the children’s birthdays, all bar three family holidays in the last fifteen years, my mother’s death and funeral, various house moves ...It has also been at the cost of the quality of our relationship and has had an impact on our mental health and wellbeing and that of our children. The logistics of parenting alone does get easier but the emotional aspects become far harder... ”

(RN non-serving partner)

“ Pressures on Service couples...terrible, absolutely terrible: Christmases, birthdays, weddings, anything are all ruined by military life. Anyone in the military will tell you that you cannot have a decent civilian, family life. Every time my wife wants to plan a holiday I have to constantly remind her that its irrelevant if I’ve been told I can get the time off now, if something comes up between now and then I will not be able to come,...My family has been to breaking point and back countless times for this and it is really starting to take its strain on everything. ”

(Army Serving partner)

“ My husband missed most of his children’s birthdays...in 2010 he was away for nine months...huge strain on our marriage. He was also able to have an affair whilst overseas on operations...In addition he has a gambling addiction and throughout his Service career has always been able to continue gambling online (poker) regardless of where he has been in the world. ”

(Army non-serving ex-partner)

Others highlighted the challenges of making new friends every time they moved:

“ The pressure on service couples in the military is vast and as a result many relationships do not stand the brunt of what is thrown at them. Having to move and make new relationships is easier for the Service partner...it is significantly harder for parents to achieve this... ”

(Army Serving partner)

The Army wife quoted below simply yearned for people to understand what it feels like to be left at home and become a ‘single’ parent so much of the time:

“ The pressure on families and relationships is always hard, especially those with frequent deployments and awful shift patterns. I know of many couples that have separated or divorced at our current posting, or moved camps to try to save their marriage. ... **I wish someone took the time to live in OUR shoes** [our emphasis], especially those wives and children left at home, where they become single parents for months at the time. Where they won’t tell the Serving person anything about what is going wrong at home because they want them to concentrate on doing their job and come home safely. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

The concluding comment in this submission carried a stark message:

“ Thank you for taking the time to look into this independently from the military. Despite numerous continuous attitude surveys run by all three branches of the military and the families’ federations, nothing has changed over the last twelve years. ”

We very much hope that certain aspects of military life will change as a result of this review. It may be that more could be done to prepare families for the impacts of repeated separations and to identify those non-serving partners who may be struggling to cope with home life while their Serving partner is away on operations.

The extracts above demonstrate how the emotional pressures on couple relationships are inclined to increase as time goes by, and how some relationships are near to breaking point. The 2019 FamCAS survey³⁰⁵ found that the effect of Service life on the couple relationship was the fourth highest negative aspect reported (35% negative). The Army Families' Federation submission³⁰⁶ to this review reported that split families and blended (step-) families are becoming more and more common amongst those the AFF support and there had been a 55 per cent increase in enquiries about marital breakdown in the last year. A report by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund³⁰⁷ discussed ten main challenges which Service children have to deal with. One of these referred to divorce and family breakdown.

The first UK Marriage Conference for the Armed Forces was held in 2009 and noted that 70 per cent of Service spouses had said that military operations in the past two years had had a negative impact on their couple relationship. In part, this will have been influenced by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan which put extreme pressure on military families and couple relationships and led to increased levels of drinking and mental health issues. Although the intense military activity is long over, the transition from being on deployment to being back with the family can still be extremely difficult to manage. Some non-serving partners told us about having to cope with pregnancy and childbirth alone while their partner was away:

“*Sadly my partner and I separated due to the stresses of the job and the emotional pressures it can cause. I didn't cope well during pregnancy mentally and I felt lonely and isolated moving [to a new area].*”
(Army Serving partner, now separated)

“*The military inadvertently asks so much of the spouses...the problems [accommodation, childcare and employment] leave most spouses feeling dejected, unimportant and with a huge lack of confidence. Couple that with a soldier that gets to go off skiing, sailing, constant stream of nights in the mess with the lads, and it's hard not to start resenting them for it.*”
(Army non-serving partner)

Most non-serving spouses/partners who move around with their Serving partner emphasised how important it is for them to be together whenever possible, and in this respect they worry about the unintended consequences of FAM and the potential to be further removed from welfare support:

“*Needless to say, military life puts pressure on relationships, but in my experience being able to live together is crucial for the marriage to survive. This will become harder with the new housing model [FAM]...most welfare and mental health issues [for Serving partners on deployment] are to do with families and relationships back home. A stable family is a stable soldier, the more healthy the family is, the more effective the soldier. ... Easy access to welfare is crucial... Welfare is so crucial, most families are stationed away from their own families and communities they grew up in and need access to their regimental communities.*”
(Army non-serving partner)

This partner referred to the lack of extended family members nearby to offer support, which is a common factor for many military families, and this adds to the pressures and underlines the need for appropriate support. We note that the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review committed the MOD to make a career in the Armed Forces better balanced with family life, reflecting the realities of modern life. The Future Accommodation Model gives more choice to more Service personnel, including co-habiting couples, as to where, how and with whom they live, but the introduction of increased choice does highlight the need for appropriate welfare support to be available to all families irrespective of where they live.

305 UK Tri-Service FamCAS Results (2019) op.cit.

306 AFF Submission 1 April 2019.

307 Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund (2009) *The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict*, RN/RM Children's Fund.

Many Serving and non-serving partners referred to the impact of deployments on their relationship:

“*There is a lot of pressure on relationships, pre- and post-deployment especially. The length of deployment is a big factor. Pre-deployment the wife and kids know where you're going so they worry. This builds up as the deployment gets closer and closer. During deployment they are understandably worried the whole time you are gone. Post-deployment, the person who has been away is used to being away and will have to get used to family life again. This is hard when you have been away for a long time being shot at. You have to learn to re-integrate into society along with managing the rest of the family worries and protecting the family from your own worries.*”
(RAF Serving partner)

“*The cycle of deployment and return is very repetitive and there are stages much like a grief cycle. When my husband returned after eleven months away he was a different person and it took a long time for him to adjust. He was frankly vile and very hard to live with for a short while and we argued a lot, but there was no support for me as the partner, only through talking to an older woman did I learn that this was 'normal'... I needed some support or warning about him returning home...it isn't an experience that people who don't have a Serving partner can relate to.*”
(RN non-serving partner)

We referred to the emotions and behaviours typically associated with the cycle of deployment in Chapter 4 and recommended that the detailed information about how the cycle of deployment impacts children of various ages and spouses/partners, promoted by the Naval Families Federation,³⁰⁸ should be made available to all military families. The NFF briefing for parents and children also contains a comprehensive list of the organisations that can support families, and each of the Services could easily replicate this very valuable guide. Clearly the Royal Navy spouse in the above extract had not seen the information which would almost certainly have helped her to understand the conflict and unhappiness that existed between her and her husband. We reiterate our strong recommendation that information about and help to understand the emotional intricacies of deployments and their effect on relationships before, during and after should be provided routinely to every Serving person and to every member of a Service family. There is abundant knowledge about the emotional cycle of deployment that there can be no excuse for the Services not to ensure that it is widely disseminated, and that support is available to those who need it. Some non-serving partners claimed that they had received no support:

“*When they [Serving personnel] go on missions, exercises, deployments, those left behind do not get any help or support from the Army. We often do not know what is going on as they cannot have mobile phones with them and we do not receive any updates from the Army.*”
(Army non-serving partner)

“*I feel there is very little advice and help available to partners...there aren't any military specific help resources, and there should be.*”
(RN non-serving partner)

The lack of information and help was mentioned frequently as adding to the pressures of being left at home to get on with family life. The Centre for Social Justice recommended in 2016³⁰⁹ that the MOD should look into ways of structuring preparation for families before and after deployments, giving time for both partners, together and separately, to discuss the possible association of deployment with mental health issues, alcohol abuse and domestic violence. It is important for military families to understand that the cycle of deployment can trigger adverse reactions and to know how to cope with the emotions and stressors, and where to seek appropriate help.

The NFF study into non-operational family separations on family functioning³¹⁰ found that frustrations about shouldering all the childcare and household tasks, and resentment that their Serving partner was rarely at home, could build up. However, few spouses actually shared these emotions and frustrations with

308 Naval Families Federation (2019) op.cit.

309 Centre for Social Justice (2016) *Military Families and Transition*, CSJ.

310 Gribble and Fear (2019) op.cit.

their partner when he came home. Instead, physical intimacy could be reduced to the point where the couple were living separate lives, co-existing rather than sharing a couple relationship. At the extreme, this drifting apart could easily result in complete separation and divorce. This pattern of growing apart, feeling resentful, spending less and less time together, and putting the relationship on the back burner mirrors the experiences of many civilian couples who separate without really communicating about their problems or seeking help.³¹¹ There continues to be a huge stigma in society about admitting to relationship difficulties and about asking for help. This stigma is heightened in the military due to the perceived risks of disclosing marital problems to the Chain of Command and the belief that there could be adverse consequences for the Serving partner's career.

The deterioration in couple relationships in all walks of life, civilian and military, usually increases over time. It is rarely caused by a sudden catastrophic event.³¹² A study³¹³ of relationship difficulties among UK military personnel looked specifically at demographic, military and deployment-related factors from the perspective of the Serving person. It found that the likelihood of UK military personnel experiencing relationship difficulties is increased due to personal vulnerabilities which may be exacerbated in the military context. The quality of the relationship prior to deployment influences the impact of deployment on the relationship, as do other factors in the person's life. It reinforces the proposal that preparing people for couple relationships and preparing them for life in the military are both important preventative interventions in assisting couples to cope with the additional relationship pressures experienced in Service life:

“ As a soldier currently attending relationship support I can testify that the pressure being placed on Serving personnel within the workplace is increasing as the number of soldiers decreases... We work in an environment where we are seen as a failure if we allow things to fail, even if it puts excess pressures on our family lives. ”

(Army Serving partner)

The RAF Benevolent Fund's study of the needs of RAF Service families³¹⁴ found that marriage and relationship difficulties or breakdown was top of the list of problems reported by Serving personnel. Interestingly, this was not the most significant problem for their spouses/partners who cited loneliness as the most serious problem for them. This reflects the different experiences for each partner in dealing with military life, but loneliness can also lead to a deterioration in relationships. There is no evidence to suggest that military couples have higher divorce rates than civilian couples. A comparative study³¹⁵ of military and civilian couples indicated that, overall, military personnel are more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced than the general population. However, women in the military and married military personnel younger than 30 years of age are more likely to report divorce than the general population. The authors suggested, therefore, that military welfare services might target these groups with programmes to support marital relationships, a recommendation we endorse.

Some families in our review raised the issue of mental health and its impact on relationships:

“ The Army are sending men out on a new tour that are not properly over the emotional and mental pain of their last tour.... I feel that Service personnel and their families require far more support and assistance before, during and after overseas service in relation to mental health. Families should be offered guidance on how to support their parents/spouse/children and Serving personnel should receive support prior to coming home, including on R n R ... I feel that the Army have so much to answer for in relation to the welfare of their Serving personnel and their families... I think there should be education for all military children about what their parent's job is, what they may experience and the potential impacts on the family. There should be a support line that older children can access if they wish. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

311 Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

312 Ibid.

313 Keeling, M., Wessely, S., Dandeker, C., Jones, N. and Fear, N.T. (2015) *Relationship Difficulties among UK Military Personnel: The impact of socio-demographic, military and deployment-related factors*, Marriage and Family Review, vol 51. Issue 3.

314 RAF Benevolent Fund (2018) *Meeting the Needs of the Serving RAF Community*, RAFBF/Compass Partnership.

315 Keeling, M., Wessely, S. and Fear, N.T. (2017) *Marital Status Distribution of the U.K. Military: Does It Differ From the General Population?* Military Behavioural Health Vol 5, Issue 1. pp 26–34.

Having talked with a number of children and young people during this review and heard their comments about the specific aspects of military life that impact on them, we consider that the availability of a confidential helpline for young people from a military family has much to recommend it. We realise that ChildLine is an obvious port of call with a long and distinguished track record of supporting civilian children and young people who would like to talk to someone in confidence. However, it is important that the skilled staff who answer calls from military children and young people are fully aware of and understand the particular stresses they experience as a result of the lifestyle they live. A dedicated military phone line would ensure that the staff answering calls would fully understand the pressures of Service life. We consider that there is considerable potential for the MOD/Armed Forces to work in partnership with a very experienced provider, such as ChildLine, to develop a specialist service for military children and young people and to ensure staff are trained to handle calls from this group of the population. We suggest that this possibility should be explored with ChildLine as a key partner.

Pressures on the relationships of dual-serving couples

A number of dual-serving couples pointed to the pressures of work on their relationships. They drew attention to the additional stressors on their relationship when they are not co-located, a problem which is increased if they are serving in different branches of the Armed Forces:

“ Pressure on my relationship with my spouse and both of us with our children is considerable. We are resigned to living separately for the majority of the time. We have no prospect of living together. I have no choice about where I work and neither does he. We have no choice over who is in a position to care for the children and therefore where they live We both love our jobs but have discussions about whether it is really worth the cost to our marriage and our children. ”

(RN dual-serving partner)

We found that several dual-serving couples had made the decision that one of them would have to leave the Armed Forces:

“ The year post our wedding my husband and I were both deployed at sea. It very nearly broke us. The added pressure of having a displaced family, small children, both parents in Command and trying to still strive for promotion and advancement is a hard dynamic to manage... I do worry about the long-term effects on my children's health and mental wellbeing at being under constant change... It is my opinion that long-term it is unsustainable to have two parents in the Forces. ... What our future holds as a family is always on my mind. My children must come first, followed by our needs as a couple. I would very much like to continue working in the Royal Navy but not to the destruction of my marriage and my children's happiness. ”

(RN dual-serving partner)

This Serving mother speculated that she would be the first to leave the Forces at her 20 year point to provide some stability for their children. Another mother described how it had become impossible for her to continue her career in the RAF and for her husband to continue his in the Army. For several years they had both been deployed but when her husband began to experience mental health issues they decided that he would leave the military:

“ After starting his civilian career I was posted on a long course, where I was living away from home again. Unfortunately this nearly caused irreparable damage to our marriage and to the mental health of both us and our daughter... After ten months into the course we were all struggling and I was advised by the welfare officer to request flexi-working from home two days a week to mitigate the problems I was having at home... This was flatly denied. ... Currently in my own career I am looking to leave the RAF as soon as financially possible, as I believe the stress levels I have endured since becoming a parent and combining it with military service are too much. I am going to look at the new flexible service options and possibly try it out for a while. ”

(RAF Serving partner)

For some female Serving partners balancing the role of mother with the demands of a military career was regarded as just too difficult. It would appear that in these circumstances it is female military personnel who usually take the decision to become a Service Leaver:

“ In addition to all the stresses most Service families face, I believe there is still a difference for a Service couple where both partners work in the military. Traditionally the Service is geared for men with wives at home. There is a rule which states that both members of a Serving couple cannot be deployed at the same time, but this does not extend to non-deployable roles...I was offered a role that would have seen me away from home at least three out of every four weeks. ”

(RN dual-serving partner)

“ I have been within the military environment all my life. I took the decision to leave Regular Service a number of years ago...My husband was about to be loaded onto a year-long development course and I felt that my position to remain a mother, wife and Servicewoman became untenable...We have chosen to live together as a family and not subject my husband to a weekly commute. ”

(Dual RAF Reservist/Army Serving partners)

This former RAF officer became a Reservist on Volunteer Ex-Regular Reserve Service while her husband continued his Army career. She urged that

“ it is vitally important that the families of those serving receive education and support to enhance their understanding of the environment in which they will be enveloped. ”

Other dual-serving couples spoke about the difficulties they experienced in managing deployments:

“ Immense pressures! I personally feel that ‘To Serve’ is to also deploy which sadly means that I might shortly be leaving the Services. Having children within the military setting certainly changes your perceptions... Deployments are just too frequent and long for it to be ‘healthy’ and sustainable for a family... A pressure felt by both my husband and I is that it frequently feels as though there is a great demand for output within our job roles, with a lack of resources and a shocking lack of personnel ... Service persons find themselves burnt out. It is also very difficult for the vast majority of married Service personnel to cohabit [live together in the same property], particularly with different cap badges...I am shocked to realise just how much time my husband and I spend apart while he is deployed or living two and a half hours away whilst UK based. Relationships suffer. ...I am most likely signing off now [from Army career]. The pressures and lack of support have consolidated my opinions. ”

(Army dual-serving partner)

“ We are under constant pressure particularly when it comes to moving. With us both in the Services, ... our pressures have always come from the fact that we are an Army/RAF Serving couple and each Service will demand that the other has the issue to deal with. ... The process of moving and running a dual Service military family home is complicated enough but the stress we have continually faced is unacceptable. ”

(Army dual-serving partner)

These families were only too aware of the competing demands of family life and Service life...the contest between two ‘needy’ institutions, which we drew attention to in Chapter 2. They also referred to the lack of understanding and support within the military:

“ I have seen many marriages and couples break-up whilst serving with the British military. I myself have been married twice, first to someone in the Royal Marines, currently to someone Serving in the RAF, both while I was serving in the Army. The pressure on women within the Armed Forces to commit wholeheartedly to their chosen career while trying to keep a marriage and family together is stressful to say the least. The Armed Forces are NOT and never have been female friendly. ...There is a huge amount of bullying going on within the military, which I have been witness to. I know that most women I joined up with in 2011 are no longer in the Armed Forces...All ranks are being forced to complete work within an unrealistic time frame while being supported by worn out civilian staff and a depressed military workforce. ”

(Army ex-serving partner)

The introduction of flexible working may enable some dual-serving couples to stay in the Armed Forces but if they are based in different locations the pressures on their couple relationship will still be a factor in their decision-making. There needs to be much greater coordination of career pathways for these couples, and career managers from different branches need to liaise with each other to manage the deployment patterns of each person so that leaving the military does not become the only option for one if not both partners. Several dual-serving couples commented on a lack of coordination of career pathways and the seeming reluctance of career managers to talk to each other when they are dealing with dual-serving personnel.

Loneliness and social isolation

One of the pernicious aspects of Service life can be the loneliness felt by the non-serving partner when the Serving partner is away from home. The RAF Benevolent Fund study demonstrated this and revealed the consequences³¹⁶ of additional stresses on the couple relationship. More RAF personnel and their partners had experienced problems with community and social isolation than with respect to any other theme: 52 per cent of Serving personnel and 67 per cent of spouses/partners cited it as a problem. Loneliness was reported particularly by RAF personnel who were separated, divorced or widowed. Serving women and those in dual-serving households were also more likely than other RAF personnel to feel lonely. The impact of frequent moves was cited as a stressor that added to non-serving partners feeling lonely because it is hard to make and sustain friendships.

We met a number of partners of sub-mariners on our visit to HMNB Clyde and they explained just how lonely life can be when their partners are deployed with virtually no contact and no definite date for coming home. We heard of return dates being changed and submarines arriving home weeks later than expected. These spouses and partners were proud of their Serving partners and the job they do but conscious of the significant negative impacts on their family life and on their relationships, especially when timetables are unpredictable or changed at short notice.

The stresses and pressures were articulated in a long, detailed and balanced response from one non-serving partner with two young children in a long-term cohabiting relationship of 15 years with a sub-mariner. They had bought a house some 50 miles from the base so that the non-serving partner could be nearer to her mother, but she was unable to continue in her own professional career because of the difficulty locating affordable childcare. They had to live in private accommodation since SFA was not available to them until 2019, a rule which this partner described as

“ hugely outdated for today’s society, and quite archaic...there should be more equality for cohabiting couples, ensuring people like us are entitled to the same privileges as those who choose to be married. ”

While cohabiting couples are now able to apply for SFA, at the moment they do not have entitlement even if they are eligible, and we have made recommendations about the seeming inequality of this provision in Chapter 3.

Extensive extracts from this partner’s submission to our review are included here because they reflect many of the similar accounts we heard from other non-serving partners in all three Services who were living in dispersed accommodation away from the military estate, irrespective of their marital status. Undoubtedly, the specific pressures are felt more keenly by those for whom communication during deployment is limited or non-existent due to the nature of their Serving partner’s work:

“ The pressures on Service couples are tenfold. You have all the usual stresses of family life and then on top of this you have the stress of deployment periods, homecomings, last minute drafts, and ‘will he be here or not? Can I book that or not?’ And all the horrendous nights worrying whilst he’s away, ‘Is he safe?’ ... Even after fifteen years together we still find it difficult to go about our daily lives without things always being cancelled or changed. We both have such a longing for a ‘normal family life’ where we get weekends together...just the ability to make plans and stick to them! ...His job has to come first. It’s what’s expected and what he gives. ... He works extremely long, gruelling hours, spends months away from his family and friends, misses out on so

316 RAF Benevolent Fund (2018) op.cit.

many of the children's milestones... We once had the car packed ready to go on holiday, a holiday that had been approved, and my partner was told the day we were leaving that he would have to stay for 'essential training' that could last a couple of days. We lost out on our only family holiday for the sake of what turned out to be one day's training. So even when he is classed as 'alongside', plans can change at the very last minute. ”

“ For me, I have to be so many things at once that it can be so overwhelming [our emphasis]. As a partner I have to be understanding when he comes home and says 'ok, all the dates have changed' ...my frustration cannot be put on him, which is very hard. When my partner's away I am on my own and in charge of everything, which is daunting. I know of so many relationships that break down as it is so hard.... The pressure, especially if things at home are going wrong when you don't have your partner to support you, is incredible.... I feel more help to the families of deployed Service members, especially for those with children who don't live near the base is needed [our emphasis]. While my partner is deployed there is a coffee morning held near the base weekly but with it being a one hundred miles round trip it is difficult for me to attend. It's a very lonely life, [our emphasis] and the sacrifices that we go through as a family always seem so significant yet not recognised. ”

(RN non-serving long-term cohabiting partner)

This lived experience highlights the challenges when the family live away from a military base and cannot take advantage of activities or the support offered on the base, the absence of a military peer group who share the same pressures, and the unpredictability of family time such that arrangements frequently change, which is especially hard for children as well as the partner at home. It also indicates the disadvantage long-term cohabiting partners have faced with the restriction on eligibility and entitlement for SFA.

A recent online survey examined the challenges for the non-serving partners of sub-mariners transitioning from Plymouth to Helensburgh.³¹⁷ Some of the findings echo the sentiments expressed above. Spouses and partners asked for more clarity about timings and logistics to allow a more balanced and predictable family life:

“ He's currently working duties every day so we barely get to speak and this is before he leaves on a deployment of unknown length and unknown contact arrangements. It kills marriages! I love my husband and it won't break us but it is HUGELY affecting my mental health. I had a mental health breakdown in 2016 and I'm scared of another one. There is NO support/help available for those of us who don't live close to base [our emphasis]. I was left totally alone in 2016 and feel exactly the same way now'.³¹⁸ ”

In his Foreword to a study into loneliness and isolation in the Armed Forces community,³¹⁹ The Director General of The Royal British Legion wrote:

“ We know from existing evidence that loneliness and social isolation are damaging to physical and mental health, and can even increase the risk of mortality. ... While membership of the Armed Forces community bestows many benefits such as discipline, leadership and teamwork skills, findings from this research suggest that some elements of the Forces lifestyle can increase vulnerability and social isolation.³²⁰ ”

Loneliness and social isolation are closely interconnected: loneliness usually describes a subjective feeling/emotion and social isolation is a more objective measure of social interactions. Risk factors for loneliness and social isolation are multifaceted but the most common are considered to be: life transitions, of which military families experience many; relationship breakdown or bereavement; and poor mental or physical health, injury or disability. Loneliness and social isolation are not confined to the elderly in society, as is often thought, but can be experienced at any age and stage of life.³²¹

317 Watt, N. (2019) *The Submarine transition programme: concerns and challenges faced by military spouses and partners*, Wee Scottish Lassie.

318 Ibid. p19.

319 The Royal British Legion (2019) *Loneliness and Isolation in the Armed Forces Community*, Royal British Legion.

320 Ibid. p3

321 Hardeep, A. (2016) *Isolation and Loneliness: an overview of the literature*, British Red Cross.

Loneliness and isolation can lead to ill-health and relationship breakdown and vice versa. The FANDF survey³²² of Forces families with additional needs or disabilities highlighted the feelings of isolation often felt by these families. Dealing with a family member with additional needs can enhance feelings of isolation, leading to depression, anxiety and constant stress. This can impact on the mental health of other family members. The survey also highlighted the perceived lack of support offered to these families as a consequence of frequent relocations. Dispersed families described a lack of contact with the Service person's unit or military welfare staff, and a lack of support from the Chain of Command. The report also notes that when the Serving person is unable to offer much support to their partner the bulk of caring responsibilities for children with additional needs falls on the non-serving partner, rendering their ability to sustain employment impossible, thus exacerbating their sense of isolation and their stress levels.

Within the general population, four per cent of adults report being lonely 'always' or 'often'.³²³ By contrast, the Royal British Legion survey indicates that 25 per cent of members of the Armed Forces community reported feeling lonely 'always' or 'often'. It is important to note that the survey included veterans and was not confined to Serving members and their partners. We know that older people in the general population tend to report feeling lonely more than others, so we should consider the figure of 25 per cent with some caution due to the inclusion of veterans and the consequent profile of the respondents. We do not have specific figures for Serving personnel. Nevertheless, the survey shows that almost 70 per cent of respondents agreed that loneliness and social isolation are common issues within the Armed Forces community. The greatest trigger of loneliness and social isolation was said to be exiting the Armed Forces (51%), closely followed by moving to a new area (50%). Relationship breakdown (20%) was fifth on the list of triggers.

The Royal British Legion report highlights the number of transitions which military families face and the tendency for these to increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness. Postings to different areas disrupt social connections and support networks³²⁴ especially for those not moving as a unit or not living on the patch. A number of non-serving partners who contributed to our review pointed to the difficulties in making new friends and connections when moving to a new area. Those living off the patch often felt 'different' from their civilian neighbours because of their connection to the military and to a way of life that is not well understood in the civilian population unless the community is situated near to a military base. This sense of social isolation was evident in the comments by spouses/partners in all three Services who were living away from a base. Moreover, the Armed Forces culture is such that it promotes self-sufficiency which in itself can mitigate against Serving and non-serving partners admitting to feeling lonely or isolated and seeking help and support.

The Royal British Legion report draws attention to the need to take account of the additional stresses and pressures on mobile military families and to be aware of the impact of these on couple relationships. It also emphasises the importance of helping family members and Serving personnel to be aware of and understand the triggers which can result in relationship breakdown and the pressures relating to the cycle of deployment, and to know how to access the support that is available. We recognise that reaching out to non-serving spouses and partners is especially challenging and we consider the communication issues within the Armed Forces in Chapter 10. Social media and specialised Apps could be useful in ensuring that information is given to family members without depending on the Serving partner to share it. The three Families Federations have an important role to play here, especially in reaching out to dispersed families. Living away from the patch can render some families especially vulnerable, as can caring for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Long-term and chronic health problems can also increase vulnerability.

322 FANDF (2020) op.cit.

323 Morrison, K. (2017) *Social Capital in the UK: May 2017*. Office for National Statistics.

324 See Sharp, M.L. (2016) *Social Influences and Barriers to Seeking Healthcare for Mental Health Problems among UK Military Personnel: qualitative and quantitative investigations*, Kings College London.

Domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence

We were told by welfare staff that domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence appear to be increasing issues within the military community. Public campaigns to increase awareness and understanding of domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence are likely to have made it generally more acceptable for partners to disclose issues and to seek help. Nevertheless, this is a very sensitive area. Since talking about abuse is often very difficult and people are wary of disclosing it because of the potential consequences of speaking out, we did not receive many examples from the families who contributed to the review. However, a few families told us about their experience of domestic abuse but, not surprisingly, it was not mentioned as openly as other relationship difficulties. Interestingly, welfare staff rarely mentioned it unless we asked about it. When asked, however, they were quick to point out that it is an issue that is increasingly reported to them and one which they regard as being both serious and complex to address.

In their Summary of Need in 2018,³²⁵ the Naval Families Federation highlighted that there are insufficient data on domestic violence within the Armed Forces, and a lack of information about its extent. It is widely accepted, however, that there are risk factors in the military community which are known to show a correlation with domestic abuse and barriers to disclosing abuse and seeking support. To a large extent it remains a hidden issue but one that the MOD is fully aware of. In November 2019, the MOD launched a Domestic Abuse Awareness Campaign, aligned with the UN 16 Days of Action Campaign. The launch event involved 16 charities and experts, as well as survivors of domestic abuse who gave accounts of their experiences. Chief of Defence People introduced the campaign with a blog on MODNet and this was followed with other articles over the course of the sixteen days. We very much welcome this initiative and understand that the next steps are being considered and, in particular, how to reach families. The MOD is a member of the Employers Initiative on Domestic Abuse (EIDA) and the MOD Domestic Abuse Working Group is re-writing the policy on domestic abuse. The new policy is being facilitated by the charity Hestia and their 'everyone's business' programme. The MOD has also engaged the Five Eyes community to draw on policy and guidance and learn lessons. These steps are important in bringing the issue of domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence into the open within the Armed Forces, and in increasing awareness and understanding of a matter which remains hidden in many parts of society.

Although few respondents to our Call for Evidence named domestic abuse as an issue for them, several referred to anger and rage when the Serving partner returned home after deployment which cause serious relationship issues. One very detailed submission from the wife of an Army veteran explained that all through her marriage of fifteen years her husband had consistent problems with anger and control. She had called the police several times but complained that nothing was done because, she thinks, in the words of the police 'the abuse is only emotional rather than physical'. It is important to note that police forces across the UK are now far more aware of the range of abusive behaviours, emotional, psychological and physical, that cause enormous stress for victims, and specialist units have been set up to address these issues. This non-serving partner told us that she had contacted Women's Aid for help but she felt that they 'did not understand military issues'. Her husband was eventually diagnosed with PTSD and was receiving support. She wrote:

“ I didn't sign up for the Army and should not be going through this...please don't let me get punished daily... ”

This submission highlights the difficulty for a non-serving partner to access help and for the stresses on her health to be recognised. She went on to ask for spouses/partners to be given what she referred to as a 'Forces Spouse/Partner Card' which would at least offer her some recognition when approaching agencies for help. We return to the provision of cards that accord some status to spouses/partners as members of military families in Chapter 10.

Disclosing domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence remains difficult throughout society and victims are often afraid of the negative consequences of doing so. Women and men can be victims as well as perpetrators and the complexities of domestic abuse highlight the need for sensitive approaches to addressing the issue. It is almost certainly more difficult for military spouses/partners to feel confident

³²⁵ Naval Families Federation (2018) Summary of NFF Evidence of Need, December 2018.

about reporting abuse by their military partner because it exposes the Serving partner and may have consequences for their career, and it may ultimately result in relationship breakdown. In these extreme circumstances, if the family occupy SFA, the non-serving partner will have to move out of the family home. This has many implications for both the non-serving partner and children and may deter the victim from disclosing the abuse. The Chain of Command is required to act on reports of domestic abuse with sensitivity and proactively prioritise the needs of survivors and their children. There is some evidence that military families may experience more serious and severe violence³²⁶ especially following combat.³²⁷

The Ministry of Defence Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018–2023³²⁸ promised to develop a culture of support that does not tolerate domestic abuse and which ensures access to high quality services. The aim of the Strategy is to reduce the prevalence and impact of domestic abuse and increase the safety and wellbeing of those affected by it. This includes providing victims with access to pathways of support and appropriate interventions, and providing perpetrators with pathways to rehabilitation. This inevitably includes the need for partnerships with specialist providers and statutory agencies.

Ensuring that there are places of safety available for military partners who disclose abuse should be a key part of any strategy. It is particularly helpful that the Strategy places importance on meeting the accommodation needs of those experiencing domestic abuse and helping, wherever possible, to locate a place of safety. We understand that the Army places some vulnerable families in the Services Cotswold Centre, which can be used by all three Services, where they can stay for up to six months and receive specialist help. Some victims can access accommodation support through the SSAFA Stepping Stones Homes project which assists non-serving partners with temporary housing when their relationship to a Service member breaks down. However, victims/survivors are not able to self-refer to this facility and must instead obtain a referral from a welfare agency such as the Army Welfare Service, Unit Welfare Officers, the Police, or other branches of SSAFA. This requirement may introduce additional difficulties in accessing this form of support given the barriers to seeking help for domestic abuse and other intimate personal problems.³²⁹ It is essential that the MOD Strategy is consistent across the whole of Defence if the culture of silence is to be tackled, abuse is to be addressed, and family members are able to seek support and safety.

Research undertaken at the University of Bristol and funded by the Forces in Mind Trust³³⁰ set out to identify what constitutes a specialist domestic abuse provision for military families. It found that Armed Forces families regard military-based support as problematic, lacking in confidentiality, and have a sense that seeking help is a sign of weakness. Concerns about the possible negative impact on their partner's career and losing entitlement to SFA were also reported by spouses/partners as barriers to help-seeking. This evidence is not surprising, and more work will be needed to encourage domestic abuse victims in military families to feel comfortable in seeking help without fear of reprisal from the abusive partner.

The researchers noted specific factors that potentially influence domestic abuse in military families. These include: suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), having had combat exposure; issues around military 'culture'; and stress on personnel and their families due to deployment and reintegration. This is consistent with the comments made by spouses/partners in our Call for Evidence. Although few non-serving partners talked openly about domestic abuse they described their partner as being physically violent or as being verbally abusive; or their partner's behaviour as bullying, as well as experiencing conflict in the relationship. Previous research has emphasised the stress factors that can lead to abuse.³³¹

³²⁶ MOD (2015) *Armed Forces Domestic Abuse: a handbook for civilian support services*, MOD.

³²⁷ MacManus D. et al (2013) *Violent Offending by UK Military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan; a data linkage cohort study*, *The Lancet*, March 2013, 16;381(9870):907–17.

³²⁸ MOD, *No Defence for Abuse, Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018–2023*.

³²⁹ Gray, H (2016) 'Researching from the spaces in between? The politics of accountability in studying the British military', *Critical Military Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1–2, pp. 70–83.

³³⁰ Williamson, E. & Matolcsi, A. (2019) *Domestic Violence and abuse (DVA) in Military Families: Improving signposting to specialist support*, Bristol: Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol.

³³¹ Williamson, E. (2011) 'Domestic Abuse and Military Families: The Problem of Reintegration and Control', *British Journal of Social Work*, 42 (7), pp.1371–1387.

A study of post-deployment family violence among UK military personnel³³² looked also at stranger violence. The study found that mental health problems and aggression are significantly associated with both family and stranger violence. There was a higher risk of family violence among military personnel who reported symptoms of PTSD. While alcohol misuse was strongly associated with stranger violence it was not associated with family violence. This study also showed that being in the Army was associated with the perpetration of both stranger and family violence, while there was a reduced risk of family violence amongst Naval and RAF Serving personnel. This may well reflect sociodemographic differences and higher exposure to combat situations by Army personnel. The research team have suggested that more research is needed to understand potential differences in violent behaviour between military personnel in the three Services.

The link between mental health issues and domestic abuse is prevalent in the growing literature relating to intimate partner violence in military families. A systematic review of the link³³³ examined thirteen studies from Canada and the US. The review found that among Serving personnel psychological intimate-partner violence was more consistently associated with depression and alcohol problems than physical violence. However, under-reporting of mental health problems among Serving personnel and under-reporting of physical violence by spouses and partners may impact on these findings. The military culture fosters the expectation of male strength and admitting to mental issues can be viewed as a sign of weakness.

Although most research on domestic abuse in military families has focused on Service personnel as perpetrators and civilian spouses/partners as the victims, studies of domestic abuse in the civilian population have shown that men and women are equally likely to be violent in intimate relationships, but women are more likely to suffer an injury and be at greater risk of serious and sexual assaults.³³⁴ A review of self-reported intimate partner violence victimisation³³⁵ found high levels of intimate partner violence victimisation among military personnel. This refers to behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, and psychological abuse or controlling behaviour. Studies have shown increased risk of physical violence towards family members among those returning from operational combat and also increased risk of victimisation. The researchers concluded that given the heightened stigma associated with victimisation among male military personnel, welfare staff need to be vigilant and knowledgeable about the barriers to male victims seeking help in order to identify higher risk groups. We understand that domestic abuse awareness is delivered as part of the Unit Welfare Officers course for the Army and Royal Navy and via the RAF Community Support Course, and one day in-situ welfare staff training days. A programme of specialist training to improve support to male victims of domestic abuse has been commissioned.

A research review of the role of PTSD in bi-directional intimate partner violence³³⁶ has urged that in order to respond effectively to intimate-partner violence it is critical to develop a more accurate understanding of the direction of the violence within each relationship:

Of particular importance within military IPV [intimate-partner violence] research is the need to deepen understanding about the role of PTSD in bi-directional IPV not only as a risk factor for perpetration but also as a vulnerability risk factor for victimisation...³³⁷

332 Kwan, J., Jones, M., Somaini, G., Hull, L., Wessely, S., Fear, N.T. and MacManus, D. (2017) *Post-deployment family violence among UK military personnel*, *Psychological Medicine* 48(13):2202–2212.

333 Sparrow, K., Kwan, J., Howard, L., Fear, N. and MacManus, D. (2017) *Systematic Review of Mental health Disorders and Intimate Partner Violence victimisation among military populations*, *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 52(9):1059–1080.

334 Stokl, H., Devries, K., Rotstein, A., Abrahams, N., Campbell, J., Watts, C. and Moreno C.G. (2013) *The global prevalence of intimate partner homicide: a systematic review*, *Lancet* 382(9895) 859–865.

335 Sparrow, K., Dickson, H., Kwan, J., Howard, L., Fear, N. and MacManus, D. (2018) *Prevalence of Self-reported Intimate Partner Violence Victimisation among Military Personnel: A systematic review and meta-analysis*, *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 1–24.

336 Misca, G. and Forgey, M-A. (2017) *The Role of PTSD in Bi-Directional Intimate Partner Violence in Military and Veteran Populations: a research review*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol 8, Article 1304.

337 Ibid. p1.

The majority of research has been undertaken in the US following the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and has found that while the majority of those diagnosed with PTSD do not engage in intimate-partner violence, combat exposure increases the risk of violence within the couple relationship. The review by Misca and Forgey³³⁸ confirmed bi-directionality amongst military active populations, but highlighted the limited evidence about the dynamic between PTSD and bi-directional intimate-partner violence. Exploration of the complex dynamics of intimate couple relationships in military families is essential to developing interventions and support for each partner and for the couple. Domestic abuse/intimate-partner violence behaviours are influenced by a wide range of risk factors, and there is much that is not yet fully understood. Little attention has been paid to exploring the incidence of abuse in dual-serving relationships and in those in which the Serving partner is female:

Future research that better explains the roles of PTSD as a risk factor for IPV perpetration and victimisation for each partner in military and veteran samples is essential to the development of safe and appropriate treatment options for these couples'.³³⁹

It is clear that there is still much to be learned about domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence in military families and more to be done to develop adequate and targeted responses which support Serving personnel and their partners. Welfare staff are very conscious of the challenge in responding to domestic abuse in as professional a way as possible and which is consistent across the whole of the Armed Forces. It is to be hoped that increased collaboration between military and civilian service providers will lead to increased partnership working to provide more support to families and better ways to break down the stigma associated with disclosing domestic abuse, intimate-partner violence and mental health issues in society generally and in the military in particular. Partnership working with expert providers is essential. One such provider is Aurora New Dawn.

CASE STUDY: Aurora New Dawn

A number of welfare officers told us about the help they had received in respect of responding to domestic abuse issues from Aurora New Dawn, a charity which offers support to victims of abuse, including those in military families. Prior to March 2018 the project ran as a pilot for the 2017/18 year and the majority of the 31 military referrals were identified internally and were allocated to the Armed Forces Advocate for ongoing support once a Forces connection had been identified. Referrals directly from Forces personnel in the pilot year were low. The project at that time covered veterans as well as current Serving personnel. The project re-launched in April 2018, with funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, to focus solely on Serving personnel. It took a proactive approach, building up relationships with Forces partners and circulating information about the support available far more widely. As a result, Aurora New Dawn delivered briefings/training sessions to various military welfare teams.

In 2018/19, a new advocate joined the team, with an established Forces connection and experience of military life both at home and abroad. This brought an increase in referrals from welfare staff and an increase in self-referrals. Although the charity is based in Portsmouth, it accepts referrals from Service personnel and family members living across the UK and abroad. The criteria for referral are:

- the victim is a serving member of the Armed Forces or
- the alleged perpetrator is a Serving member of the Armed Forces.

The next phase of the project is the roll-out of the delivery of a stalking training programme which has been piloted. The ambition is to have 200 personnel trained by 2021.

338 Ibid.

339 Ibid. p7.

Aurora New Dawn

The charity

- supports survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence and stalking.
- advocates offer support to male and female victims of abuse and Serving personnel and their families.

Referrals

2018/19 total referrals of female and male members of military families were:

- Army 28
- RN/RM 15
- RAF 4
- 12 referrals were from Foreign and Commonwealth families
- 19 referrals involved dual-serving partners.

Main presenting issues

- domestic abuse
- sexual violence
- 20% of referrals involved some form of stalking behaviour.

Alleged perpetrators

- Serving partner in 24 Army referrals, 12 Navy referrals and 3 RAF referrals.

The advocates provide

- one-on-one tailored support to address safety concerns, and wellbeing
- support for clients in what they want to do, prioritising safety and wellbeing
- risk/needs assessment and safety planning.

The evaluation early results show that:

- about half of the clients had not engaged with any other support service to address the issues
- 82 % stated that they felt safer after working with Aurora New Dawn
- 91 % stated that their emotional wellbeing had improved.

100% said that having support from a specialist advocate with knowledge and experience of the military community had made a positive difference to them.

Providing welfare support: meeting the needs of Service personnel and their families

We turn now to consider the welfare support offered by the three single Services, the experiences of military families in respect of the support they receive, and the views expressed by welfare staff and the Chain of Command.

Welfare support provision in the three Services

The pressures of Service life on families are well-documented and our study has highlighted some of these. There is universal agreement within the Armed Forces that Service personnel and their families should be supported and assisted to deal with these if operational effectiveness is to be realised. The provision of welfare support, therefore, is considered to be core Armed Forces business. In his Foreword to the latest Tri-Service Welfare Policy, the then Chief of Defence People, Lt General Sir Richard Nugee, wrote:

- People lie at the heart of operational capability; attracting and retaining the right numbers of capable, motivated individuals to deliver Defence outputs is critical. This is dependent upon maintaining a credible and realistic offer that earns and retains the trust of people in Defence. In order to achieve this, all personnel must be confident that not only will they be treated fairly, but also that their families will be treated properly and that Service veterans and their dependants will be respected and appropriately supported.³⁴⁰

³⁴⁰ MOD (2019) *Tri-Service Operational and non-Operational Welfare Policy JSP 770*, pt 1 (V13.0 Apr 19) Ch 1, para 1.1.03.

Welfare is defined as:

- Provision of a widely-recognised and accessible personal and community support structure that secures and improves the wellbeing of Serving personnel and the Service community, is capable of adapting to societal, legislative and operational change and, in so doing, optimises the military capability and motivation of all Service men and women.³⁴¹

We note that in the definition of 'welfare', reference is made to the Service community and we would suggest that it would be helpful and appropriate to include specific reference to the families of Serving personnel to ensure that everyone is aware that welfare provision always extends to family members. The policy provides guidance for Commanding Officers and welfare specialists across all three Services, and sets out a number of principles as follows:

- to underscore the primacy of the Chain of Command, who are responsible for the welfare support of those personnel under their command and their entitled families.
- to provide guidance for the individual in their responsibilities and the pivotal role needed to ensure they communicate effectively with both their families and the Command in times of complex need.
- to provide a widely-recognised and accessible personal and community support structure which secures and improves the well-being of Serving personnel and their families, and in so doing, optimises the military capability and motivation of Service personnel.
- to provide welfare support, in both operational and non-operational areas, to secure the well-being of all Armed Forces personnel.
- to have in place balanced, resourced and appropriate welfare packages, ready for immediate activation when Armed Forces personnel are deployed.
- to provide overseas, as far as is reasonably practicable, the services that are normally available in England through Service specialist welfare organisations.
- to provide, as far as reasonably practicable, an equal standard of welfare support for Reservists in conjunction with Local Authority provision.
- to limit, as far as reasonably practicable, those factors that are detrimental to the operational effectiveness of Armed Forces personnel.³⁴²

These principles make it clear that Serving personnel must take some responsibility for ensuring that their families know how to seek welfare support, but we know that Serving personnel do not always take vital information home. We return to the crucial issue of appropriate communication with family members in Chapter 10. The policy also makes it clear that individuals have responsibility for their own immediate welfare and that of their family. Providing access to welfare support is a prime command responsibility but the Chain of Command involvement should not be seen as the default setting for resolving low-level welfare issues. Individuals are expected to maintain situational awareness of their personal welfare needs and the welfare needs of family members, ensuring timely communication with the Chain of Command where personal welfare situations may affect functionality, availability or operational capability.

The Chain of Command is required to ensure that appropriate welfare support and signposting are in place, to address issues beyond the capability of the individual, and Serving personnel are responsible for maintaining the communication links between available support and their families alongside their requirement to ensure personal records are both accurate and up-to-date. In other words, each Serving person has a responsibility to communicate effectively with their family in respect of support and other military matters. It is the failure of this expectation that is frequently held responsible for family members feeling neglected by the military and receiving little or no support. We return to this in the next chapter since communication with families is a wider issue beyond the provision of welfare.

Although the Tri-Service Policy lays out the welfare responsibilities for all three Services, each of the three Services has its own way of delivering welfare support to Serving personnel and their families.

The Royal Navy offers all its welfare support via trained multi-disciplinary staff. The mission statement of the welfare service states that it is delivered:

³⁴¹ Ibid. Foreword.

³⁴² Ibid. para 1.1 05.

- 6 To provide accessible support services that strengthen and enhance the resilience and resourcefulness of Royal Navy personnel, their families and communities in order to contribute to the Moral Component and Optimise Operational Capability.³⁴³

There are three pillars of support: specialist welfare, community and information, and communication. The cornerstone of the welfare support is the welfare portal. The welfare service is now known as the 'Naval Service Family and People Support (NS FPS)' and the portal is the primary access point for all services for Naval personnel and their families wherever they reside. The family and personal support teams undertake the same seven-month training as the Army Welfare Service (AWS) teams and a bespoke data base JANIS (Joint Army Navy Information System) is kept for both Services, allowing trend and other analyses to take place. The Portal team consists of experienced social workers, military caseworkers and business support staff who will undertake assessments and make recommendations in support of the individual's or the family's needs. Serving personnel and their partners can refer directly into the support team on a confidential basis through the Portal, via a dedicated telephone (0800 number) or an online platform.

The Portal team work in conjunction with area teams consisting of community development workers, caseworkers, social workers, Information and business support staff. These teams work closely with medical and mental health teams and Chaplains. The team can offer a range of interventions, including counselling. The Portal provides continuity of support and standardised practice to Serving personnel and their families wherever they happen to be throughout the world, thereby ensuring that there is no gap in provision when families move and when Serving personnel deploy. In order to ensure this continuity of service a new system of holistic support has been trialled on board HMS Queen Elizabeth and her escort ships. It would appear to provide an innovative blueprint for future tri-Service approaches to welfare support.

The Army retains all welfare support in-house. Army policy directs that welfare is a function of command and a key element of the moral component of fighting power and operational effectiveness.³⁴⁴ Commanding Officers at all levels in the Chain of Command are responsible for the welfare and welfare support of those under their command and the associated community. This places a duty of care to all the soldiers under command and a moral responsibility for the welfare of their families. All Commanding Officers receive a briefing on welfare issues. The first line of welfare support, therefore, is via the Chain of Command and the Unit Welfare Officers and Chaplains. Unit Welfare Officers, the vast majority of whom are Serving personnel, are usually in post for about two to three years and receive fairly minimal training since their role is primarily one of signposting. Serving personnel and their families can self-refer to the Unit Welfare Officer. If the Unit Welfare officer can deal with the issues raised this is done locally, is completely confidential and not shared with the Chain of Command.

We were told that there is no formal recording system at the unit welfare level and so when a Serving person moves to a new garrison there is no onward record of any ongoing issues or the help that has been or is being provided. There is no means of referring the person on to the Unit Welfare Officer at the next assignment for continued support, therefore. Nevertheless, Army Welfare Policy directs use of the JPA Welfare Tool, a digital flag that follows the Serving person on assignment. While it does not record the detail of the welfare 'issue', due to confidentiality, it can initiate the conversation between leaving and receiving Unit Welfare Officers. The lack of clear continuity of care would seem to be disadvantageous to the Serving person and/or their family.

If the unit welfare staff in the garrisons are not able to deal with a problem it is then referred to the second tier of support provided by specialist Army welfare teams who will address more complex issues including mental health, substance abuse, domestic abuse, and child protection. The Army Welfare Service (AWS) is often the first port of call for military personnel and their families, offering much of the support available to Army families. The AWS focuses on delivering community support, personal support, and information. The second tier staff in the AWS have seven months training and the teams include military and civilian staff and some qualified social workers. Some Serving personnel and their families may be referred to specialist counsellors (contracted to Health Assure) and can receive six sessions of counselling. There are second

343 Royal Navy (2018–19) People Support, P16.

344 AGAI Vol 3 Ch 81/1–1, Para 81.003.

tier welfare teams all over the UK and in most overseas camps. These trained and experienced staff assess the level of risk in a particular case: we were told that a child protection case, for example, would be dealt with immediately and a relationship issue would be dealt with in about ten days. We understand that Family Links has trained staff from the AWS to deliver a 10-week Nurturing Programme for parents, which promotes the emotional health of parents and children, their relationship skills and positive behaviour management strategies.

The RAF has developed a different model of welfare support which involves contracting out their second tier specialist support to SSAFA. The first line of support for RAF Serving personnel is through talking informally to colleagues, talking to the line manager or to the Human Resources staff on the unit (Unit Welfare Officers). All line managers have the tools to provide primary level welfare support. If they feel it is necessary and appropriate a referral will be made to the second tier of support which is provided independently of the Chain of Command by SSAFA. The RAF believe strongly that by using an independent specialist support service this negates some of the barriers to seeking help felt by some Serving personnel and by their spouses/partners.

Although SSAFA provides support to the Armed Forces generally wherever it is needed in the UK and in eleven countries around the world, its specialist second tier provision via a contract with the RAF is through the Personal Support and Social Work Service (PS&SWS)³⁴⁵ This service includes professionally qualified staff with a range of counselling and social work skills working to a code of confidentiality. Their position, independent of the Chain of Command although supportive of it, encourages RAF personnel and their families to approach them for help. SSAFA support is delivered via a three-region construct: North, South and East, with a Social Work Regional Managers (SWRM) located in each of the regions. Within each of the regions are Social Work Team Leads. The majority of RAF units have a permanent SSAFA presence. SSAFA works with individuals to assess their needs, provide advice and counselling, signpost to other agencies, including those in the statutory sector, and act as advocates where necessary. Working in partnership with local authority services, SSAFA addresses issues relating to Children In Need; Safeguarding of children; and Looked-After children.

Non-statutory support offered by SSAFA to Serving personnel and their families includes: help with addictions; bereavement issues; childcare concerns; education; equality and diversity issues; housing; financial issues; mental and physical health concerns; emotional wellbeing; domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence; relationship problems; additional needs adults; and victim support. In other words the SSAFA social work staff deal with the full range of welfare difficulties Service families can face. The service is open to all RAF Serving personnel and their families, and to other Service personnel and their families when they are Serving on a RAF station in the UK. Requests for help can be made directly with the SSAFA office on each station via a single national 0300 number, available 24/7. The SSAFA ForcesLine is a free confidential telephone helpline available to all the military community in the UK and overseas; and by email and the web.

SSAFA also contributes to the Station Personal Support Committee and to welfare-related policy, planning and procedures. SSAFA fieldworkers are required to provide monthly reports to SSAFA headquarters to ensure quality assurance and to identify good practice. SSAFA retains all the RAF welfare data. We were told that In 2018, the second tier teams dealt with 2,667 cases referred to them. The service is completely confidential and issues are only disclosed in extreme circumstances such as safeguarding, or when permission is given to disclose to the Chain of Command. SSAFA acts as the interface between the RAF and statutory services and ensures that appropriate referrals are made as speedily as possible.

All three Services manage their welfare support in a way which they believe is appropriate for them and their military communities. The RAF is characterised by the use of independent specialist social work teams with a long history of understanding and supporting the Armed Forces. There are examples of good practice across all three Services, and during all our visits to military bases we spoke to Welfare Officers, Padres/Chaplains, and those responsible for providing primary welfare support about the issues which are brought to them and the help they offer. We also visited family centres both inside and outside the wire. In addition we gathered information from a range of military charities and other organisations providing support to military families.

345 RAF Personal Support and Social Work Service – SSAFA (2019) AP 7005, Leaflet 102.

Our responses to the Call for Evidence elicited comments about welfare provision as did our discussions with Serving and non-serving personnel on the bases. The comments we received were mixed in their appreciation of the support offered by welfare staff within the Chain of Command: some were very positive about the help they had received and others were less so. Dispersed families from all three Services who do not live on or near a military base overwhelmingly said that they do not feel supported by welfare teams. In addition, families with additional needs also questioned the support they receive. We note that the FANDF survey³⁴⁶ found that some families with a member with additional needs or disabilities did not feel supported and that there is a lack of consistency across the three Services with the level of the support often being determined by individuals in key positions. The report concluded that the culture within units or the organisation can significantly shape the experiences of military families with additional needs.

Without any doubt, it is clear to us that despite the best efforts of all welfare staff on the various military bases, there are variations in respect of the nature of the support given, considerable barriers to seeking help, and a reluctance by Service personnel and their families to disclose personal problems.

Barriers to help-seeking

Whatever the model of welfare provision offered by each Service, a recurring theme throughout the review was the reticence of both Serving personnel and their partners to seek support for personal issues, especially if it means going through the Chain of Command. This is not surprising. Research on help-seeking behaviour by civilian families indicates that there is still a considerable stigma associated with admitting to problems and asking for help. A study of the support needs of parents undertaken for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now DfE)³⁴⁷ found that seeking help was felt to be difficult, and that several barriers stand in the way of disclosing what many people regard as private, personal issues. The barriers discussed in that study are in evidence in civilian and military populations today and our conversations with Serving personnel and their families illustrated the following factors:

- inhibitions, taboos, attitudes and social stigma about relationship and personal pressures
- denial of the problem and/or fear of exposing it
- the need to put on a brave face
- not knowing where to go or what to say/lack of knowledge
- scepticism about the help available.

Stigma

There is a belief in society generally that talking about personal and relationship problems or seeking help for them is 'not the done thing'. It is seen by some as a sign of weakness and failure. There is a tendency for men to be more inhibited than women and it is generally more socially acceptable to deal with difficulties 'behind closed doors'. This tendency to stay silent about problems can keep some people within violent and abusive relationships for a long time. There are a number of factors which create barriers to help-seeking, including fear of the consequences of disclosing personal issues to anyone in authority, and a hope that the difficulties might simply go away in time.

The Royal British Legion report earlier noted that there is a current lack of research into stigma in the Armed Forces community, and we know that stigma is one of the main barriers preventing disclosure of mental health issues³⁴⁸ although this reluctance is lessened when a crisis situation arises.³⁴⁹ The various initiatives spearheaded by members of the Royal Family have begun to lessen the stigma of admitting to mental health problems but it is still a huge step to take for many people and especially for those who are expected to be tough and resilient. The Royal British Legion report³⁵⁰ shows that stigma appears to be a large barrier to seeking help for loneliness and social isolation in both the general population and in the

³⁴⁶ FANDF (2020) op.cit.

³⁴⁷ Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

³⁴⁸ Coleman, S.J., Stevelink, S.A.M., Hatch, S.L., Denny, J.A. and Greenberg, N. (2017) *Stigma-related barriers and facilitators to help-seeking for mental health issues in the Armed Forces: a systematic review and thematic synthesis of qualitative literature*, *Psychological Medicine*, 47,(11) p1880–1892.

³⁴⁹ Rafferty, L., Stevelink, S., Greenberg, N. and Wessely, S. (2017) *Stigma and Barriers to Care in Service Leavers with Mental Health Problems*, Forces In Mind Trust.

³⁵⁰ The Royal British Legion (2019) op.cit.

military community. It seems that 62 per cent of the respondents to the Royal British Legion survey would feel awkward or embarrassed telling someone else and nearly 50 per cent would not know what to say in these circumstances.

Reluctance to admit there is a problem/putting on a brave face

It is not only perceived stigma that prevents people from seeking help: there is a general reluctance to admit to a problem and a sense that if it is not talked about it might just go away. Talking about personal issues is not easy, particularly if they involve the relationships or intimate sexual problems between partners. Delving into one's private life can be deeply embarrassing. There are sometimes genuine fears that disclosing a problem might result in social services getting involved if there are children in the household, and that the consequences of asking for help may be worse than simply putting up with the problem. Admitting that the problem is serious is very difficult and 'brushing it under the carpet' is often the easiest solution, in the short-term at least. When asked whether they had sought help with their problems, the RAF personnel and partners who took part in the RAF Benevolent Fund research³⁵¹ revealed that some 50 per cent of Serving personnel and 50 per cent of non-serving partners had sought help. The RAF personnel were more likely to seek help from their Senior Medical Officer rather than from Community Support staff, or welfare officers, or the Hive. The situation was reversed for their partners. Mental health and family issues dominated the agenda for help-seeking.

Not knowing where to get help

The RAF Benevolent Fund research revealed considerable confusion as to the help available, particularly in respect of managing loneliness and social isolation, and there was 'patchy' knowledge about the roles of SSAFA, who are under contract to provide welfare and social work support, the Hives, padres and RAF station Facebook pages. The lack of knowledge as to who to go to for support was greater among the non-serving partners: 46 per cent of non-serving survey respondents did not know which organisations to go to for help and 34 per cent did not know where to go. This is not surprising given that there is considerable variation in support and in respect of the services available at different RAF stations, and no consistent pattern of support. Some spouses/partners also cited poor experiences in the past when they had asked for help and had been disappointed with the response, so they were disinclined to ask again.

A lack of knowledge about where to go and how to seek help is common in civilian populations, also. Most people do not look to find out about support services unless there they have a problem, and then there is anxiety about doing so. In a culture in which talking about personal problems is not encouraged — maintaining a stiff upper lip continues to be an oft-quoted mantra — then it is usually only when a problem becomes so serious or people reach a crisis point, that seeking help becomes inevitable. It may then be too late to resolve the issue easily or without unwanted consequences.³⁵² The RAF study demonstrated the belief held by many Service families that they should cope on their own and be self-sufficient, alongside a fear of negative impacts on RAF career prospects if they asked for help with personal issues. In these circumstances, when the situation has reached crisis point, relationship or other support is a 'distress' purchase that no-one really wants to have to get.

Scepticism about the help available

It is also the case that a certain level of scepticism exists about whether seeking help will do any good. A lack of trust in professional services can put people off asking for help. The Royal British Legion study found a level of distrust of military welfare services amongst members of the Armed Forces community. Families living on the patch may know welfare staff personally and not want to open up to or confide in them about their personal concerns. A bigger fear is that engaging with welfare staff will reflect negatively on the Serving person and may negatively influence decisions about promotion. We heard comments such as these during our visits:

³⁵¹ RAF Benevolent Fund (2018) op.cit.

³⁵² Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

“ My thoughts on military life...I'm afraid they are all fairly negative but there are so many areas that need improving to bring this lifestyle into the twenty-first century. For example, welfare units are still predominantly manned by middle-aged men. Whilst most welfare officers I have met have been lovely and helpful they would not be who I would turn to in a crisis. ...The number of times I have heard about relationships breaking down and the Welfare Officer not helping the spouse as they are friends with the Serving person is just disgraceful. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

However, this spouse added that when her husband had been injured on two occasions the welfare support had been very good:

“ In both instances the welfare provision was brilliant. I was well supported after my husband was injured and cannot speak highly enough of the whole process. ”

This suggests that when there is a crisis support is forthcoming. When there is no obvious crisis, many families commented that support had been lacking:

“ The pressures are there constantly. What isn't there is the support. When my husband was deployed just after we were married I received constant information from the welfare office, all of which was completely irrelevant to me and our family situation. The Army seems to have one template they're operating from when it comes to Service personnel, that of a family from the 1950s: two heterosexual people who've been married for years with 'x' number of children living on a base or town next to a base. I've yet to meet a family quite like this ... ”

(Army non-serving partner)

In this blended family, it was the Serving partner's third and the non-serving partner's second marriage:

“ New to the Army I would receive emails from the welfare office while my husband was deployed, and while I appreciated the goodwill and intention, they made me angry...The emails read as though they were in code – full of acronyms I had no understanding of. ...Today, while trying to find help for myself and my husband, trying to make sure said-help is anonymous enough that it won't compromise his military career, I feel completely disconnected from the Army. Yet the irony is that the Army governs my life...I have grave concerns for my husband's wellbeing. ”

A clear message from this comment is that information which does not seem to be relevant at the time it is received is dismissed as being unhelpful. Research has shown that information and advice need to be personally tailored and relevant if they are to be valued by the recipient...a one size fits all approach does not work.³⁵³ Moreover, it is important to note that there are barriers to seeking support if the request always has to go through the Chain of Command rather than family members being able to seek help confidentially from an independent specialist and without talking to the Chain of Command.

Professionals involved with the Royal British Legion study referred to the diversity of the Armed Forces and underlined

the need for tailored support, as generic or universal programmes aimed at the Forces population may not work.³⁵⁴ ”

The report stressed the importance of 'not pigeon-holing people' with respect to their support needs but tailoring support based on an individual's needs and context. In addition we would urge that all communications with family members must be in plain language and not littered with military acronyms.

One non-serving partner felt that the welfare funds were being used inappropriately and inefficiently when addressing Service family welfare:

³⁵³ Walker et al (2010) op.cit.; Walker, J. (ed) (2001) *Information Meetings and Associated Provisions Within the Family Law Act 1996*, Final Evaluation Report, Lord Chancellor's Department.

³⁵⁴ The Royal British Legion (2019) op.cit. p36.

“ When a unit deploys there is no provision for a properly trained welfare worker to pro-actively contact and connect with the families of the deployed. Much of the support offered to families is highly localised, yet the majority of families affected by the Service person's career live at range from the bases. Furthermore, if a family member does contact the welfare service unit for help, they are met with someone with insufficient training to be able to identify the subtle aspects of child mental health...It is important to note that unit level military welfare is provided only during the time of absence: support is required over a longer period to be effective... I welcome the excellent resource the Naval Families Federation recently published on parental absence and the work of the RNRMC. ”

(RN sub-mariner non-serving partner)

We have already recommended the wide dissemination of such material.

Variations in support

Families living on tri-Service bases have pointed to the variations between the different Services and different bases in respect of the welfare services and support on offer. One spouse offered the following observations:

“ For example, the RM and RN have Families Days whereas the Army does not. This means that children living next door to each other may have different experiences and some will be left out of activities. It would be enormously beneficial for families if the welfare support on offer was consistent throughout a base. Whereas families try to build a positive community on the base, the lack of consistency creates barriers. ... Welfare Officers have different training and skills sets. The RN and RM Welfare Officers are able to offer counselling, but the Army Welfare Officers do not. The pathway for support in the Army is different and there is stigma going to the Welfare Officer. It's much better to be able to go independently, to Relate for example... ”

“ If the Serving person is married unaccompanied, there is no support for the spouse and there is no information for the spouse as to how to access support. There is even less support for partners who are cohabiting (very discriminatory). **The main message is to promote better consistency in welfare provision for families on bases and between the different Services in order to promote fairness and build better supportive communities** [our emphasis]. [We need] greater clarity/consistency about the training and skills of Welfare Officers. ”

(RM non-serving partner)

Other spouses/partners referred to feeling lonely and isolated and underlined the importance of pro-active welfare support, particularly when families move to a new area:

“ Moving house is made easier when the local Families Centre reach out to new occupants and put a few pointers up for them. One area we moved to did this, and just the knowledge that the information was there when you finished unpacking was useful. Another area didn't and I didn't know where to start accessing groups/support having moved unaccompanied as my husband was 'unavoidably delayed'. I also knew no-one in the area. **I felt very isolated, depressed, and unhappy** [our emphasis] when a simple letter of introduction/ come to this place/call us, would have made all the difference. The spouse isn't the Serving person and therefore doesn't have as much knowledge of where to access information, so it needs to be made available as easily as possible. Each local Families Centre should know when a property becomes occupied... ”

(RN non-serving partner)

A number of spouses/partners echoed this plea for pro-active engagement when they arrive in a different area and could see no reason why welfare staff should not contact them at the start of the assignment. It is essential that requirements relating to data protection do not prevent this kind of pro-active engagement with spouses/partners. We were told that the welfare staff do not know when an SFA property is occupied by a new family or when a spouse/partner has arrived on the patch or nearby. The lack of direct communication with spouses and partners has arisen many times and as a dominant theme during the review and we return to the need for direct communications in Chapter 10.

The families we met expressed varying views about the welfare provision on their base. Some were not sure whether welfare staff could be trusted with very personal information because of being part of the Chain of Command. Others had nothing but good stories to tell:

“Welfare support here is amazing!”
(RAF non-serving partner)

The study of family separations on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy and Royal Marines families³⁵⁵ reported that some spouses had received excellent support from the Naval welfare services but that the support varied in quality across different welfare officers and bases. The spouses referred to the ability and dedication of individual members of welfare staff as influencing the quality of support they received. Some had felt that they received little or no welfare support and some admitted that their Serving partner has not wanted them to access welfare services.

There is clear reluctance to be seen as a ‘welfare case’: the very term ‘welfare’ conjures up connotations of being a failure, being unable to fend for oneself, or being needy, and we welcome the move in 2019 by the Royal Navy to change the language away from welfare support to the Naval Service Family and People Support (NSFPS). This might be a rather long and unwieldy title but reference to Family Support would certainly seem to be more family-friendly and welcoming. We comment more generally in the final chapter about the need to change some of the rather archaic language used in the military.

The RAF study³⁵⁶ asked RAF personnel and their partners how to improve the support available. Thirteen per cent of Serving personnel and 27 per cent of partners suggested that there should be support groups, engagement activities, family social events and more integration with local community activities, workshops and specific organisations telling them about the support available to them. In other words more comprehensive and clearer information is required. They were also asked to give their views about the appointment of Community Engagement Workers on every station, the provision of a welfare App, workshops and seminars for partners and life coaching opportunities. The first three ideas were regarded as meeting a real need but views about life coaches were more mixed. On the whole, innovative ideas were welcomed as worth trying and the potential for integration of the various initiatives as worth exploring further.

The RAF has acknowledged that many families find it difficult to identify where they can turn to for support, especially when they are serving overseas. We understand that the vision is to provide an interactive automated intelligence (AI) service (akin to Amazon’s Alexa) that helps people to find the answer to their problem wherever they are serving in the world. The RAF is working with the RAF Families Federation, RAF Benevolent Fund and the RAF Association to develop the RAF Families Federation website to become a central and easily accessed repository of information for RAF personnel and their families.

There is an expectation that the software that has been developed for the ‘Map of Need’³⁵⁷ project funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund can be adapted to provide a comprehensive search engine that can facilitate easy access to the information held on the RAF Families Federation website. The initial focus is to demonstrate and prove the concept through a pilot scheme that will provide information for RAF Families assigned to the USA in conjunction with the British Defence Staff. The RAF Families Federation, with the RAF’s support, is conducting analysis to understand the technical challenges and resourcing requirements for the App. The website will cover all areas of support from accommodation and education to healthcare, community support, welfare, partner employment and childcare. The RAF is exploring with the RAF Benevolent Fund how to provide the App for families to interrogate the repository and gain access to support wherever they are serving in the world. This is an innovative project which should provide information about good practice to the MOD and the three single Services.

355 Gribble and Fear (2019) op. cit.

356 RAF Benevolent Fund (2018) op.cit.

357 Developed at Northumbria University.

Views from Welfare Officers and the Chain of Command

All the welfare staff and Commanding Officers in the Navy, Army and RAF who we met on visits to military bases were clearly very aware of the difficulties Serving personnel and family members experience in military life, the pressures and the impacts of deployments, accommodation and relocations. They are all aware also just how difficult it can be for Serving personnel and family members to admit to having difficulties and to seek help. We were left in no doubt that they take their various roles very seriously and are keen to offer as much support as is possible to the Serving personnel and families under their care. They are also putting immense effort in to working more closely in partnership with local service providers and local health and clinical care teams. Fostering positive links with local communities is key. For example, every RAF station has a Community Development Officer to make the link with the local authorities in the area.

It is important to recognise that the responsibility for support does not just lie with the military. By working with local schools it has been possible to ensure the provision of breakfast and after-school clubs in some areas. The local authority Service Pupil Champions are pivotal in setting up these programmes and working closely with welfare staff and the Chain of Command. For example, 60 schools in the Plymouth area are working with the Military Kids Club at HMNB Devonport. In Scotland, HMNB Clyde has established a positive relationship with Argyll and Bute Council and their Armed Forces Champion and with the Convenor of the Scottish Parliament’s Armed Forces and Veterans Community Group. A welcome pack is provided to Service personnel arriving at the naval base. In Rutland, the Forces Family Forum brings people together to talk about issues for Army personnel serving at Kendrew Barracks. The Armed Forces Officer for Rutland works closely with the Chain of Command.

There is general agreement that an integrated model of welfare provision and support for families which brings together the military and organisations, schools and businesses in the local community is essential and by far the best way forward. This can increase the sense of belonging and reduce the isolation that families can feel, partly because military friendships are so transient and difficult to maintain when families move from one area to another, and partly because families often feel disconnected from the local community and peer support may be lacking.

Nevertheless, there are challenges. We were told that the Army Welfare Service had been reduced and that unit welfare officers need to be able to signpost Serving personnel and their families to organisations in the community, such as Home Start. The RN/RM welfare support has also suffered cuts and there is a drive to increase access to support through longer opening hours and at weekends via the NSFPS Portal.

The three Services all engage with community support whenever possible and take advantage of the many programmes and activities that can meet the varying needs of Service families. Commanding Officers and local welfare staff in the military bases stressed the importance of liaising with local charities, using the garrison/base/station as a hub. Unit welfare staff are supported by a number of organisations such as the Service charities and the Families federations. Army Commanding Officers, when talking to us about welfare provision, referred to the number of units based in the larger garrisons, such as Aldershot for example, which can render family support more complex as a result of the diversity of personnel and the level of churn as units move into and out of the garrison. This can be challenging for the Commanding Officer as the first line of welfare support. One Commanding Officer told us that in his opinion:

“Supporting the relationship between the Army, the soldier and the family is the most important aspect of the role of the Garrison Commander.”

This will be even more important and challenging as the Army develops five super garrisons. Others stressed the duty of care for military personnel but pointed to a lack of clarity about how this translates to providing care for the families, wherever they happen to reside. Understanding the military commitment to supporting its people is vital and being aware of the needs of the families is key to addressing welfare issues. The Army is responsible for more young families than the RAF as a result of the variations in socio-demographics and recruiting patterns, and their needs will be different.

All the stressors that families have talked about during the review are acknowledged by Commanding Officers but finding solutions is not regarded as straightforward. For example, co-working hubs, discussed in Chapter 5, to address spousal employment concerns, are generally welcomed by the Chain of

Command and welfare staff in all three Services, but many pointed out that they will not assist everyone and on their own will not be sufficient.

Welfare staff in all three Services told us that they lack information at times and cannot answer questions raised by family members. An example they cited was the information about the Future Accommodation Model which welfare staff in all three Services, including in some pilot sites, seemed unsure about. We witnessed some exchanges in several bases, including a pilot site, where it was clear that families wanted to know more about FAM but the welfare staff were not sure of the detail. Some welfare staff told us that they lack specialised training and feel unprepared to address issues such as domestic abuse. What is clear is that concerns about the state of accommodation, the lack of work for non-serving partners, childcare issues, education, access to healthcare and deployments all feature very highly on the workload of unit and local welfare staff. Commanding Officers also get pulled into these issues, especially the high level discontent about SFA and SLA, yet there is little, if anything, they are able to do about resolving some of these concerns.

Welfare staff referred to the complexity of issues that they are sometimes faced with, especially those concerning mental health issues, family breakdown and intimate-partner violence. Welfare staff are well aware of the impact of the cycle of deployment on family relationships and on the emotional wellbeing of partners and children. Unpredictability is a major problem as it prevents families planning their lives in a meaningful way. They also acknowledge that while the Services can provide a range of groups for partners and children and these are obviously important, they do not address the real impacts of time spent apart and the relocations which disrupt family life and cause some families to split up or the Serving partner to leave the military when the sacrifices become just too much.

However much welfare staff and Commanding Officers are able to do to provide support to families, they acknowledge that they face a difficult task reaching out to dispersed families. Integrating care and support is much harder when military families do not live on or near the base. Welfare staff are alive to the difficulties inherent in providing welfare support to military families who live in communities with few military families to provide any kind of peer support group. The loneliness we heard about is felt more keenly by some partners living some distance from a base. We were told of serious concerns about the Future Accommodation Model which is perceived by some welfare staff and some members of the Chain of Command, specifically in the Army, as encouraging families to live apart from the Serving partner, and which would therefore present considerable communication challenges for Commanding Officers and welfare staff. During our fieldwork period which ended in September 2019, fears and concerns and misunderstanding about the purpose of FAM were commonplace in some bases in all three Services, but especially in Army garrisons.

The study of Naval families by Gribble and Fear³⁵⁸ showed that spouses and partners living off the patch were often unclear about what welfare services they might be eligible to receive and how to access support. The authors drew attention to the reliance on Serving personnel to deliver information to non-serving partners as contributing to a perceived lack of information. This adds to the feeling spouses and partners describe of being disconnected from the military community. Limited outreach by welfare staff could result in families believing that the military does not value them.

Having been given more training in understanding mental health issues and domestic abuse, some welfare officers said that they felt better equipped to signpost people to the appropriate professional services. At RAF Wittering, for example, family members can go on a 'Thriving at Work' mental health awareness course and this encourages more openness and breaks down stigma relating to mental health issues. A similar course was also run at the local community school. Welfare officers believe that the military needs to be smarter in ensuring greater mental health awareness and training for as many people as possible so that they understand the signs and encourage people to seek help early. Line managers are in a good position to notice if someone is in need of support. A number of staff recognised that the military needs to be more pro-active about providing welfare support rather than taking a reactive approach which responds to distress only when help is sought. Reaching out seems to be an ambition for some who want to see welfare support for the whole family to be given a higher priority in military training and in Service life. Again, we concur with these proposals.

³⁵⁸ Gribble and Fear (2019) op.cit.

We noted that some military bases make it possible for family members to have a pass that allows them onto the base, even though certain areas may be restricted to them, while others do not encourage this. Families who could utilise base facilities welcomed this and value being regarded as members of a military community. Some bases are already enabling non-military families in the local community to join in local activities such as youth clubs for example, in order to create greater cohesion between military and civilian families in communities near the base.

The Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017–2022 recognises the value of welfare provision for Service families and the need to break down stigma in seeking help for worries and concerns that can cause stress. This calls for strong and pro-active leadership by Commanding Officers who need to create the right environment to reassure Serving personnel and their families that it is perfectly acceptable to seek help and that doing so will not damage military careers. We recognise, however, that Commanding Officers have a duty of care to the personnel under their command and, in some circumstances, it is critical that issues which may seriously impact on a person's performance, or which may endanger the Serving person and/or others, are brought to their attention to ensure that appropriate support is provided and protective actions taken.

Military welfare reviews

While we were conducting our review, both the Army and the Royal Navy were undertaking their own internal reviews of their welfare provision. The Naval Service Family and People Support service was asked to consider its approach to welfare support as part of the Royal Navy's transformation programme, and the Army Inspectorate was asked to review the manning and performance of primary unit welfare support. This latter review was initiated following concerns raised by the Army Families Federation about the quality of welfare provision in some areas. The Army Inspectorate was charged with identifying changes that should be made. We met with the Army Inspectorate Review Team and with the Chief of Staff conducting the NS FPS review. While preparing our report for publication, the Army Inspector shared his findings and recommendations with us, many of which echo and are consistent with those from our review.³⁵⁹ The report concludes that the 'skills, qualifications and experience of the Army's Unit Welfare Officers could be improved, and structures diversified'.³⁶⁰

The Army Inspector's report has highlighted that although Army welfare provision had been reviewed 27 times since 1975, 13 of which referred to Primary level support, the delivery of Army Primary level welfare provision 'has not changed significantly over this period',³⁶¹ and identifies a number of recommendations that had not been acted on. Inevitably, Armed Forces personnel and their families today will have different expectations of welfare support than in times past. Family life has changed since 1975. The Army Inspector raised a number of issues about the delivery of Primary level Army welfare support which were also brought to our attention. These include:

- the lack of a management information system to support the Primary level of welfare provision which would enable transfer of data between the levels of welfare provision and across units and locations
- questions about the personal qualities and skills of Unit Welfare Officers
- the adequacy of Unit Welfare Officers' training
- the pros and cons of welfare provision being delivered within the Chain of Command
- concerns about the extent to which maintaining confidentiality may be a barrier to successful welfare delivery
- the lack of gender balance in welfare teams
- the use of specialist civilian professionals to deliver support outside the Chain of Command.

The Army Inspector's report also highlights three issues which we believe are relevant not only to the Army but to all three Services:

³⁵⁹ The Army Inspector (March 2020) *Army Inspectorate 3rd Line of defence Assurance Review: The manning and performance of Primary welfare support*. DCGS/ArmyInsp/Welfare/Report/2020 p6.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

- the ability of welfare staff to respond to the changing nature of family life, including the impact of dispersed living away from the patch
- the disparities in welfare support
- the challenge of communicating directly with families.

The Army Inspector has made 22 recommendations, many of which chime with our recommendations. He underlines the importance of the Army identifying the ends, ways and means for its welfare provision, and of developing a coherent welfare strategy which would bring clarity and underpin decisions on the purpose and scope of welfare support, how to deliver it, the workforce and training required to deliver it, and how to measure performance.

It is clear from our review that there are a range of pressures on military families in the normal course of Service life and that welfare services are not always attuned to the importance of offering support routinely to ensure these pressures can be well-managed. The welfare response across all three Services is regarded as good when there has been a crisis, and especially in situations of injury or death, but less good on a day-to-day level. In other words, welfare support in the military tends to be reactive rather than pro-active.

Our review suggests that, given the known barriers to seeking help, there needs to be greater pro-active engagement with families throughout the Serving person's military career, and especially at the 'crunch' points, such as deployments and moving to another location, when families are at their most vulnerable. In addition, our review has found good evidence to suggest that support offered by professional civilian services is highly valued by Service families. It addresses concerns about expressing personal and sensitive difficulties to someone in the Chain of Command and increases confidence that it is worthwhile to seek help. Given the complexity of many of the problems experienced by today's Service families, the provision of specialist expert support has an important role to play in the overall welfare offer. We have also highlighted the benefits of an approach which offers more coherence across all three Services.

The Army Inspectorate report refers to a comment made during an interview with the Chief of Defence People, Lt General Nugee, in November 2019 in which he:

“ saw the benefit in Defence developing an overarching strategy to bring greater coherence to the welfare across the three Services, with common principles whilst allowing for Service variation in execution tied to their demands.³⁶² ”

This is in line with one of our key recommendations.

Reviewing the Tri-Service Welfare Policy

The Tri-Service Welfare Policy sets out a set of principles while recognising the individuality of each Service. We believe that there would be merit in reviewing the extent of the individualisation and assessing the potential benefits of establishing more coherent policies across all the Armed Forces. More coherent policies do not imply that one size of welfare response can fit all, but it does suggest the development of a Tri-Service welfare policy with which each branch of the Armed Forces needs to comply, beyond complying with a common set of principles, objectives and parameters of provision.

The Tri-Service Family Support Agreement, for example, could mirror the approach to health and wellbeing overseen by the Surgeon General for all three Services. A Joint Welfare System across all three Services which is owned/overseen by the Chief of Defence People would ensure parity of support across the Services. One Commanding Officer suggested to us that families should be able to seek support from a military base that is closest to them, irrespective of whether it is the Serving person's home base, or whether it belongs to a different branch of the Armed Forces. If better coordination of in-house provision and better ways to connect with family members are regarded as being of high priority, then the ability to seek help at any military location and from any of the three Services, should that be necessary, should be perfectly possible in the long term.

³⁶² Ibid. p26.

We note that the Tri-Service Welfare Policy states that welfare is not an end in itself but a key element of the moral component of fighting power and, hence, operational effectiveness. It is not a luxury but a central component of military life and the 'duty first' requirement. The Policy confirms that:

“ Welfare is a broad concept that has both a direct and indirect bearing on almost every aspect of military activity. It concerns the wellbeing and motivation of personnel from each of the three Services including Reservists, both individually and collectively, and in every sense: physical, mental, material, moral and social. It also encompasses the Serving person's entitled family and the entitled civilians working in support of the military when overseas.³⁶³ ”

Rethinking the provision of welfare support through a family lens with a view to achieving greater clarity and coordination was a proposal put forward by some senior officers in all three Services. They argued for a review of welfare support across the whole of the military in the quest for a model which is fair, allowing parity of provision, and accessible by everyone. It was also suggested that there should be universal provision for everyone and that the first response in the Armed Forces should always be 'How can we help?'

The MOD Tri-Service Welfare Policy³⁶⁴ indicates that

“ MOD provides welfare support as a core business function. As well as exercising its duty of care to Service personnel, it also recognises that welfare supports operational capability. This latter point applies to provision of welfare support to Service personnel and their families and recognises the impact of service (largely mobility, dislocation from normal forms of support and separation). It is therefore essential that measures are in place, where reasonably practicable, wherever personnel are required to serve, to provide the timely and effective assistance necessary to maintain operational effectiveness. ”

With increasing numbers of families choosing to live away from the patch and the provisions within FAM to encourage Service families to live in their own or privately rented property, together with increased tri-service engagement, there is a belief that traditional models of welfare will not be fit for purpose in future, and that a more professional, inclusive and tailored set of support services will need to be made available if families are to be valued, protected and retained. We concur with this view. This does not imply an increase in dependency but, on the contrary, suggests a model that promotes independence by building emotional resilience to cope with military life.

Several senior welfare staff questioned the appropriateness of each of the Services running its own welfare support model. The changing nature of family life and relationships and the expectations of modern families, together with the move towards dispersed living, all suggest that a more coherent model of welfare support across the Armed Forces is needed, including the use of modern technology, social media, and other ways to provide more personalised support. We were also told that there needs to be more clarity about and a more precise understanding of the duty of care which all Commanding Officers have to discharge. Some suggested that there should be a welfare system that embraces all three Services, and welfare services which are truly Tri-Service and owned by Defence. Some Serving personnel and family members highlighted the variations in training between welfare staff in the different Services as unhelpful; and questioned the rationale for variation in the pathways of support. We also heard that there appears to be a greater stigma attached to approaching welfare officers in the Army.

CASE STUDY: Project Frontline

We heard a consistent call for there to be better parity of welfare provisions for families within Tri-Service bases and across the different Services. In this respect, recent trials undertaken on board HMS Queen Elizabeth, one of the newest and most advanced aircraft carriers in the Royal Navy, have provided useful feedback. Together with her escorts, the ships' companies include Serving personnel from all three Services, representing a true tri-service community.

³⁶³ MOD, *Tri-Service Operational and Non-Operational Welfare Policy*, op.cit. para 1.1.21.

³⁶⁴ Ibid. p7.

HMS Queen Elizabeth has been the test bed for a new welfare initiative.³⁶⁵ The carrier embarked a Royal Navy military social worker for the duration of the ship's deployment to the US during the last quarter of 2019: a highly trained and experienced Chief Petty Officer from Naval Service Family & People Support (NS FPS) with a background in both medicine and social work was tasked with providing support to personnel across the Carrier Strike Group. In a separate, but complementary trial, an experienced mental health nurse was also on board. The aim was to provide support and reassurance to Serving personnel when they need it the most, in cases such as bereavement and loss, or other personal or domestic difficulties, and to ensure that Serving personnel can remain at sea rather than having to be sent home, thereby reducing the impact on operational capability and retention rates. Both trials were due to end when the task group returned in December 2019.

Most Royal Navy personnel who have deployed to sea have experienced the frustration and isolation of having to cope with difficult personal or family events at home. In the trial, the social worker has provided support to Armed Forces personnel at sea, in addition to the normal role of the NS FPS in providing support for Serving personnel and families at home. Within the first month of the trial in August 2019, the caseload quickly reached maximum capacity. Usually the Chaplain and Divisional Officers on board offer primary level welfare support. Serving personnel who are in serious difficulty or whose family is in difficulty at home would be returned to the UK at the earliest opportunity. This is costly in terms of operational capability and potentially disruptive for the Serving person and the family involved.

As we have demonstrated in this review, there is an increasing belief that the approach to welfare support in the military needs to be modernised to be more pro-active and offer early intervention so as to prevent problems escalating. This includes assisting Serving personnel through tough times while they are on deployment. It is acknowledged that problems can become worse when people are away on deployment without the usual support networks at home, and that mental health issues can easily escalate, affecting work, relationships and operational capability investment. The trial included the NS FPS social worker making regular visits to HMS Queen Elizabeth's escorts, HMS Dragon and HMS Northumberland, to help their ships' companies. Personnel from all three Services were seen and supported: the RN/RM, the RAF, and the Army.

The mental health nurse on board provided support, including cognitive behavioural therapy, to Service personnel who would normally be sent ashore and assigned to a Personnel Support Group. Providing treatment in situ keeps personnel at sea – which is where they indicate they would rather be. An audit in 2018 showed that a considerable proportion of the medical officers' time on board ship was taken up with mental health issues which should have been dealt with by Community Mental Health teams. We know that Serving personnel and their families are more likely to try to cope rather than seek help. This supports the views we have heard throughout the review that people do not seek help and just try to keep going until they reach crisis point. By receiving help on deployment Serving personnel can keep working and receive treatment without it impacting on military operations.

We understand that in the first three months of the trial some 40 Serving personnel had received specialist social work support, and the Chief Petty Officer described it as her busiest time ever managing such a high case load. Those seeking support approached their Divisional Officer on board and were directed to the social worker. This allowed an orderly progression from the Chain of Command to specialist support. Given that it was a trial, the social worker maintained an open door policy as well, to ensure that no-one felt inhibited about asking for help.

Our conversation with the NS FPS military social worker during the trial indicated that a number of early benefits had emerged:

- being able to deal with problems experienced by Serving personnel on board and link directly back to the NS FPS team in Portsmouth via the Family and People Support Portal, to offer appropriate support to the family at home. This provided reassurance to the Serving person, the family and the Command
- dealing with problems at sea has built resilience and supported the Serving person through a difficult time and, at the same time, enabled them to stay focused and working on board

³⁶⁵ Navy News, December 2019 and personal communications.

- responding at sea to any emerging issues about safeguarding of children at home, meant that these could be picked up quickly and addressed by the shore-based NS FPS team, offering reassurance to the Serving person and support to the family
- working closely with the mental health nurse, triage assessments could be undertaken quickly, resources could be shared, and support could be coordinated
- working together helped the military social worker and the mental health nurse to up-skill and learn from each other in order to provide a more coherent, effective and holistic intervention at sea
- when a Serving person experiences problems at sea these could be dealt with quickly and confidentially. This is particularly beneficial for young sailors who are at sea for the first time, and it may also aid retention in the Royal Navy.

The trial has also yielded important learning for the future which will inform a new approach to specialist welfare support:

- there is clearly a demand for specialist military social work support for Serving personnel during deployment
- a range of problems, some fairly complex, can be effectively dealt with at the front line
- it is challenging for one military social worker to manage a large number of difficult and challenging cases without appropriate support networks in place
- appropriate, confidential and private work space is needed and this is not traditionally available on Naval ships...this would need to be addressed in future deployments
- each of the single Services has its own processes for managing secondary specialist welfare issues and clarity is needed about how these are to operate at sea and points of contact at home need to be established
- a more standardised approach to support at sea for members of different Services will need to be developed for a true Tri-Service offer to be in place
- ship dynamics have to be taken into account and the ship's daily programme dictates how specialist welfare support can be provided
- military social workers supporting Serving personnel at sea would benefit from increased training, for example in dealing with mental health issues
- Tri-Service support requires a clear strategy to be in place and protocols to be agreed.

The feedback from Serving personnel who accessed support during the trial is overwhelmingly positive. The immediate access to specialist welfare support has been valued, fewer people than might have been the case had to be flown home. We have seen preliminary feedback and it confirms a strong endorsement for the specialist social work role to be a permanent one on Carrier Strike and also for consideration to be given to extending the role throughout the Fleet. As one member of the Ship's company said:

“ In my personal opinion it should be a permanent assignment, as being a member of the ship's company would make the social worker a more familiar and accessible resource in the future. I feel they are a vital asset to the ship and especially on a carrier with a large ship's company where in my experience there are definitely enough people needing the specialist support to warrant them having a permanent assignment. ”

This view was expressed by many others. Some mentioned that it had been helpful to talk to a professional social worker in confidence outside the Chain of Command. There was also positive support expressed by Divisional Officers who felt that the trial had helped them enormously in their primary welfare role:

“ Given the size of QE Ship's company, a permanent assignment seems appropriate. ”

Colleagues of all ranks were extremely positive about the benefits of having specialist welfare support on board and many felt better informed about the ways in which such support can prevent problems escalating:

“ I do believe a social worker would add value to the Carrier Strike group. If personnel feel that they have support they can call on if needed out of the divisional system, it may work towards a happier work force and more efficient. ”

Serving personnel from other Services were also positive about using the social work support they received. We were told about one person who needed to go home to sort out an issue at home was able to do so and return to the ship quickly as a result of the preparatory work that had been undertaken from the ship with the NS FPS shore-based team. The early evidence points to the potential benefits of including specialist military personal welfare support workers on board during deployments, and this suggests that a different mind-set is likely to be needed to embed social work and mental health support within the ship's company and deployment operations and, potentially, across the Armed Forces.

The Chain of Command will need to fully realise the benefits for them in respect of operational capability as well as the benefits for the personnel and families involved. The opportunity for Divisional Officers to work with specialist support staff on board has helped them to identify where intervention is needed before it impacts on an individual's wellbeing. The demand has been such that in future, more resources may be needed to ensure burn-out from carrying a large caseload does not occur.

Overall, the trial would appear to have gone well, and it has provided very useful learning in respect of a coordinated early intervention support service being delivered uniformly to military personnel across the three Services. This in itself is important in testing how Tri-Service support can be offered primarily by a specialist military social worker from one of the three Services, and underscores the potential value of developing a Tri-Service welfare support protocol for the future.

Looking to the future

The Tri-Service Specialist Welfare Agreement endorses the ability for welfare to be provided across the Armed Forces:

- 6 In principle, the provision of specialist welfare support is the responsibility of the parent Service but there will be occasions when another single-Service welfare provider is better placed to meet the needs of the service user. Such occasions may include the proximity (and hence availability) of the welfare provider, the speed at which a welfare provider is able to respond, or where the personal circumstances of the service user are such that intervention by a different welfare provider is deemed more appropriate. This agreement outlines the arrangements whereby Service Personnel and their families may be the recipients of specialist welfare support services from one of the other single Service providers.³⁶⁶ 9

The Agreement is made between the three single Services and covers the following circumstances:

- when the Service person is serving with a unit from another Service and their families, where appropriate, will be provided with specialist welfare services by the local Service welfare agency.
- where services would be more appropriately provided by another agency because of geographic or other reasons
- where service users, because of the specific nature of their situation, seek the assistance of a different single-Service specialist welfare agency.³⁶⁷

This agreement is a practical arrangement that allows more effective provision of specialist welfare support services to Service personnel and their families by enabling access to the services provided by other single Service agencies. There are a number of restrictions and parameters to follow, but this already offers the possibility of more joined-up provision and a better service for dispersed families.

Commanding Officers have responsibility for ensuring a duty of care, a responsibility that extends support to family members as well as to the Serving person. Leadership is a key aspect of this, as is doing everything possible to ensure a stigma-free culture of welfare support. While the MOD employs the Serving person and their needs are clearly paramount, it is essential that the spouses, partners and children of Serving personnel are appropriately supported as an essential aspect of the duty of care which promotes operational effectiveness across the whole of the Armed Forces.

³⁶⁶ MOD, Tri-Service JSP 770, op.cit. Annex B to Chapter 1.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

In this chapter we have identified a range of stressors and concerns raised by Serving personnel and their partners/spouses and children. The issues are not new but the review has shone a spotlight on the impact of these on family life and relationships, and on the need for greater support, especially for families around the cycle of deployment, when they move to a new area and when they live some distance from a military base. The comments we received from families across the three single Services indicate the extent to which the demands of military life can strain marital/couple relationships, sometimes to breaking point. The seeming incompatibility of Service life and family stability is clearly a trigger for some to exit the Armed Forces prematurely.

Each of the three Services offers a wide range of welfare support and it may well be that a clearer more coordinated model might be more efficient and effective. Many people feel that there is a stigma associated with seeking help and support for personal issues. Disclosing these to military staff who are part of the Chain of Command, however much confidentiality is a key feature of the work of welfare officers, is perceived by many Serving personnel and their families as likely to impact negatively on career progression and be regarded as a sign of weakness. Many members of Armed Forces families believe it is better not to seek help but 'to grin and bear it'. We have been struck by the many admissions of marital problems, by the number of spouses and partners who experience loneliness and social isolation, and by about the potential for domestic abuse which is often undisclosed for a variety of reasons. These are not isolated examples and it suggests that there is a hidden demand for support within the military community which is not being met at the current time. Maintaining a reactive stance to welfare support is unlikely to satisfy this gap and a more pro-active and more coordinated approach would seem to be essential in future.

In the next chapter we examine the support offered by organisations in partnership with the Armed Forces, consider the learning from support that is offered in other countries, and highlight the importance of small acts of kindness.

Our Recommendations

Preventing relationship stress: short term

Recommendation 80

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to take a pro-active approach to supporting families and preventing relationship breakdown by:

- being more aware of the cumulative pressures on couple relationships
- ensuring every family is given information about the potential stressors on their family relationships as a result of Service life, particularly before, during and after deployment, and about the support available
- providing clear information in plain language, avoiding military acronyms, about how to access confidential help and support
- ensuring early intervention and personal support are available and accessible for all families.

Recommendation 81

All three Services to take steps to aid the retention of Serving personnel in dual-serving relationships, particularly those in different Services, and ensure that career managers liaise with each other to manage work requirements and deployments in order to minimise relationship stress.

Increasing welfare support: short term

Recommendation 82

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to work in partnership with an established helpline, such as ChildLine, to set up a confidential helpline specifically for children and young people from military families.

Recommendation 83

The Chain of Command and Welfare staff to ensure greater awareness of factors which increase loneliness and social isolation and pro-actively reach out to families who are especially vulnerable as a result of deployments, mental health concerns, additional needs or disabilities, postings to new areas, and dispersed living arrangements.

Recommendation 84

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

- ensure all Serving personnel and their partners are aware of the confidential support available for those experiencing intimate-partner violence, domestic abuse and stalking, and how to access it
- undertake research to better understand the incidence and nature of intimate-partner violence and domestic abuse in Serving military families.

Recommendation 85

The three single Services to work together to:

- ensure there are no gaps in welfare support when Serving personnel and their families relocate
- offer welfare support to all military families irrespective of whether they live on the patch or are dispersed, and to find new ways to reach the most vulnerable families
- ensure appropriate support is available and accessible to all military families without stigma or fear
- break down barriers to seeking help
- harmonise terminology and move away from references to 'welfare' (following the Royal Navy lead).

Increasing welfare support: medium term**Recommendation 86**

The Armed Forces to actively explore the integration of specialist welfare support with deployed units and ways to provide better coordinated support across the Armed Forces community.

Recommendation 87

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

- review and refresh the Tri-Service Welfare Policy to encourage a more integrated and pro-active approach to welfare which includes prevention, early-intervention and specialist support available to all military families in all three Services
- establish a more coherent, consistent Tri-Service offer of support for all military families, including the use of modern technology, recognising that one size does not fit all
- realise the benefits of greater harmony across the three single Services and a Defence-wide approach to specialist welfare provision to ensure parity of support and better reflect the increased joint working environment.

Increasing welfare support: longer term**Recommendation 88**

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to establish a Defence Case Management Information System to ensure continued support for all military personnel and their families.

Chapter 9

Small Acts of Kindness: A Pro-Active Approach to Meeting the Needs of Service Families

In Chapter 8 we looked at the key pressures that threaten to disrupt personal relationships and cause increased stress for both non-serving and Serving partners, including loneliness and isolation. We noted how many couples try to cope with situations that cause stress and unhappiness in their personal relationship without seeking help for a variety of reasons. We recognised the impact of domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence and the reluctance surrounding disclosure, including the fear of the damage disclosure might inflict on the careers of Service personnel. These are complex issues which are often difficult to address, particularly in a military culture which values resilience and puts duty first. We described the various approaches of the three Services to the provision of welfare support, and considered the benefits of reviewing the Tri-Service Welfare Policy to ensure greater coherence of welfare support across the whole of the Armed Forces. Although each Service uses different terms for the staff who provide primary support within each Service, we use the collective term 'welfare officer' here for simplicity.

In this chapter, we consider some of the additional and vital support provided by third sector organisations either through partnership programmes with the Services or via projects funded by the military charities and the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. We point to examples of very promising practice and new approaches to personal support, and look briefly at some of the innovations in military welfare support in Australia and the US. One of the difficulties we face in discussing most of these initiatives is the limited extent to which robust evaluations have been undertaken to demonstrate 'what works' in welfare support. This makes it more problematic to suggest which programmes should be rolled out and extended.

It became increasingly clear as we spoke to military families that there is considerable confusion about where and how to seek support. We have discovered that there is a plethora of provision for Serving personnel and families across the Armed Forces, much of it offered by external partners. We received information about and submissions from a number of organisations providing specialist support to military families, many of which had received funding from The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. There is no doubt that for welfare support to be available and accessed effectively by military families in a non-stigmatising manner at all stages in a military career, external organisations need to be working closely with Armed Forces providers to ensure appropriate access to and understanding of the work they do. Some spouses and partners questioned why there are so many charities offering support of various kinds:

“Why are there so many military charities trying to offer similar things? Is there a central hub/ service centre that can support them [veterans/Service families] access what they need and direct to the most useful service? ... I'm confused who does what, and for the Service person who likes avoidance and minimisation, it is a likely factor that may put them off rather than encourage engagement. Is there a guide for families...it's all unknown to us as families and how do we know where to look? ”

(Army non-serving partner)

We address these questions and refer to some of the organisations/charities offering support, describing the work they do. There is a substantial level of ignorance about the support that is available and more could be done to reduce this.

Partnership approaches to providing family support

The three Services each have their own military charities and each Service works with a number of partners to provide certain types of support. The UK Armed Forces charity sector is extensive.³⁶⁸ It began in 1803 to assist the casualties of the Napoleonic Wars. SSAFA is the oldest tri-Service charity in operation today, having been founded in 1885. Between 1916 and 1920, 11,407 wartime charities were registered, with another 6,492 exempted from registration.³⁶⁹ Today the Armed Forces charity sector remains diverse. In 2014 some 2,200 Armed Forces charities existed in the UK, with the number estimated to provide welfare support today standing at about 400. This is still a large number of different charities and this sector, therefore, plays a hugely significant role in supporting veterans and Serving families. During our review we have met with a number of the charities and been informed about the work they do. Others have sent us information about the role they play. Most of them support the entire military community which includes Serving personnel and their families and veterans and their families. The three single Service Families Federations focus their work on Serving personnel and their families. We have referred to their work throughout this report.

With such a broad range of charities, collaboration and co-ordination is a challenge. While the Confederation of Service Charities (COBSEO) offers a single point of contact with government and the devolved administrations, it is virtually impossible for Serving personnel and their families to be fully cognisant of the charities and organisations that are available to help them, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Much depends on the Armed Forces themselves to ensure that welfare support is understood, people know who to go to and how to access the various services. COBSEO promotes and represents the Armed Forces and the bulk of their work is with veterans and their families. The Armed Forces Covenant is the link between COBSEO and Serving personnel and their families.

The single Service charities tend to be the most visible of the military charities in supporting Serving personnel and their families: the Royal Navy/Royal Marines Charity (RNRM); The Royal Naval Benevolent Trust (RNBT); the Army Benevolent Fund now renamed the ABF – the Soldiers Charity (ABF); the RAF Association (RAFA); and the RAF Benevolent Fund (RAFBF). In addition, The Royal British Legion (TRBL) and Help for Heroes provide invaluable support for the military community, and place considerable emphasis on support for veterans. SSAFA also provides a range of support to the whole military community.

The large military charities fund an enormous number of programmes and projects for the three single Services. We have seen first-hand some of the projects and support programmes that these Service charities fund and have been enormously impressed with their scope and the support they offer to families. For example, in 2018/9 the Army Families Federation used funding from the ABF – the Soldiers Charity, to engage with families with additional needs. Support groups were established in a number of garrisons to work with these families and build their confidence. The groups were followed by an Additional Needs Study Day, bringing decision-makers together with families. One of the lessons from this was the need to improve the training of key support staff, including welfare officers.³⁷⁰

During the review we have been able to meet with a few of the charities and we summarise the work of those we have engaged with.

SSAFA

SSAFA is 134 years old, with about 6,000 volunteers located around the world. About 60 per cent of their work is with Serving personnel transitioning out of the military. As we noted in Chapter 8, there is a SSAFA social worker on most RAF bases offering support to Serving personnel and their families, and working in collaboration with local authority statutory services, as part of their contracted welfare support. SSAFA also runs the Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum (FANDF). While SSAFA provides welfare/social work support on RAF and RN bases they are aware that on Army bases the welfare officers are endeavouring to offer welfare support with limited resources, and that the ability to provide consistency of support services across all military bases in all three Services is a huge challenge.

368 The Armed Forces Covenant (2018) *The UK Armed Forces charity sector: a summary of provision*, FiMT, National Lottery Fund, Cobseo.

369 Pozo, A. and Walker, C. (2014) *Sector Insight, UK Armed Forces Charities: an overview and analysis*, Directory of Social Change.

370 AFF (2019) *Shaping the Future for Army Families, AFF Annual Report and Accounts 2018/9*.

SSAFA provides specialist adoption services, sheltered housing (Stepping Stones) for women and children who need a place of safety; and a wide range of support for veterans and their families. During our conversations with SSAFA, staff pointed to accommodation, spousal employment, education and childcare as the main challenges for Serving military families, together with the lack of support available when families opt to live off the patch. One of SSAFA's current priorities is ensuring that social isolation does not become a bigger problem in future as FAM is developed and dispersed living is encouraged.

NSPCC Early Support for Military-Connected Families

The NSPCC has two long-established centres offering 'early help' services to families in Tidworth (since 1989) and Catterick (since 1998) Army garrisons. A recent evaluation³⁷¹ focused on drop-in services for parents and children aged under five, school lunch clubs for children from military families, and group work for children with emotional and/or behavioural problems. The early help services aim to build five protective factors: parental resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; support in times of need; and the social and emotional competence of children. Parents described how military life, including barriers to help-seeking and increased risk of social isolation, can undermine parental wellbeing and child development.

The evaluation reveals that attendance and satisfaction with the drop-in services were high:

- feeling supported at times of need was significantly higher if parents had been attending for three months or more.
- social connections increased over time, and this is an important finding in respect of the non-serving partners who told us in our review that they were feeling lonely.
- social connectedness in turn increased the parents' confidence in their parenting abilities.
- attending the drop-in centre regularly had also improved their feelings of wellbeing and lowered their levels of anxiety.
- using a strength-based approach to build protective factors in families provided positive encouragement for parents to feel competent in their parental role.

There is promising evidence that preventative, non-threatening, social support interventions for military families with young children can help parents overcome stress and depression and encourage child-centred parenting.³⁷² The mothers using the drop-in centre spoke of loneliness and social isolation and the difficulties in making friends when being constantly on the move to different locations. The drop-in centre creates an opportunity to derive non-stigmatising peer support which otherwise might not have been available.

The drop-in services are open 50 weeks a year and families can use a range of toys and materials and undertake activities that they can also do at home. The children are encouraged to learn and socialise with other children while parents relax and make friends. Professional staff provide advice and information on a range of topics. Usually parents attend twice a week and more often if needed. The drop-in groups attracted some 8,000 visits and nearly 900 new Service users in the year 2017–18. The use is expected to increase as both Tidworth and Catterick become 'super garrisons' following the draw-down from Germany.

The lunch clubs, Military Munch, led by two NSPCC practitioners are held at three schools in Tidworth for military children aged between 7 and 13. A programme of activities is designed to support emotional resilience, social and emotional development and child safety. Children can opt in and out of the group. In addition, a group work programme to develop emotional resilience in children (ERIC) is offered as a six-week intervention for children aged 7–10 with low-level anxiety, emotional and behavioural problems, and those with additional needs. The children learn to recognise and manage their feelings, using mindfulness techniques. The evaluation has shown that children attending Military Munch described it as giving them opportunities to talk about how they feel and to meet others going through the same experiences. The ERIC programme gave children more confidence and a greater understanding and awareness of their emotions, and greater resilience to deal with potentially stressful events.

371 McConnell, N., Thomas, E., Boshier, A. and Cotmore, R. (2019) *Early Support for Military-connected Families: evaluation of services at NSPCC military sites*, NSPCC.

372 Julian, M.M., Muzic, M., Kees, M., Valenstein, M. and Rosenblum, K. L. (2018) *Strong Military Families intervention enhances parenting reflectivity and representations in families with young children*, *Infant Mental Health Journal* Vol 39,(1), p106–118.

Welfare staff we met at Tidworth were positive about the interventions offered by the NSPCC. An obvious limitation pointed out by welfare staff is that they are located on or very near the garrisons and unlikely to be attended by dispersed spouses and partners who may feel even more socially isolated and anxious, especially during deployments. However, the programmes for children can be easily replicated in schools around the country attended by Service children. We know that similar interventions are offered to children in other military schools that employ specialist psychologists.

Home-Start

A number of welfare officers told us about the valuable work of Home-Start. Established in 1973, the charity works with local authorities across the UK and with a number of military bases. There are 212 local Home-Starts. They provide a wide range of services, including home visiting support services, parenting programmes, counselling services, drop-in centres, and young mums groups, to families with at least one child under five. Home Start trains local volunteers to deliver compassionate support and practical help to families in their own homes and at regular groups. A number of local Home-Starts have delivered services to military families across England funded through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust 'Families in Stress' programme. The Covenant Fund Trust has supported family groups on some military bases and family support workers who work directly with families on a one-on-one basis. The support offered is designed to reduce loneliness and social isolation experienced by some non-serving mothers with young children.

We understand that Home-Start Oxfordshire, for example, had supported 206 military families in the previous two years, and these families reported:

- a reduction in isolation as a result of attending the groups and/or being supported by the Family Support Worker
- improved parenting abilities (25% of families)
- feeling more integrated into the local community (50%).

The Home-Start interventions provide an integrated support service alongside the military welfare services. Families are referred by GPs, health visitors and Armed Forces welfare officers and families can also self-refer. The volunteer worker will support the family for as long as is needed in order to help mitigate social isolation, mental health issues and any other problem the family might be dealing with. We understand, also, that Home-Start Kennet and Home-Start Wiltshire had provided support to 27 military families in the first year of Covenant Fund Trust funding, and feedback indicates that families were helped with mental health needs and social isolation.

Although we did not meet any military families during the review who had used Home-Start support, welfare officers at bases we visited felt that Home-Start enables them to be able to signpost to a range of services to meet the varying needs of the families under their care.

Big White Wall

Big White Wall, founded in 2007, supports people with anxiety and depression. A social enterprise company it works with people with a wide range of mental health and wellbeing issues, from anxiety, depression, stress and trauma, to relationship problems and lifestyle challenges. Big White Wall is a digital support and recovery service for people who are stressed, anxious, or just not coping. It is available online 24/7. It offers one-to-one online therapy with registered and accredited counsellors and Cognitive Behavioural Therapists. A range of organisations commission services in Canada, New Zealand and the UK. With a guarantee of anonymity, clinicians engage with Armed Forces personnel who find it challenging to ask for help.

Big White Wall offered the first online pathway for wellbeing and mental health, placing people at the centre of their own care, and allowing them to access support from their own home. Services are available free to all Serving personnel, reservists, veterans and their families. Big White Wall is part of Contact, a collaboration of military charities working with the NHS and the MOD to help members of the Armed Forces community access mental health and wellbeing support. Welfare staff told us that Big White Wall is a valuable resource for military personnel and their families.

The Warrior Programme

The Warrior Programme is a charity with a longstanding track record in working with veterans and their families. The programme enables individuals to manage their emotions and to develop the resilience, focus and motivation to succeed in today's world. The programme has been developed over the last ten years to meet the demands and challenges experienced by past and presently Serving members of the Armed Forces and their families. It consists of a twelve-month programme for Serving personnel, commencing with a three day intensive foundation course, followed by regular refresher sessions and online interaction and support. During the programme the Service personnel are introduced to coaching techniques that enable them to maximise their potential, build resilience, and deal effectively with daily life. The twelve-month programme is fully funded, including food and accommodation. A similar programme is offered to adult family members of Serving personnel. Family members are introduced to coaching techniques that help them to build resilience, manage stress, and focus on building a confident and positive future. This programme is also fully funded.

The Warrior Programme has obtained funding from the Families in Stress programme supported by the Covenant Fund Trust. Between April 2017 and June 2019 the Warrior programme was delivered to Army personnel and their families, primarily in the South/South West and Yorkshire regions. Further funding was obtained from the Covenant Fund Trust to deliver the programme to **families of personnel in the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and the RAF, and via LIBOR funding to deliver the course to Serving personnel across the Armed Forces.** A robust evaluation³⁷³ of the programme has been undertaken and it has shown a positive impact in enabling Army spouses/partners to tackle a range of personal, family and work-related challenges. This positive impact has been felt within the family by the Serving partners and children.

Ninety-one spouses/partners of Serving Army personnel had engaged with the programme up to June 2019, and the research indicates that:

- partners/spouses experienced an increase in self-confidence
- they experienced improved relationships and family life
- there was a decrease in feelings of anger, anxiety, and frustration, enabling the skills acquired by partners/spouses through the programme to render them more confident and more effective as parents. This in turn benefits children and is resulting in improvements in children's behaviour and attitudes.

Similar benefits are being experienced by Serving personnel who have been on the Warrior programme.

The Warrior programme appears to be breaking down barriers to help-seeking for personal problems and is improving mental health and wellbeing. Engagement with the Warrior programme is spearheading cultural change to increase acknowledgement of the importance of mental health and wellbeing within the Armed Forces, and to find ways to reach families who are most in need but often less likely to seek help:

6 This is a particular achievement given the complexity of a large and multi-faceted organisation such as the Army and the challenge of establishing referral pathways through the myriad of points of contact in Army Welfare and the Chain of Command.³⁷⁴

The development work undertaken by The Warrior Programme staff has enabled the Army Welfare staff to enhance their skills and make appropriate referrals to the programme. An important factor in the success of the programme to date has been its independence from the military and the provision of a safe and supportive environment for those participating. We understand that referrals are increasing and that there is a waiting list for courses. Feedback indicates that the programme could be of particular benefit for new Service families who are coming to terms with the military way of life, families living outside the wire who are socially isolated, and families of Commonwealth Serving personnel who do not have supportive networks in the UK. These groups could be targeted in future as we know from our review that social isolation is an issue for some families and particularly those who are dispersed away from the patch, as we have highlighted in Chapter 8.

373 JN Consulting (2019) *The Families In Stress (Army), Warrior Programme Evaluation Report.*

374 Ibid. p3.

The Warrior Programme is very committed to continuing to offer programmes to all Serving families and to ensure that it is free at the point of delivery. The evaluators also suggest that more spouses/partners would be able to benefit if there was some provision of/support for childcare for those wishing to engage in a residential course. The Warrior Programme has already established good relationships and partnership with the Armed Forces and has secured referral routes through the welfare staff. The Warrior Programme has also underscored the comments made during our review that spouses/partners often feel that they are under pressure to be strong; they often feel isolated; they may experience anxiety and a loss of self-confidence; and they have to deal with all the stressors at home while their partner is away, all of which we have discussed in the report. The programme also fosters new friendships and ongoing peer networks and support.

CASE STUDY: The RAF Benevolent Fund Airplay programme



Photo 9.1 RAFBF Airplay Programme

The RAF Benevolent Fund's Youth Support programme has a unique role to play in supporting children and young people growing up on RAF stations. Airplay has three main elements: Airplay Parks; Airplay youth support activities and Airplay Childcare Centres. Airplay provides state of the art facilities within a fun and stimulating environment. As part of the Youth Support programme, Airplay provides safe activities for children aged 8 to 19 years of age on all RAF stations. Airplay is a RAF Benevolent Fund £24 million youth support programme for RAF families, providing a range of facilities, equipment and activities for children and young people. Airplay was founded after a survey had found that young people in RAF families face unique challenges and keeping them safely occupied was a big concern for families, especially when one parent is away on deployment. Furthermore, air stations are frequently located in rural and fairly isolated locations with minimal community activities near

at hand. Airplay gives children and young people an opportunity to engage in a range of activities near to where they live. When families move between Stations there will be another Airplay programme for them to join and make new friends immediately.

We visited the Airplay programme at RAF Wittering during the review and gained insight into the value of this project for RAF families. The support offered in RAF Wittering is detailed below. Wittering is a high deployable station, with periods of separation, and families face unique challenges, including moving around the country to new stations. RAF Wittering is situated in a rural location with no weekend bus service and no night bus service, so there are limited opportunities for young people to engage and socialise with civilian young people in the local communities. It is clear that children and young people thoroughly enjoy the activities of Airplay. In addition, at RAF Wittering, the playpark is located in the local village and open to both civilian and military children. This provides an important opportunity for children to socialise together.



Photo 9.2 RAFBF Airplay Programme, RAF Wittering



Photo 9.3 Airplay Art Project, RAF Wittering

In 2019, RAF Wittering's Airplay Team, which includes Station personnel, workers and volunteers from the RAF Benevolent Fund, won the Airplay Team of the Year award. A key element of the team's delivery was the successful '7's transition project' which encourages young people in the junior youth club to join the senior facility in the term before transitioning to secondary school. This provided the young people with bespoke and intensive peer support. In addition a baby-sitting course was designed as a joint project with the families centre and the NHS to give young people support, guidance and safety skills for looking after their siblings or baby-sitting. This course also provided the learning of important life-support skills.

RAF Wittering AIRPLAY 2019

Provides: support to children and young people aged 8 to 19

Through: a network of trained youth workers [provided by Action for Children] and sessional workers

And the Ben Club: a term time club for children aged 5 to 7 (12 attendees).

The programme delivers: 4 sessions a week over 3 evenings.

- Monday – Project Tuesday Youth Forum, 6 attendees & Youth Drop In (age 12–19 years). 17 attendees.
- Tuesday – Sevens (intermediate group for young people in school year 7). 15 attendees.
- Wednesday – Youth Club (aged 8 to year group 6). 35 to 40 attendees.

Summer 2019: activities over 4 weeks included:

- trips out to various theme parks
- Station Cinema
- team activities
- arts and crafts day
- celebration event
- residential event Airfest music festival
- residential event London two nights stay on HMS Belfast.
- Battlefield Live (26 young people).

Residential events were heavily subsidised and any Service family member with a parent currently deployed attended free of charge.

Attendees at the summer 2019 activities: 244 attendances by 61 young people.

Professional counselling for children and young people

RAF Wittering has established a contract with Relate Cambridge to offer counselling to military children and young people. The service is funded through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust which gave a grant to Relate Cambridge for one year from November 2018 for this work. The specialist counselling is offered across the three catchment schools (one primary and two secondary) which have military pupils from RAF Wittering families on their rolls. By October 2019, 140 hours of counselling had been delivered to 22 children/young people, girls and boys, aged between 7 and 17. The issues these young people presented with show a number of consistent themes: anger; anxiety; family conflict; low self-esteem; bereavement; eating disorders; self-harm; and bullying.³⁷⁵

The number of sessions with each pupil has varied according to need. Counselling takes place in suitable private meeting rooms in the schools. The feedback received from the children/young people indicates that they enjoyed the counselling sessions, and some would have liked more sessions. The objective evidence indicates that the counselling had reduced levels of distress substantially in every case. The Community Development Officer at RAF Wittering, an experienced youth worker, follows up with the children/young people when they have completed their counselling sessions with Relate, to ensure ongoing support is available for those who need it.

³⁷⁵ Data supplied by RAF Wittering.

There is overall agreement at RAF Wittering that the intervention is extremely helpful, that there is a real demand for it amongst military children and young people, and the Chain of Command and welfare staff at RAF Wittering are keen for the counselling offer to continue.

Wittering Children and Young People's Board

RAF Wittering has established a Children and young People's Board in line with the MOD DCYP vision to harness the positive benefits of living in a Services community and ensure that every Service child and young person's experiences and opportunities help them to achieve the best possible outcomes in life. It also supports, protects and intervenes where needed, to help the most vulnerable children to achieve their ambitions. The Station CYP Board is the strategic operational lead providing direction for support services for children, young people and families in the RAF community. It is co-chaired by a young person from the RAF community in the station and the Project Tuesday Youth Forum Chairperson. The membership includes: the station Community Development Officer; head teachers from local schools; local councillors; local authority children's services representative and early years specialist; parents; young people's representative; a member of SSAFA; a representative from the Parish Council; and a representative from Action For Children.

The Board meets three times a year to oversee and direct development of services delivered for children, young people and families within the RAF Community, inform service providers in the wider community of the needs of children and young people in Armed Service families, and provide support to the development of their services. The objectives are to:

- identify the needs of children and young people within the annual Station Community Needs Analysis
- set priorities within the Station Community Support Action Plan
- monitor local contracts with charitable or other organisations engaged to deliver Childcare provision (includes Annual Stewardship Report) and other activities, and ensure providers respond to identified need
- engage with Schools and Local Authorities to develop knowledge and understanding of the Armed Service community and support Service Pupil Premium and other initiatives to respond to identified needs
- identify opportunities for the development of initiatives for children and young people within the Armed Forces Community Covenant
- maintain awareness and understanding of Government policy and initiative impacting children, young people and families and respond as appropriate
- maintain awareness and understanding of MOD and RAF policy and guidance on Community Support services for children and young people and respond as appropriate
- create opportunities for children and young people to contribute to the decision making of the Station CYP Board
- monitor Airplay Youth Support delivery to ensure that it meets identified need, improves in quality and is policy compliant
- monitor compliance with Safeguarding reporting procedures
- monitor Station Youth Engagement Strategy.

Delivery of the actions is via the Community Development Officer and relevant lead staff with external support. The SSAFA Social Worker has the lead for professional engagement with the local authority Social Services for the RAF. The young person from a military family stationed at RAF Wittering who co-chairs the Board told us that having that kind of responsibility is important: it has built her confidence, and encourages military children and young people to take an interest in the support provided to those living on or near the station. The Station Commanding Officer and staff regard the CYP Board as an essential aspect of supporting young people and their families. We referred to the importance of hearing the voices of children and young people in military families in Chapter 4, and recommended that they are enabled to share their views and experiences to inform policymaking. This is an excellent example of young people engagement.

Supporting couple relationships: Building Stronger Families

Serving personnel and family members in both the Royal Navy and the RAF have access to confidential personal relationship support independent of the Chain of Command. This has been available via contracts with Relate funded by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity (RNRMC) and the RAF Benevolent Fund (RAFBF). Relate³⁷⁶ is the largest relationship support organisation in England and Wales. In total, some 1,400 trained and highly skilled practitioners offer a range of confidential professional support, which includes: couple counselling; counselling for children and young people, psycho-sexual therapy; family counselling; family mediation; and education, training and learning about relationships. Counselling is delivered face-to-face, online, via Live-chat and by telephone. In 2016, the RNRMC contracted Relate to offer couple counselling services to RN/RM families and this has continued.

The RAF also contracted Relate to deliver similar services funded by the RAF Benevolent Fund. The 2018 report³⁷⁷ about meeting the needs of RAF Serving families found that 27 per cent of RAF personnel had experienced marriage or relationship difficulties in recent years. Similarly, RNRMC has noted that with the expectation of Naval personnel being away from their home base for up to 600 days in every three year period, there are inevitable strains and pressures on relationships.³⁷⁸ Serving members of the RN/RM and the RAF and their families are able to access specialist support from Relate through a dedicated confidential phone line and they are allocated to a counsellor in their local area. Referrals can also be made by the Naval Service Family and People Support (NS FPS) and SSAFA. RN/RM clients can access six free counselling sessions and the RAF clients can access seven free counselling sessions. There are provisions for additional counselling if this is needed.

During the review we have had access to Relate reports about the Building Stronger Families programme and opportunities to review anonymised Relate data for each of the Services. We have looked at Relate reports referring to RN/RM clients between 2016 and 2019, and to RAF clients for the period 2018–2019. More detailed data were available for RN/RM clients than for RAF clients. Since the outcomes are very similar we focus here primarily on the experience of RN/RM clients.

The RNRMC has also supported some follow-up research with Naval families who have accessed Relate services. This work is ongoing and we include some emerging findings. The analyses of both Relate and RAF data tell a very positive story about the outcomes achieved for military families from both Services.

CASE STUDY: Royal Navy families using Relate services

In 2018, some 580 courses of counselling and 1,327 separate counselling sessions were completed with RN/RM Relate clients.³⁷⁹ Some 90 per cent of the sessions delivered were for adult relationship counselling, 4 per cent for sex therapy; 2.5 per cent for family counselling, and 2 per cent for children and young people's counselling.³⁸⁰ In 2019, 92 per cent of the services delivered were for adult relationship counselling and 4.4 per cent were for family counselling, an increase on the previous year, and 2.7 per cent were for young people and children's counselling. The data indicate that:

- the majority of RN/RM clients were located in Portsmouth, Plymouth, Exeter and Dorset; while the highest volumes of RAF clients were supported by Relate Centres in Lincolnshire and Oxford. This reflects the locations where large numbers of military families are based.
- generally, in the civilian population women are more likely to contact Relate and more likely to access Relate services, but amongst RN/RM clients this is reversed, with 52 per cent of clients identifying as male. This suggests that male Serving personnel had almost certainly felt more able to seek counselling support than men in the general population, and it could reflect the fact that the Serving RN/RM population is largely male.

376 Relate (2019) *Because Relationships Matter: Annual Review 2018/19*.

377 RAFBF (2018) *op.cit.*

378 RNRMC (2019) *Impact Report 2018–9*.

379 *Ibid.* p33.

380 Relate (2018) *The Difference We Make, November 2018*.

- RN/RM clients tend to be younger than Relate clients generally, with 26 per cent of RN/RM clients aged in their early 30s (compared to 14% of Relate clients generally) and only 2 per cent of RN/RM clients are aged 60 or over (compared to 11% of Relate clients overall). This clearly reflects the age range of Serving members of the Armed Forces.

The 2019 data show an increase in the number of families living in SFA accessing Relate. In 2018–9, 34 per cent were living in SFA and 49 per cent were living in their own accommodation. In the same period 2017–18, 16 per cent were living in SFA and 74 per cent lived in their own accommodation. The increase in referrals from people living in SFA might indicate that more information about Relate had been available on the patch than previously, or simply that word had got around about the value of the counselling service.

Presenting issues

The presenting issues reported in 2017 and 2018 were broadly similar to those reported by Relate clients more generally. The six most common presenting relationship issues were: problems with communication; managing conflict; worries about their relationship; rows and arguments; my partner's/other people's behaviour; and taking each other for granted.

Other presenting issues included: mental health problems; problems at work; and in 2019, worries that their relationship will end had reached the top six issues. Problems at work were cited by 25 per cent of clients in 2017, and some 35 per cent in 2018. Mental health problems were reported by approximately one third of clients, and RN/RM clients were slightly more likely than Relate clients generally to report that mental health problems caused issues in their relationship (36% compared with 26% in 2017, and 31% compared with 25% in 2018), which might reflect the pressures and stresses of military life. In 2018 other relationship issues emerged with greater impact, including infidelity or having an affair. In 2019, managing responsibilities in the home, money worries, and difficulties with their sex life also featured prominently in the list of issues.

It is important to note that, in 2017, 80 per cent of RN/RM clients attributed their relationship issues to Service in the Royal Navy or Royal Marines. Of those clients, 47 per cent reported that their relationship issues were in some way a consequence of operational deployment. This reflects the findings of our review referred to in Chapter 8 that relationship issues develop during periods of separation and particularly as a result of deployments which, in the Royal Navy, tend to be long. In 2019, 50 per cent of RN/RM clients attributed their problems to Service pressures and 77 per cent to operational deployments. We note also that over 50 per cent of RN/RM clients reported in 2018 that they had brought the issue(s) to the attention of their Chain of Command, and 47 per cent had done so in 2019.

Outcomes

Relate routinely uses two robust, well-validated scales to measure outcomes from its counselling services. The first, the Enrich Communication Scale is used as a proxy indicator of relationship quality. Developed in the US, the scale has been widely used to measure counselling outcomes in a number of research studies in the UK. It comprises a 10-item questionnaire which is completed before, during and after counselling. The second, the PHQ-9 scale, is a measure of psychological distress. These scales, together with before and after questionnaires provide a robust picture of the changes that have occurred during the counselling intervention and so offer a clear correlation between counselling and the outcomes achieved. The findings show significant improvements in both these outcomes year on year.³⁸¹

In 2017:

- 41 per cent of RN/RM clients recorded distressed relationships (i.e. Enrich scores of less than 28) at the start of counselling. Of these, 50 per cent had improved to the point that their relationships were no longer distressed by the end of counselling.
- 31 per cent of clients were psychologically distressed (i.e. PHQ-9 scores of more than 9) at the start of counselling, and of these, 71 per cent had improved to the point that they were no longer psychologically distressed by the end of counselling.

³⁸¹ Relate, RNRMC, *The Difference We Make reports: 2017, 2018 and 2019*.

In 2018:

- 52 per cent of RN/RM clients had distressed relationships (i.e. Enrich scores of less than 28) at the start of counselling. Of these, 37 per cent had improved to the point that their relationships were no longer distressed by the end of counselling.
- 32 per cent of clients were psychologically distressed (i.e. PHQ-9 scores of more than 9) at the start of counselling. Of these, 55 per cent had improved to the point that they were no longer psychologically distressed by the end of counselling.

In 2019:

- 42 per cent of RN/RM clients had distressed relationships (i.e. Enrich scores of less than 28) at the start of counselling. By the end of the counselling process 63 per cent had improved to the point that they were no longer distressed. There were similar improvements in psychological distress also.

These are extremely positive results.

More generally, the outcome data show that:

- 100 per cent of those using Relate services reported improved communication
- 87 per cent reported that rows and arguments had reduced
- 88 per cent reported being better able to manage conflict
- 87 per cent reported that issues around taking each other for granted had reduced as a result of counselling
- 74 per cent reported that their partner's behaviour had improved and 86 per cent reported that their own behaviour improved
- 85 per cent reported that they felt more confident about their relationship after counselling
- 89 per cent felt able to cope with any difficulties they might face in the future.

Client feedback

Royal Navy clients seem very satisfied with the Relate service, with 93 per cent saying that they would recommend Relate to other people, and 97 per cent reporting that they would come to Relate in the future if problems arose. Not all clients take the opportunity to leave comments after counselling but the comments recorded are extremely positive about the service received and the outcomes achieved, and attest to the value everyone ascribed to the opportunity to access 'free' confidential counselling. The comments are anonymised but below is a small selection of the feedback we have seen. They stress the value of talking to someone who is independent of the Armed Forces; they appreciate the advice they were given; they refer to the value of having a safe environment in which to talk about personal issues; and the extent to which counselling had increased their confidence for the future:³⁸²

“ It has allowed my partner and I space and a place to talk about our relationship in a safe environment. ”

“ The advice has been incredibly helpful, given us perspective and some very useful tools to move forward with. ”

“ It has been a great resource and our counsellor has done a great job helping us to understand ourselves and each other better. ”

“ I was slightly unsure about seeking help through Relate but I would absolutely recommend it to other couples in need. ”

“ It's good to have an independent person's perspective to make you think about issues and how they may be read by your partner and also how better to address them. ”

“ I'm really happy I came. I feel much better about myself. ”

³⁸² Ibid.

“ I have found the whole experience of counselling very helpful. Being listened to in a non-judgemental way and having someone to explore aspects of my behaviour has been enlightening and surprisingly effective. I feel more confident about my ability to tackle discord and negativity. Thank you so much. ”

“ A safe place to talk about our problems. No judgement. Helped our relationship. ”

“ A fantastic help to our relationship, leaving the 6 sessions much more positive and happier in our relationship. ”

Longer-term follow-up

In 2019, Relate sent a follow-up questionnaire to 156 clients from the RN/RM sample who had agreed to be contacted in future, in order to obtain a sense of outcomes over a longer period of time. Some people were still in counselling, however, so opted out of the survey, and 33 people completed the questionnaire. While this is a small sample and not large enough for robust quantitative analysis, the responses provided a wealth of qualitative data about their experience of Relate counselling. We can observe from the data that 26 people were still in the same relationship, 6 had since separated, and one was in a new relationship. Of those who responded, 47 per cent were still Serving in the RN/RM, and 42 per cent were non-serving partners. Of particular note is that nine people had left the military early and cited the following mix of reasons: being unhappy with Service life; health issues; wanting stability; better employment opportunities and wanting to do something different. One person had left the military in order to save their relationship.

The majority (24) of survey respondents were living in their own privately owned or rented accommodation, and only five people were living in SFA. Ten people attributed the problems that had brought them to counselling as being very much related to Service life, and a further 14 indicated that the problems in their relationship had been somewhat related to Service life. Overall the majority reported that their relationship was much better than it had been although 20 people said that there were still some problems. Nevertheless, only 3 people felt unable to cope with any difficulties they might face. Ten people had sought further help from Relate and the vast majority (29) said that they would go back to Relate if they needed help in the future. Thirty people said that Relate had been helpful and all but one person said that they thought Relate should be universally available for all members of the Armed Forces community. Of the 33 people who completed the survey, 23 of them agreed to be contacted again in the future.

Given the small sample the qualitative feedback is particularly helpful. People were asked about their experience of going to Relate and to suggest what they would like Relate to do differently in future.

The experience of counselling

Overall, the comments given by the respondents were extremely positive about their experience, with many people describing it as ‘excellent’, ‘very good’, ‘very caring and understanding’, ‘calming’, and very useful’. It appears that people valued the opportunity to talk to a neutral professional, knowing that there was someone to talk to in a safe space to discuss feeling without blame and anger, and that it was important to be able to reflect on the relationship and then work together to resolve issues. Several people described the experience as daunting at first:

“ [It was] terrifying at the beginning. I didn’t know how my husband would be, whether he’d talk. I was worried that what I needed to share with him would not be received well. I was scared about telling anyone.... After the initial session where all we did was cry it got much better. Having a third person there as we talked helped ... ”

“ Scary and worrying but once we started it was a weight off my feet to be able to talk and someone listened and it felt safe to say how I felt in front of my husband. ”

Others had clearly seen Relate as a lifeline:

“ It saved our marriage, no question about it. ”

“ I truly valued the time with the counsellor. She was a lifeline for me and I was sad when I had to end the sessions with her. She gave me a lot of support... ”

Only two people had anything negative to say about their experience. One person described counselling as ‘tedious’ and another as ‘very poor’.

Lessons for providers of personal support programmes

Despite the many very positive comments some people expressed disappointment about a number of the organisational arrangements. These are not surprising given the military lifestyle. Booking appointments was obviously problematic for some people, and some were kept waiting a long time:

“ I felt the waiting time was too long. With relationship issues, they need to be dealt with when it happens and not 6–8 weeks later when the situation has been diluted. ”

“ The waiting time between initial assessment and the start of counselling was far too long and detrimental to our relationship. It was a really difficult time. We asked for help, the assessment was useful, it gave us hope, but then we had to wait three months to start the process. ”

“ The time it takes to get an appointment. My marriage could have been saved if we didn’t have to wait for Relate. I had to end up paying for outside help, which by the time it took (over three months later) our marriage was over. ”

This time delay is clearly unhelpful and may be exacerbated by the demands of military life in that making appointments that fit with Service demands are likely to be more difficult than for those in the civilian population. One couple had difficulties arranging appointments because they lived in different areas, for example. It will be important for Relate and other providers to ensure that couples do not have long waiting times in future. One or two people simply did not get on with the counsellor allocated, or felt that they did not fully understand military life:

“ The counsellor myself and my partner saw appeared disorganised...we saw this counsellor for only two sessions before discontinuing the sessions as they weren’t helpful. ”

An important lesson for providers of support is the need to understand military life as an essential pre-requisite for organisations and professionals who are supporting military families.

The main disappointment, however, was the limited number of counselling sessions available. Several people would have welcomed more sessions:

“ You can’t settle long-term institutionalised problems relating to long military Service in six sessions. ”

Others would have liked to be able to contact the counsellor directly and not have to wait until the next scheduled appointment. This can be particularly relevant for couples for whom short-term postings might occur unexpectedly during counselling.

There are some useful lessons for Relate and other organisations to consider, but the offer of counselling to RN/RM families has undoubtedly helped a number of couples to work on their relationship and this has been valued. The experiences of RAF families have been very similar.

RAF families using Relate services

The RAF families accessing Relate were between 25 and 49 years of age, with the majority being aged between 30 and 39. Just over 50 per cent were female and just under 50 per cent were male. The highest volumes of RAF counselling had been delivered from Relate Centres in Lincolnshire and Oxford, reflecting the RAF population clusters. In the first six months of 2019, 58 RAF families had accessed Relate, most of them referred by SSAFA. Some 891 sessions of counselling were delivered in the first six months of 2019. Compared to the same period in 2018 there has been a 32 per cent increase in counselling sessions delivered. From July 2018 – June 2019, a total of 284 cases involving 487 clients had been undertaken.

The vast majority of counselling was delivered face-to-face. In addition to counselling sessions, 48 sessions of mediation had been delivered between January and June 2019 to couples who were separating or who had separated to assist them to make arrangements for the future.

The presenting issues in recent years have been very similar to those of RN/RM clients, and similar percentages attributed their problems to Service pressures and operational deployment: general Service pressure was reported by 79 per cent of RAF clients and 42 per cent referred to operational deployment.

In respect of outcomes:

- 86 per cent reported that communication was better
- 70 per cent reported an improvement in managing conflict
- 53 per cent reported an improvement in confidence as to whether their relationship would last
- 22 per cent reported an improvement with respect to problems at work
- 32 per cent had experienced an improvement in mental health issues.

Comments by RAF clients were just as positive as those given by RN/RM families:

“With all the services available to me as military employee, Relate has been my rock in moving forward. I can't thank you enough for the professionalism and support given to allow me to live a normal life.”

“The ability to talk without being judged in a safe environment has been fundamental in allowing me to process my problems. Without Relate I don't think I would have rescued my marriage and I am grateful for my eyes being opened, and the future is looking fantastic.”

“Relate provided a safe space that allowed us both to talk our way through what we both wanted to say. Personally realised the need to be open and it helped to ensure we are both ready for the future together.”

“My counsellor is truly amazing. She could have just listened to me waffle on, but every session has been incredibly constructive, both helping and bringing hard truths to the fore.”

“Very eye opening. Ended up thinking and talking about issues that were never considered as the root of the problem. Definitely have learnt more about myself and more importantly my partner.”

“Fantastic being able to get everything out in the open which helped us to talk to each other and which has helped us get our relationship on track. ... we have not been so happy in a long time [our emphasis].”

“I feel our relationship has gone through tough times but we can continue to improve it, to cope. I feel I can open up to my partner and talk.”

“Really useful and open environment that has provided a lot in the form of reflection, guidance and tools to help us work better together for the future and all in such a short space of time.”

“Relate staff have been extremely accommodating in meeting our needs. The initial contact, in particular, was excellent; Several appointments were offered, which was very helpful.”

“Very useful and positive experience, mainly the opportunity to talk in a focused way with my partner for 45 mins.”

Reviewing the Relate evidence

The quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrate very clearly the value military personnel attribute to the offer of professional intervention by experienced counsellors outside the Chain of Command, and the positive impacts of counselling on couple relationships under stress. We know that it is important to seek relationship support as early as possible when relationships are struggling, and Relate offers both early intervention when relationships are under pressure, and counselling and mediation when relationships have broken down. The RNRMC has supplemented the free telephone, online and face-to-face counselling service with Relate by launching the RNRMC 'Building Stronger Families Portal', a self-directed online

learning programme providing a discreet and easily accessible way for all Naval families to access advice and support when relationships are under strain.³⁸³ The courses include topics such as Military Life; Sexual Communication and Intimacy; Family Life; and Parenting.

The data also clearly demonstrate that there is a demand for Relate services from the Naval and the RAF communities, and that the ability to access counselling with the support of the major charities is a very worthwhile initiative. We do not have any comparable data with respect to any similar service offered to Army families. Given the extremely positive outcomes for Naval and RAF families achieved through Relate interventions, we would urge all three Services to ensure that their families are offered open and confidential direct access to professional services such as Relate, and that further evaluation should take place.

The Ripple Pond

The Ripple Pond is a small military charity established by two mothers of seriously wounded servicemen who recognised that no similar service existed purely for the loved ones supporting injured Serving people and veterans, and who found strength and comfort by sharing and supporting each other through such a unique challenge. Supported by the RNRMC, the charity is uniquely dedicated to supporting the adult family members of physically or emotionally injured Service personnel. Ripple Pond has a regional network of people and the charity empowers each member to seek support when they need it most, in ways that are helpful for them – whether that is via group meetings, a 'buddies' scheme or via a private Facebook page. The Ripple Pond gives them a safe space, both physically and mentally to address their needs, and support to deal with their difficulties.

The Ripple Pond enables a peer support network for adult family members and friends who are caring for emotionally or physically for injured Service personnel, veterans and Reserves. The charity works directly with families. Evaluation of the programme shows that this is a complex area of support and it can be very difficult for family members to obtain appropriate support, resulting in isolation, loneliness and a reduced ability to support the person they are caring for.

Peer-led group meetings take place regularly with the main aim to provide a space to express feelings safely, in a non-judgemental environment, where everyone can be heard. The groups are for any adult family member who feels they would like support. In between meetings, a Buddy system and online forum are offered. The Buddy system works by putting members directly in contact with another member should they wish. The Ripple Pond operates a judgement-free, online forum through social media. The Ripple Pond team includes military and civilian spouses. The charity is not part of the Chain of Command, membership is free and confidentiality is key. The 2018/19 impact Report contains a number of case studies of those who have used the service, describing its work and expressing support for the charity.

Give Us Time

Give us Time is a small military charity formed in 2013 by former Defence Minister, Dr Liam Fox, to meet a gap in the provision of support to Service families in stress as a result of bereavement, injury, separation and financial hardship. The charity takes donations of commercially let accommodation and works with the Services welfare agencies and other charities to deliver respite breaks to military families in need of rest, recovery and reconnection.

The mission is to 'give military families precious time together' The charity emphasises the importance of fostering strong, stable families for military personnel who experience additional stressors in their daily lives. The respite breaks offer an opportunity to increase resilience and reduce dependency on welfare agencies and health and social care services. We understand that the support provided reduces stress, strengthens relationships and improves self-confidence.³⁸⁴ We are told that 91 per cent of the beneficiaries experience positive or extremely positive change. Moreover, 55 per cent had been considering separation or divorce before the holiday break and 96 per cent agreed that the holiday had helped to keep the family together and to feel more confident about the future.

383 RNRMC(2019) *Impact Report 2018-9*, op.cit.

384 Submission to the Review from Rupert Forrest, Managing Director, Give Us Time, March 2019.

This service is an important example of the role that early intervention plays in nipping problems in the bud and preventing family breakdown. We suggest that research to evaluate the effectiveness of early intervention projects which aim to enhance the mental and physical health and wellbeing of military families, improve and repair couple relationships, and reduce dependency on statutory services should be undertaken.

Kings Active Foundation

The Kings Active Foundation was established some 30 years ago and has been delivering training and activities for working with children and young people across the world. The main aim of the Foundation is to get children active, having fun and learning together. The Foundation runs activity camps for children, creates activity jobs for young people and provides people, programmes, training and resources to individuals and organisations that work closely with children. The Foundation has worked with over 2 million children and young people, and has provided employment experience for some 20,000 young people. The Foundation works in partnership with schools, commercial partners and local communities.

The first Kings Camp run exclusively for Royal Navy families took place in HMS Neptune in 2009. At that time the project catered for 128 Royal Navy children and delivered 270 hours of school holiday activities. In 2018, 1,410 Royal Navy children took part in one of the eight Kings Camp locations at Naval bases across the UK. These camps provided 54,000 hours of school holiday activities. Working in partnership with the RNRMC, Kings Camp is extending its reach to include Royal Navy children throughout the UK, not just those living at or near Naval bases and establishments, but at 55 locations from Aberdeen to Exeter. This will enable children from Naval families wherever they live to benefit from Kings Camp activities. This is especially important as Royal Navy families tend to be widely dispersed. Kings Camps is a not-for-profit organisation with a vision of a world where children love being active, have fun and learn together.



The Kings Action Foundation trains individuals to work actively with children and young people and to give them increased life skills and better chances in life. Sixty camps in the UK offer sports activities for children and young people aged between 5 and 17. The Foundation trains youth workers all over the world, working closely with UNICEF. The aim is to give children and young people a range of life skills and encourage resilience. Kings Camp work closely with schools around military bases.

Teen Active, Multi-Active and Rookie Academy programmes take place in the Easter and summer school holidays and are heavily subsidised by the RNRMC. More than just sports activities, the Kings Camps bring together children and young people who have at least one parent serving in the Royal Navy or Royal Marines, to develop peer support and friendships. Most of the Naval children who participate attend a Kings Camp on four days each week for two weeks in the summer holidays. During a typical week, children get to participate in around 30 activities. Parents make a contribution (up to £60 per child per week) to the cost and bursaries are provided. This is made possible by the support of the RNRMC. The ambition is to support children to become young leaders. Young carers in Naval families are encouraged to attend to give them a well-deserved break from their caring responsibilities.

We met Royal Navy parents on our visits to bases whose children had attended a Kings Camp. They sang the praises of a programme that not only gives their children something fun to do in the school holidays but also teaches them valuable people skills and supports them at a time in their lives when at least one parent is absent for much of the time. Parents are keen to send their children to Kings Camp every year and we were told that the children are equally keen to attend.

The role played by family centres and hubs

During our visits to Naval bases, Army garrisons and RAF stations we visited the family centres and spoke to staff and families about the facilities. We are in no doubt that welfare staff, Commanding Officers, Padres and members of other organisations such as SSAFA all do their very best to ensure that each family centre is fit for purpose and is a welcoming, family-friendly place for spouses/partners and children to come and meet others. The family centres vary considerably across the Defence estate as to their location, condition and the facilities offered. We were told about a wide range of activities for families, including parent and toddler groups; art clubs; coffee mornings; wives/partners' breakfasts; and physical activity classes. They are also used for briefings for families. It was not uncommon for families to tell us how brilliant some of these facilities are and how much they are appreciated:

“ There are lots of groups for children and they can also go to Military Kids Club, HMS Heroes... ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ The facilities are good but getting the right help from welfare officers is very dependent on the personality of the welfare staff. ”
(RM non-serving partner)

On one military base we visited, the Hive had been temporarily closed for refurbishment and the adjacent coffee shop was closed too. Comments from non-serving partners indicated just how important these centres are for some families, especially when their partners are on deployment. One mother told us:

“ The coffee shop in the Hive is very important ...my network of support was ruined when the decision was taken to close the Hive...it was a big issue for me. ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

This young mother had relied on being able to access the Hive to meet up with other spouses/partners because she was living off the patch and was feeling socially isolated. Going to the Hive was her one chance to stay in touch with her friends. The swimming pool on the station had also been closed for the past two years because of a lack of funding for maintenance, and this had added to the disappointment felt by non-serving partners that there was nowhere to meet up with friends on the station. We understand that alternative venues were available but the temporary loss of a place which was familiar and had become an important part of some mothers' routine had been difficult. We were told by welfare staff that the Hive was scheduled to re-open at the end of 2019, and the expected date was February 2020.

There was a sense among many of the spouses and partners we spoke to that decision-making about the facilities for families is not always joined up and that welfare support is reactive rather than staff pro-actively thinking about the needs of families and the impact on them when meeting places are closed/changed for a period of time. Welfare staff agreed that life can be lonely for partners, especially those with young children when they are living off the patch and had lost the close network of support they had experienced before, and that the closure of the Hive for a period had been disruptive. Opportunities to meet other spouses and partners are very important, as is being able to go on trips and to be part of a wider supportive community, especially when Serving partners are away on deployment.

Discussions with Commanding Officers and welfare staff at several bases highlighted the need for welfare to be much more pro-active in reaching out to families:

“ We could be smarter. Good line managers know their personnel and should be able to spot stress and breakdown much sooner. Training needs to focus more on caring for our personnel and there is not enough about people. Reactive work can work well but we need pro-active welfare. We need to do better, invest in leadership and ensure every person understands mental health issues. ”

(Senior RAF Officer)

Others suggested that more could be done to introduce mindfulness training ‘to have more tools in the welfare toolbox’. We were told about initiatives to connect people, encouraging greater social interaction and helping people gain more life skills. Some welfare staff questioned the way in which the Family Welfare Grant is used. They questioned whether it is the best use of money to take people on lots of day trips, or whether there should be more emphasis on whole family events. There was agreement that coaching and mentoring courses are valued ‘because they help to tackle loneliness and find ways to connect people’.

Many welfare staff suggested that more should be done to prepare Service personnel and their families for military life, to build resilience early on in a military career, and that more could be done to develop a sense of community. They suggested that they should be more pro-active rather than waiting for people to ask for help. There was agreement that Family Centres provide a non-threatening location for briefings to take place, but that they need to be held at times that work for families.

We were told that Padres/Chaplains prepare couples for marriage but that does not necessarily give them the relationship skills and the tools they need to cope with a military lifestyle, frequent separations and relocations, and the impact of these on relationships. One Commanding Officer suggested that if the Armed Forces want to reduce dependency then the military would have to do more to build resilience and prepare Serving personnel and non-serving partners for the stresses and pressures they would face. In his view, this calls for a bigger more pro-active job for welfare staff.

Many families we spoke to had wanted someone to reach out to them, especially when they moved to a new area, and would welcome a more pro-active stance. We sensed that this request was indeed being taken seriously on some military bases where the welfare teams were striving to find better ways to reach out to families. However, they felt that too many barriers were put in the way of this kind of approach. We return to this issue in the next chapter.

Not all family centres were in purpose-built buildings, and some clearly require some investment. During our review, the family centre at HMNB Clyde was in the process of major refurbishment and it opened its doors formally in January 2020. This new family centre offers a blueprint for the future as it offers a range of opportunities that meet many of the support needs identified in our review.

CASE STUDY: Drumfork Nursery and Family Centre HMNB Clyde

This state of the art family centre³⁸⁵ at HMNB Clyde, the Drumfork Community Centre, was officially opened by HRH The Process Royal in January 2020.³⁸⁶ We were extremely impressed when we visited the project in summer 2019 by the potential scope of the refurbishment of a 1960s community centre in the heart of Royal Navy accommodation just a short distance away from the base itself. Financed by the RNRMC with the support of a number of donors, it is the single biggest capital building project in the RNRMC’s history. The refurbished building will serve a military community of some 2,000 families (approximately 8,000 family members) when the Submarine Service and shore-based training have been fully relocated to the Clyde in 2020. A Community Needs analysis confirmed the need for a modern community centre because of the dearth of facilities for families in the area. Military families now have access to a range of facilities and activities under one roof, with a safe outside play space which has been designed with the support of families themselves, and a coffee shop next door.

385 Photo 9.4 by permission of Carl Lamerton, Lamerton Creative.

386 All the photographs are included with permission of Drumfork Family Centre and RNRMC.



Photo 9.4 Drumfork Community Centre



Photo 9.5 Drumfork Reception



Photo 9.6 Drumfork Community Centre socialising area

The Drumfork Centre has a spacious soft-play area and there is plenty of room for children to play safely, for parents to socialise, join in activities and get involved, and to hold events. There is a fully equipped and extremely impressive IT suite and a number of flexible rooms for a range of uses. The IT suite and the flexible rooms can house a co-working hub and provide workspaces for military spouses/partners who want to pursue their own business or remote working opportunities. There is plenty of space for recreation, sports, health and fitness, entertainment activities which can be used by all kinds of military and civilian groups in the local areas of Helensburgh and Lomond. It also has well-equipped catering facilities.



Photo 9.7 Soft play area



Photo 9.8 Children's reading corner

The Centre provides accommodation for the West of Scotland Military Wives Choir, the Geeks and Games Youth Club, and Forces Families Fridays. It will host PE sessions; dance and music classes; multi-language development; parent and carer health and wellbeing services; Tea, Toast and Talk sessions; and a perinatal support programme, pre- and post-birth.

The Centre also has a beautifully equipped nursery facility that supports both the military and civilian communities. The Drumfork Centre is imaginatively decorated to provide a warm, welcoming environment which is already bringing Royal Navy families and members of the local civilian community together. It is well-placed to be easily accessible. While the refurbishment has been a major investment for the RNRMC, it is one which offers a comprehensive programme of support for parents and children, and it is already helping military families to feel valued.

During the official opening in January 2020, mothers told us that the Centre is becoming the go-to place for making friends and getting involved:

“ I come here nearly every day now and it's just brilliant. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ The soft play and the space for the children is great and they are perfectly safe here. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ We had a wonderful party at Halloween and everyone had fun. I am really happy to help out whenever I can. ”
(RN non-serving partner)



Photo 9.9 One section of the IT suite



Photo 9.10 NFF Notice Board

Some of the spouses/partners had recently completed the Barclays course described in Chapter 5, and were excitedly looking for employment, recognising the potential for the Centre to help them, especially being able to use the IT suite.

The plan is to be able to open the Centre for longer hours, during evenings and weekends, and the vision is to introduce an 'induction and settling-in' programme: each family will have the opportunity to receive a home visit where they can complete an 'all about me', and a 'resilience matrix', which will enable every child to have a unique written plan to ensure their needs can be met. It will be important to monitor the effectiveness of this programme with a view to it being rolled out across all three Services.

“ At Drumfork Nursery and Family Centre we aim to support the children, parents and carers and families with not only their transition into the centre but provide them with a family centre that meets the changing needs of the community.³⁸⁷ ”

Several spouses/partners have said that the stressors experienced by military families together with the loneliness and social isolation are often the drivers for Service personnel to become Service leavers, so have urged the Armed Forces to 'make the military a good thing for families'. The Drumfork Centre is undoubtedly regarded as being 'a good thing' and a great deal of thought has gone into its planning and execution. It addresses many of the concerns expressed to us by spouses and partners who find it difficult to settle in a new area and to make friends.

³⁸⁷ Drumfork Nursery and Family Centre Information leaflet.

Hopefully, the Drumfork Centre will enable many Naval families to feel less isolated and more valued and appreciated in the years to come. The centre also brings the naval community together with the local civilian community and should foster better integration and understanding of the military lifestyle.

In their study of transition, the Centre for Social Justice³⁸⁸ argued that it can be particularly challenging for military families to seek help for personal issues 'in the goldfish bowl' of a military base, and so military families should be regarded as a 'hard to reach' group and lessons learned from other non-military initiatives. The CSJ referenced the learning from Sure Start Children's Centres. The aim of these centres was to provide health and family support, emphasising outreach and community development, but initially they found it difficult to reach the more vulnerable parents they had hoped to help. Instead, the approach shifted to take a whole family approach and a move away from simply focusing on supporting parenting, towards a focus on supporting relationships and providing broader family support.

The CSJ recommended a Family Hub model to be established for military families. In this model the Family Centres/Hubs would be the

“ nerve centres of family strengthening activity with strong links or spokes to all other family-related support in the community...connected to other statutory, voluntary and private sector support either there or elsewhere in the community.³⁸⁹ ”

In other words, the Family Centre/Hub would become the 'go to' place for families to access a range of support services, information and advice. The Drumfork Centre has the potential to trial a range of approaches and models of support to meet the needs of a variety of Service families, and to forge links with the civilian community. FiMT's Engagement Programme Report³⁹⁰ emphasised the importance of providing a single point of contact for access to specific information and support.

The Drumfork Community Centre could also encourage the development of peer support. We note that the Naval Service Family and People Support team at HMNB Clyde already recruit volunteers from among non-serving partners of RN/RM personnel. Some of these are now helping at the new Drumfork Centre. The opportunities in Drumfork and HMNB Clyde to change the culture of help-seeking and to modernise the provision of what is usually referred to as 'welfare' support are considerable and could provide a blueprint for the future in establishing more holistic high quality support for the whole family in all military bases. It should also ensure that everyone arriving in HMNB Clyde is welcomed. This is very important for families in all three Services when they move to a new area:

“ One idea I had on our last patch was the formation of a welcoming committee. A group of individuals who would welcome newcomers to the patch. They could deliver a pack with local information and offer to accompany the new person to the next coffee morning ... There are occasions where this welcome and support would have meant the world to me. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

This simple idea was echoed by other spouses/partners and would be very much welcomed as a small act of kindness that would go a long way to helping families to feel welcomed and valued by the Service community. We very much hope that the exciting opportunities to change the model of support will break down barriers to enable preventative programmes to be delivered, and families to be strengthened and helped to deal with difficult issues such as mental health, domestic abuse, relationship breakdown, and loneliness. The CSJ recommended that the MOD should look into ways of structuring preparation and support for people. Drumfork provides a good place to start and a clear blueprint for the future. One of the on-going challenges will be to ensure that families living away from the naval base can also find ways to benefit from the exciting opportunities offered at Drumfork.

³⁸⁸ CSJ (2016) op.cit.

³⁸⁹ CSJ (2016) op.cit. p34.

³⁹⁰ Forces in Mind Trust (2015) *Understanding the Support Needs of Service Leaver Families: Engagement Programme Report*, Brian Parry Associates.

Reviewing the role of the charity sector

We have referred to just a small proportion of the charitable work that is undertaken with military families. During our review we have been enormously impressed with the various initiatives around the UK to support Service families and the commitment and dedication of those who organise them and deliver services. Many are volunteers who give their time generously to improve the quality of life of military families through direct assistance and innovative interventions. Every charity, whether it be military or civilian, has its own mission and aims and specific eligibility criteria. Some are small and confined to operating in a local area, others are much larger and provide a nationwide service.

In the Summary of Provision, 2018,³⁹¹ the charities are listed by the theme of their support offer, such as housing and mental health. It indicates the breadth of support on offer but also highlights the myriad of different charities all working within the military space. It is hardly surprising that military families say that they do not know what help is available, for whom and how to access it. Research has shown that those seeking help are often unsure where to turn.³⁹² We understand, for example, that some 76 Armed Forces charities provide support for mental health issues, 43 charities offer support for depression and anxiety and 33 support those suffering from substance misuse. Not all offer clinical interventions, some provide advice, others have help lines, and so on. We note that a study of the Armed Forces charities' housing provision for veterans and their families³⁹³ argued that collaboration is key as a principle of best practice and that through greater cross-sector collaboration Forces charities could benefit from shared resources and knowledge, and improve referral pathways for military families.

The uncertainty families feel about where to find help is rendered even more complex by the fact that charities have different target groups: some work only with Serving personnel and their families, some support only Service veterans, and some support both. Moreover, some charities that advertise themselves as veterans' charities also provide support to Serving personnel and their families. With such a wide range of charities and varying offers of support, it is vital that more effort is made to ensure appropriate sign-posting and that comprehensive information is provided to Service families.

We know that charities are increasingly seeking to collaborate and form partnerships. This is welcome, but our review has highlighted yet again, the barriers to help-seeking in the Armed Forces, the lack of knowledge as to what is available and how to access support, and the variation in provision between the three single Services and in different geographical locations around the UK. Moreover, the support available normally depends on the Serving person or their spouse/partner making the first move to ask for help.

We have noted that personal welfare support provided by the three single Services is primarily reactive and not pro-active. The considerable barriers to help-seeking which are common across society, frequently stand in the way of support programmes being accessed. This will continue unless what are normally 'distress' purchases are offered in a preventative, pro-active way. The Airplay programme and Kings Camp are good examples of pro-active support for children and young people, and Family Centres can also develop pro-active approaches that are preventative, educational and informative.

The military charity sector is fairly crowded and can be very confusing. Cobseo has a strategic role to play in promoting the highest standards of governance across the sector and in supporting efficiency and rationalisation of the sector to make it easier for families to seek and obtain support. Programmes offered to military families need to be sustainable if families are not to be let down when a short term initiative is withdrawn. Reflecting on the issues that military families have raised during the review, we believe that there are considerable opportunities for greater collaborative approaches to resolving them. A more joined-up coherent and consistent approach across the Armed Forces, the charitable sector and the various providers of services to the military community could result in an increased understanding of the support needs of Service families and ways to meet these needs more effectively.

³⁹¹ The UK Armed Forces Charity Sector (2018) *A summary of provision*, op.cit.

³⁹² The Forces in Mind Trust (2013) *The Transition Mapping Study: Understanding the transition process for Service personnel returning to civilian life*, The futures Company. Ashcroft, M. (2014) *The veterans Transition Review*, Lord Ashcroft.

³⁹³ Doherty, R., Cole, S., and Robson, A., (2018) *Armed Forces Charities' Housing Provision*, directory of Social Change, COBSEO, FiMT and National Lottery Fund.

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust has a pivotal role to play in funding and coordinating innovative interventions to support family life in the Armed Forces. The Covenant Fund was established in 2015 within the MOD to distribute £10m per year, initially using LIBOR funds, in grants to support programmes for the Armed Forces community. By the end of March 2020 it had distributed £50 million. The Trust has also run the application assessments and grant management functions for HM Treasury's £30 million Aged Veterans Fund, the £10 million Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund, and the £3 million Veterans Community Centres Fund.

In 2018 the work of the Fund was transferred to the newly incorporated Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. As an independent trust the main purpose is to provide assistance and support to those who serve in the Armed Forces, both regular and reserve, veterans, and the families of all Armed Forces personnel. The Trust supports a number of projects that help to encourage good relations between the military and civilian communities. Grants are made annually to organisations in the voluntary and public sectors. Since 2015, scrutiny has been undertaken by the Covenant Reference Group (CRG) to which the Trust submits an Annual Covenant Fund Report. Since becoming an independent charitable trust, an Annual Report and Accounts have been submitted to the Charity Commission.

The Covenant Fund Trust has four broad funding themes:³⁹⁴

- removing barriers to family life.
- extra support in and after Service for those that need help.
- measures to integrate military and civilian communities and allow the Armed Forces community to participate as citizens.
- non-core healthcare services for veterans.

During 2018/19, the Trust committed funds to the following programmes:

- tackling serious stress in veterans, carers and families.
- ex-service personnel in the criminal justice system.
- armed Forces Covenant Fund local grants.
- armistice and Armed Forces communities.

The Covenant Fund Trust is a major grant provider for a wide range of programmes, some of which are targeted at the veteran community and others which are targeted at supporting Serving personnel and their families. In the first three years of the Local Grants programme,³⁹⁵ 430 grants worth £7m were awarded: £4.6m to community integration projects and £2.4m for the delivery of services. Community Integration projects must show that they will help integrate Armed Forces and civilian communities across the UK. They cover a number of themes, including: supporting children from Service families to be able to make friendships when moving to a new area; and helping communities form lasting bonds with local bases. More broadly, these grants contribute to improving awareness among the wider community of the role of Serving members of the Armed Forces, their families and veterans.

Local service delivery project funding is awarded to projects that show evidence of a clear local need, with a planned activity or service to meet this need. Projects are encouraged to form connections with other local services to ensure that Serving personnel, families or veterans can be signposted onto other activities that might help address the wider needs that they have. Projects are also encouraged through the application process to consider the needs and issues identified in their area by Local Covenant Partnerships. Home-Start, Ripple Pond and Relate, discussed earlier in this chapter, have all received funding from the Trust. The Trust supports three pillars of activity with veterans and their families; dispersed families; and children and young people. Thirty-two projects worth £509,000 were awarded for work with schools to:

- target interaction and community engagement between Armed Forces families and civilian families
- create new spaces to enable better support for children of Armed Forces families.

³⁹⁴ The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (2019) *Report and Financial Statements to 31 March 2019*.

³⁹⁵ Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (2018) *Armed Forces Covenant Local Grants Programme: the first three years*.

Forty-six grants worth £643,103 were awarded to military bases, including to Army Welfare units, to encourage local community integration. The Families in Stress programme has targeted families of Serving personnel in crisis and in 2018 fourteen projects totalling £2,537,728 were funded.

The funding has assisted in the development and provision of important and innovative support programmes, many of which have been much appreciated by welfare staff seeking to find better ways to assist military families under their care. This significant amount of public funding allocated by the Trust has a vital role to play in supporting and increasing the collaboration between the sectors and promoting greater coordination of the various initiatives, programmes and projects designed to support the daily life and wellbeing of Service families. This work could also make it easier for Serving personnel and their families to know about the range of help and support available to them, to reduce the stigma in seeking help, and to ensure military families know how to access high quality support services appropriate to their needs.

In February 2020, the Trust awarded funding to the value of £13.7 million across four programmes. The awards included: local grants to a total of £700,000; £3,465,000 to the Positive Pathways programme for veterans; £7 million to the Removing Barriers to Family Life programme; and funding for a further 46 centres across the UK in the Veterans' Community Centres programme. This is a substantive investment in a wide range of initiatives designed to support veterans and their families and Serving personnel and their families. Several of the programmes discussed earlier in this chapter have been awarded Trust funding. This level of funding provides a considerable opportunity to fully evaluate different approaches and programmes, measure their effectiveness with their target groups, and build a knowledge base of 'what works' in supporting the Armed Forces community.

Measuring the effectiveness of the initiatives funded by the Trust

Measuring the effectiveness of social interventions is challenging, primarily because, unlike in the medical sector, it is very unusual for randomised control trials to be undertaken. This renders it very difficult to attribute with any degree of certainty any outcomes observed to the interventions/programmes delivered. Causal analysis is virtually impossible therefore, but correlations can be discerned providing a rigorous pre- and post-evaluation design is implemented. Grant makers supporting social programmes expect to be given robust evidence of 'what works' and this can be difficult to obtain in complex real-life situations.

When the Trust was established it was under considerable pressure to distribute the funds, and different providers saw this as opportunity to secure funding for their projects with the Armed Forces community. Being accountable for dispersing significant sums of public money requires scrutiny of the projects funded and an understanding of the outcomes achieved. In the early days of Covenant grant funding, although recipients were required to report on the use of Covenant funds, systematic evaluation of all the projects was not sought, making it difficult to be sure about their effectiveness and the outcomes achieved beyond looking at the data collected by some of the agencies involved. This did not allow any systematic and objective review of the effectiveness of the projects undertaken, the implications for future provision, and sharing of good practice. Evaluations of effectiveness have to be built into programmes and interventions from the start to ensure the appropriate outcome measures are in place and the data needed are being routinely and rigorously collected. Retrospective evaluations are extremely problematic and have the potential to be unreliable. The Trust, therefore, has faced a considerable challenge.

The Trust is determined that in future more systematic data collection and more comprehensive evaluations are to be required. We strongly support this objective while recognising that to achieve it evaluations need to be specific to each programme, and the outcome measures used must be relevant to the outcomes desired by each intervention. Given the wide and increasing range of activities funded by the Trust, ensuring that appropriate outcome measures are used is not straightforward. We know from our conversations with some of those who have secured project funding from the Trust that they usually collect their own data and seek to employ measures that can give them a realistic assessment of the outcomes they achieve. One of the challenges is to harness these data in such a way that different programmes of activity can be evaluated as a whole. While individual projects should be collecting hard data as they deliver their intervention, looking across a whole programme requires careful collation and synthesis of the data from individual projects.

In order to ensure that the Trust can evidence the impact of the funds it distributes there has been a concerted attempt to develop a framework that can be applied universally to all the projects and programmes being funded and which can provide an assessment of the outcomes achieved. This is a herculean task because the Trust funds interventions delivered to such a wide range of beneficiaries and with very different aims and objectives. Anglia Ruskin University were tasked to provide such a framework and have looked to what is referred to as an Outcomes Measurement Framework or Grant Impact Tool which the Trust seeks to use across the programmes it funds. Having examined in some depth the framework which has been adopted, we believe that this presents a challenging ambition.

The Grant Impact Tool is a web-based platform that enables funders to gather data directly from the people who are the beneficiaries of their intervention. The framework consists of two parts: the first part collects anonymised demographic data from each beneficiary. The second part consists of the Wellbeing Inventory (WBI) which beneficiaries of interventions are asked to complete at intervals during the time they are being supported by a project provider. The WBI has been fairly recently developed in the US for use with military veterans in the US to assess their status, functioning and satisfaction with key aspects of their lives, including finances, employment, education, health and social relationships.³⁹⁶ The WBI consists of a set of scales that was created to assess veterans' wellbeing.³⁹⁷ This tool is designed to look at the 'distance travelled' by veterans, based on their scoring of a range of elements relating to their overall wellbeing.

The WBI produces separate measures of the different factors which are described as being 'the building blocks' of wellbeing.³⁹⁸ The WBI has been used in two studies of US veterans. These have provided initial evidence for the reliability, validity and sensitivity of the WBI to assess changes in wellbeing among veterans. More work is being undertaken in respect of the tool. Applying a tool validated for use with one sector of the population to a different sector requires further validation and possible modification of the tool. So applying the WBI to other Armed Forces communities presents an initial challenge.

The US authors have listed a number of limitations of the Index which are of significance for its use with UK populations: first, it provides a broad assessment of veterans' life circumstances rather than an in-depth assessment of any one aspect of wellbeing; second, it is a self-report tool and those completing it are not obliged to answer all the questions, thereby rendering it vulnerable to significant biases; and, third, satisfaction measures are known to be vulnerable to mood effects. The authors suggest that further research with populations other than veterans and further modifications are likely to be needed. Outcome measurement tools have to go through a series of validation tests to ensure that they are applicable to a range of populations in different cultures or circumstances. These processes are still to be undertaken in respect of the WBI in studies involving UK Serving personnel and their families.

While the Trust is keen to use the tool with new programmes being funded involving the Serving community, we are pleased to know from the CEO of the Trust that the use of the Grant Impact Tool is not a mandatory requirement.³⁹⁹ The hope is that some will be willing to use the demographic part of the tool. It is expected, however, that those receiving Trust funding will use an appropriate form of impact measurement tool. We very much welcome this expectation and believe that programme providers should use validated measures that are relevant to the intervention being offered to Serving personnel and/or their families. The use of the WBI in its current form remains a matter of choice for the programme providers funded by the Trust and working with the Serving community. This is appropriate given the need for further modifications to be undertaken for its use with the UK community and a different Armed Forces population.

It is important to collect consistent socio-demographic data across all the projects in a systematic way to enable the development of a data set that can identify trends and usages but it is equally important that those receiving interventions are not asked for the same information several times given that most providers

³⁹⁶ Vogt, D. et al (2019) *Development and Validation of a Tool to Assess Military Veterans' Status, Functioning, and Satisfaction with Key Aspects of their Lives*, Applied Psychology, Health Wellbeing, 11(2):328–349.

³⁹⁷ Vogt, D. et al (2018) *The veterans Metrics Initiative Study of US veteran' experiences during their transition from military service*. BMJ Open, 8 (6).

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Personal communications from Melloney Poole, CEO Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust February/March 2020.

routinely collect demographic data. Questions about and the use of personal data are very sensitive issues. There are conversations to be had with organisations securing Trust funding about the most appropriate way to collect demographic data and to ensure that they are consistent and non-intrusive.

Providers funded to work with veterans are expected to use the Grant Impact Tool, however. We note that the Index is currently presented in the original US use of the English language and has not yet been anglicised in wording or content for the UK military. Furthermore, adapting the WBI as an evaluation tool to be used across different countries and cultures is a process that needs to go beyond linguistic adaptations to ensure that it has ecological validity and reliability in different settings, and that it has robust psychometric properties. We understand that this work is ongoing.

We recognise the ambition of the Trust to be able to robustly evidence the outcomes of funding and suggest that the ambition should be to assist in the building of a toolbox of relevant robust and well-validated outcome measures which can be applied appropriately to the intervention being delivered and the beneficiaries being targeted. An organisation offering an activity programme for children and young people in families with a Serving parent, for example, could not apply the current Grant Impact Tool and the WBI. In this regard, the onus must be on the intervention provider to ensure that appropriate outcome measures are used with children and young people to demonstrate the effectiveness of the intervention and to identify ways in which it might be improved in future. In other words, evaluations of various programmes and activities will need to be tailored to the aims and objectives of each project, and a one-size fits all approach to evaluation tools is unlikely to be sensitive enough to capture robust measures of effectiveness and specific outcomes for all the Trust's funded projects/programmes.

We are aware that in 2019 the Outcomes Measurement Framework was presented to the Defence Select Committee Inquiry into the Armed Forces Covenant Annual report 2018, and we hope that further scrutiny of the Outcomes Measurement framework will be undertaken as the work progresses and other outcome measures are used by providers. We have examined the current Grant Impact Tool in some depth because we firmly believe that the Trust has a critical role to play in building evidence of 'what works' with different sectors of the Armed Forces community which can then be used to guide decisions about which programmes to fund in the future. A single impact tool is unlikely to be able to meet this very important role.

It is also very important that successful and effective projects can be shown to be sustainable beyond the Covenant funding. A number of Commanding Officers commented to us that some of the Trust funded initiatives have not been sustainable beyond the initial grant phase and it is not helpful when seemingly useful initiatives are withdrawn. One told us that he had been inundated with requests from organisations asking for support for an application to the Covenant Fund Trust and had decided not to offer support in future unless it was clear that the proposed programme was going to be shown to be effective and sustainable in the longer term. As he put it, 'there are lots of people chasing money'. Again we are pleased to note that sustainability will be an important feature of future funding.

It is encouraging that, given the range of work and the number of organisations involved in delivering support to the military community, shared learning and partnership working is being taken seriously by the Trust. The identification of good practice and sharing this knowledge amongst the agencies working with Service families and veterans is vital if members of the Armed Forces Community are to be appropriately supported in future. Promoting greater coordination of the various initiatives, programmes and projects designed to support the wellbeing of Service families could also make it easier for Serving personnel and their families to know about the range of help and support available to them. Moreover, given the issues which have been identified during our review as causing stress in military families, the Covenant Fund Trust can be a key player in supporting programmes which are designed to meet the varying needs of Service families and to plug some of the gaps that currently exist in welfare support. We understand that the Trust's website is being further developed and should be ready in the near future.

Learning from approaches to providing support in other countries

We have considered some of the welfare services offered in other countries and considered their relevance, effectiveness and replicability. The support programmes in Australia and the USA offer some interesting approaches to the provision of preventative work with military families, which could be replicated in some way in the UK.

SMART programmes in Australia

A number of families and members of the Armed Forces have suggested to us that there needs to be more preventative work with and early support offered to Forces' families as part of a more pro-active approach to supporting them. In Chapter 4 we recommended that all families should be given detailed information about the emotional responses to the cycle of deployment in order to prepare adults and children to understand how they might feel at different times. This kind of support can build resilience and also encourage families to be able to talk about their feelings and not have to be brave and pretend that all is well. This is especially important for children and young people.

Australia has introduced a series of programmes to help military families develop their resilience and prepare them for the demands of the military lifestyle. The SMART suite of programmes⁴⁰⁰ provides families with the psychological resources to manage the stressors they might face. Increasing psychological resilience means that despite experiencing frustrations and challenging circumstances, families are better able to maintain an optimistic and positive outlook. The SMART programme teaches a series of skills including grounding techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, positive self-talk, problem solving, and expressing emotions.

During a SMART session participants are given information and resources to connect them with valuable local community resources. The programmes are delivered by local Defence Social Workers in small group sessions, and provide practical tips and techniques to help manage stressful situations. There are several SMART programmes for different family members.

1. **FamilySMART** is a series of group programmes designed to help spouses and partners identify and build on their strengths, learn techniques to cope with the stressors and challenges of the military lifestyle, and become more resilient, self-reliant and proactive. The programmes target challenging aspects of Defence life such as deployment, relocations, partner absence from home, and reuniting with a partner who is returning after a long time away.
2. **TeenSMART** workshops are for teenagers with a military parent to help them manage issues arising from deployment and relocation. During the workshops, teenagers can meet and share their stories about being part of a military family. They can also learn some ideas and tactics to help them stay connected to their parents while they are away on deployment, and meet new friends when they move to a new posting location. The workshop also covers other things, including managing change and coping when feeling stressed out. There are some tips and hints for handling emotions, and some relaxation techniques.
3. **KidSMART** are a set of four-week programmes for primary aged children to help them manage issues arising from posting, relocation and deployment. The KidSMART mascots, Tyler Turtle and Sam Super, help children learn how to manage change, stay connected with friends and meet new people. The workshops cover other things, such as helping children to cope when feeling stressed or anxious, particularly during times of parental absence and deployment. Children learn some techniques for handling emotions and relaxation. Sessions are held once a week for 1 to 1.5 hours per session and all children receive a story book to take home.

These sessions could easily be run in a family centre on a base and could be adapted for online webcam sessions and webinars for dispersed families living away from the military establishment.

⁴⁰⁰ Defence Community Organisation for ADF members and their families, Department of Defence, Australian Government.

Support for military families in the USA

Support for military families is a priority of Command and leadership in the US Armed Forces. The Department of Defense has developed an extensive infrastructure with the sole purpose of assisting families with military-specific issues, such as deployments and relocations, and also with managing the wide variety of problems that occur in any family. Some programmes are voluntary for military families while others are mandated by the Service member's Chain of Command. As in the UK there are many programmes available. A Minister in the Defense Department is responsible for managing the range of programmes including all those which impact on welfare, morale and so on. In January 2011, President Obama announced a Presidential initiative entitled 'Strengthening our Military Families'.⁴⁰¹ This was designed to support military families through a coordinated Federal approach that directs Cabinet secretaries and heads of agencies to focus on four priorities central to the lives of Service families:

- enhance the wellbeing and the physical and psychological health of the military family
- ensure excellence in military children's education and their development
- develop career and educational opportunities for military spouses/partners
- increase childcare availability and quality for the Armed Forces.

These goals for a more unified approach to support reflected the research on military families and the challenges that most impact on them. To a large extent they reflect the findings of this review. The initiative sought to provide easy access to information and programmes of support for military families. The military family assistance centres are a one-stop service and support centre, much like the vision for Drumfork in Helensburgh, and Military One-Source in the USA provides online information, services, and resources for Service families.

Although each Service uses its own terminology for the centres, nevertheless, each one-stop centre is the 'go-to' place for information, assistance, programme enrolment, and becoming a volunteer in the local military community. The centres usually provide outreach services for families living away from the bases, often in isolated and remote locations. These centres can provide a wide range of support, including:

- counselling
- crisis assistance
- deployment support services
- family advocacy
- employment assistance for spouses/partners
- financial management
- information and referrals to programmes
- parenting, stress management and life skills education
- relocation support
- new parent support programmes
- special needs assistance programmes
- outreach support.⁴⁰²

The Family Advocacy Service is a coordinated programme to prevent, identify, report and treat all aspects of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence; and the New Parent Support programme provides education on child development, positive parenting, skills and intensive support for young families at risk of abuse or neglect. In addition, trained counsellors offer services for children and young people, including to families living remotely from the base.

Military OneSource is an online Service with trained consultants available 24/7, offering information, personalised support and referrals to a range of programmes. There are a range of programmes on offer, including relationship counselling (up to 12 sessions paid for), and dealing with stress. Chaplains also offer confidential support on military bases. As in the UK there are many charities offering support working alongside the military. These offer a number of programmes including Family Readiness Support to ensure family members can be connected to networks to minimise isolation and loneliness. Again, outreach is a feature of these support groups for dispersed families. We understand that emphasis is placed on family centres being more than places to go but also as a service delivery system which can reach out to military

401 Office of the President of the United States (2011) *Strengthening our Military Families*, Washington DC, The White House.

402 Blaisure et al (2016) op.cit. p265.

families wherever they are located. This is critical given the number of families in our review who have experienced a lack of support because they do not live on the patch. We were told by US Serving personnel that Military OneSource online service is much appreciated for its high quality resources for families.

In addition Families Readiness Groups are highly valued as they bring families together around deployments, enabling deployed Service personnel to focus on their work without unnecessary worry about their families at home. They are reassured that their families are being supported during deployments. Families Readiness Groups are described as a vital organisation for helping to maintain family members' morale and for helping them to resolve problems during their partner's time away from home.

After Deployment Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT)

There is considerably more research with military families in the US than in the UK, including evaluations of a number of support programmes. Therefore there has been a concerted effort to undertake research into 'what works'. A number of the interventions have been adapted for military families from broader populations. For example a civilian programme designed to provide parent management training has resulted in The Oregon Model of Parent Management Training (PMTO) being adapted for military families as the After Deployment Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT).⁴⁰³ ADAPT is a 14-week parenting programme developed to target disruptions to family relationships caused by common post-deployment reactions in military families. Family centred interventions such as ADAPT and **Strong Families Strong Forces** utilise mindfulness in an attempt to increase the parent's awareness of their own behaviour and encourage 'presentness' when interacting with their children.

Strong Families Strong Forces⁴⁰⁴ is an eight module intervention designed to reduce the impact of post deployment stressors experienced by military families. The home-based modules focus on promoting reintegration, improving the disrupted parent-child relationships, and incorporating community-based work. Topics addressed in these modules include parent/child deployment narratives, military identity, parental self-awareness and co-parenting processes. The programme aims to build parents' ability to recognize and respond to their own emotional state and those of their children.

Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS)⁴⁰⁵

Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS) is an eight-session family centred intervention aimed at improving psychological health and resiliency for families with at least one Serving parent, and one child (ages 3–17). This evidenced based resiliency programme aims to address the combat related stressors experienced by both parents and children through psycho-education, emotional regulation skills, problem solving skills, stress management techniques, and communication skills. Treatment consists of parent-only session, child-only sessions, and combined sessions. Despite standardization FOCUS is modified to each family's needs in order to address their unique stressors. This intervention also considers the time constraints of family life, and provides flexibility regarding the sessions.⁴⁰⁶

Results of an evaluation of FOCUS show an improvement in emotional and behavioural adjustment in the parents,⁴⁰⁷ which consequently lead to reductions in emotional and behavioural problems in the children. In addition, children experienced increases in positive coping skills and pro-social skills post intervention.⁴⁰⁸ An adaption of FOCUS is aimed towards families with very young children ages 3–5 years old.

403 Gewirtz, A. H., DeGarmo, D. S., & Zamir, O. (2018). *After Deployment, Adaptive Parenting Tools: 1-Year Outcomes of an Evidence-Based Parenting Program for Military Families Following Deployment*, *Prevention science: the official journal of the Society for Prevention Research*, 19(4), 589–599.

404 DeVoe, E. R., Paris, R., Emmert-Aronson, B., Ross, A. & Acker, M. (2017) *A randomized clinical trial of a post-deployment parenting intervention for Service members and their families with very young children*, *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 9(S1), 25.

405 Lester, P., Mogil, C., Saltzman, W., Woodward, K., Nash, W., Leskin, G. & Beardslee, W. (2011) *Families overcoming under stress: Implementing family-centered prevention for military families facing wartime deployments and combat operational stress*, *Military medicine*, 176(1), 19–25.

406 Lester, P., Saltzman, W. R., Woodward, K., Glover, D., Leskin, G. A., Bursch, B. & Beardslee, W. (2012) *Evaluation of a family-centered prevention intervention for military children and families facing wartime deployments*, *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(S1), S48–S54.

407 Lester (2012) op.cit.

408 Ibid.

The Support and Family Education Program (SAFE)⁴⁰⁹

The Support and Family Education Program takes a unique approach to family conflict by educating family members about general mental illness and how to engage in self-care. ADAPT, Strong Families, Strong Forces, and FOCUS consider the time and location constraints that families face and offer home based and web enhanced services at all hours of the day. Many of these programmes consist of multiple sessions aimed at supplying parents with skills such as emotional regulation and addressing maladaptive behaviours of parents and children.

While individually these interventions are lauded and evaluations show positive outcomes, the lack of consistency between the programmes makes it difficult to determine the specific family profiles that respond best to each aspect of the interventions, making it difficult to generalise the outcomes to a wider military population. There are a number of other programmes being developed. The overall picture is of serious attempts to measure outcomes and develop robust interventions that are preventative and designed to build stronger and more resilient military families. Through collaborative inter-country research it is to be hoped that an understanding of 'what works' to support Service families will be increased in the coming years.

Coordinating support across the Armed Forces

We believe that there are initiatives in other countries which are worth considering here. Nevertheless, we have been very impressed by the external programmes we have heard about in the UK, but note that there is very little coordination of these across the Armed Forces, perhaps because they are funded by charities with specific beneficiaries. We are also aware that much depends on local personalities and the availability of different opportunities. Increased sharing of good practice across the Armed Forces is needed if perceived stigma and barriers are to be broken down. We fully recognise the importance of respecting the long history and culture of each of the single Services, and the desire to protect long-standing traditions. We also understand and respect the focus on reducing dependency and encouraging independence and self-sufficiency throughout the Armed Forces community. Programmes which increase resilience, and which build strong families are, in fact, decreasing dependence and giving families the tools to manage and benefit from Service life. Preventing difficult issues from escalating to crisis levels must be cost-effective in the longer term and also encourage retention. Research has shown:

- 6 When families are cared for and doing well in the military community, Service members are more likely to stay in the military and to concentrate on their jobs when deployed or away from their families.⁴¹⁰

This argues for coordinated preventative programmes of support which are available across the Armed Forces. With increasing tri-Service working it seems increasingly inappropriate to preserve and promote very different approaches to welfare provision.

Our observations suggest that there appears to be something of a post-code lottery currently in respect of welfare provision and the programmes that are in place. It is important, of course, to have a clear understanding about the different needs within the Serving community, although there is remarkable coherence in the comments made by members of the different Services. It is helpful also to distinguish between support for veterans and support for the Serving population. The focus for the Serving community should be on acknowledging the stresses and strains families can experience and on ensuring the right help is available at the right time.

We note that the Service Families Working Group was established in 2018 to draw together the policy leads from across the MOD, the single Services, heads of the single Services Hive information service and representatives from the three Families Federations. This group can play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the Families Strategy and could play a key role in overseeing the welfare support offered to Serving families and ensuring that the Family Test is taken seriously across the Armed Forces.

409 Sherman, M. D. (2003) *The SAFE Program: A family psychoeducational curriculum developed in a Veterans Affairs medical center*, Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 34(1), 42–48.

410 Blaisure et al (2016) op.cit. p261.

Since this group reports to the Service Welfare Steering Group, there are mechanisms in place to ensure reviews of welfare provision and to promote increased coordination and partnership working across the agencies offering support to various groups in the military community. Meeting the welfare and support needs of Serving families should be a key priority in all policy and practice discussions.

The importance of the Family Test

In 2014 the UK government introduced the Family Test to be applied to all new policy across government departments. The Family Test requires that a documented process is carried out which assesses the policy under review according to five aspects about the likely impact on:

- family formation
- families going through key transitions
- the ability of all family members to play a full role in family life, including caring responsibilities
- families before, during and after couple separation
- families most at risk of deterioration of relationship quality and breakdown.

Obviously all of these factors are particularly relevant to Service families who experience multiple transitions/changes in their lives, frequent time spent apart, and challenges to the quality and sustainability of couple relationships. In June 2015, a Parliamentary Question was put to the Secretary of State for Defence about the steps taken in the MOD to apply the Family Test.⁴¹¹ The answer given identified a number of steps taken to fulfil the Armed Forces Covenant.⁴¹² The Covenant provides an important vehicle to address the kinds of questions raised by the Family Test, but to be optimally effective it needs to have an element of enforceability and accountability. However, the Covenant alone cannot ensure that the Family Test is applied to Armed Forces policy, and each Service as well as the MOD need to be mindful of it. We are pleased to know that formalising the use of the Family Test in all MOD policy is a priority.

The Family Test was designed to embed a relational approach to policy-making and to ensure that policies will support strong and stable families. We would suggest that the five aspects highlighted in the Family Test could usefully be applied to the provision of support for promoting welfare and wellbeing, and the projects designed to support family members. How does a particular approach to welfare support impact on each of these aspects? What is it designed to achieve and is it appropriately targeted? Each Service and each base will need to decide the most appropriate approach to welfare provision. How far should it be provided by members of the military designated as 'welfare officers' and when should professional support be made available that is outside the Chain of Command and independent of the Armed Forces? The offer of relationship support would seem to be an important aspect of welfare provision to assist couples to address the issues which are damaging to their relationship. The contracts between the RAFBF and the RNRMC with Relate, funded by the military charities, appear to provide a very useful and valuable intervention, which can be accessed directly by Serving personnel and/or their partner without going through the Forces in-house welfare services and the Chain of Command.

Applying the Family Test would suggest that it would be timely to undertake a review of, inter alia:

- Harmony guidelines and their application in the different Services
- the assignment and posting policies which move units and personnel every two or three years
- the length of deployments and time Serving personnel spend apart from their families
- the preparation and support offered to Serving personnel who form new relationships and create a family
- equality and parity across all families irrespective of marital status and living arrangements
- rules about occupation of SFA and rules about CEA
- the impact of multiple transitions/changes in everyday life
- the current models of welfare support across the three Services.

Many of the concerns raised by families during this review might be reduced if the Family Test was applied more rigorously by each Service, and some current policies reviewed and redrawn as a result. It would also highlight unintended consequences of policy decisions and the current variations in support, including the

411 Hansard, Written Question and Answers, 16 June 2015.

412 Centre For Social Justice (2016) op.cit.

potential benefits of implementing a more strategic and coherent system across the Armed Forces, which would benefit more people and stabilise more families.

The CSJ's review of Family Test⁴¹³ highlighted the MOD as an example of best practice in respect of its commitment to applying the Family Test:

6 The Ministry of Defence showed clear evidence that it has understood and adopted the philosophy of the Family Test. The department has created a bespoke programme to ensure military families are considered throughout the policy-making process.⁴¹⁴ 9

The CSJ recommended that there should be better use of external expertise in each department via an expert reference group to establish an evidence base on issues relating to the family. Maybe the application of the test and reviewing the extent to which it has been taken into account in developing and reviewing Armed Forces policies could be a function of the Covenant team, with the support of the Covenant Fund Trust, when considering applications for funding. All organisations making applications for funding should be asked to apply the Family Test. In addition, the Armed Forces People Support Team, which includes the Welfare Team, which owns families' policy, and the Covenant Team have an important role to play in taking forward the closer scrutiny of and adherence to the Family Test.

Establishing a more pro-active system of support for the military community in the twenty-first century.

Breaking down barriers is key if Serving personnel and their families are to receive the support they need to enhance wellbeing and promote a positive response to service life. Serving personnel and their families can be forgiven for not knowing what support is available and how it can be accessed safely, and for feeling that there is no support for them unless they ask for it. There are a plethora of organisations offering programmes to the military for specific problems, but they may each have limited reach and some are little known. The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust has an important role to play in promoting greater integration of support and more comprehensive information and guidance for families. The MOD has made it clear that:

6 The value of welfare provision for Service families is of utmost importance, recognising the unique role and contribution of the family unit in a Service Person's career.⁴¹⁵ 9

Promoting small acts of kindness

During this review, we have heard first hand just how helpful small acts of kindness can be for ensuring that Service families feel valued and supported. These have included:

- being offered a helping hand when moving to a new area
- being made to feel welcome
- reducing levels of distress by talking to a specialist counsellor
- offering children and young people meaningful activities and programmes designed to support them, address their anxiety, and make them feel special
- ensuring that spouses and partners feel included and cared about when their partner is away on deployment
- the Chain of Command saying thank you to families when awards are given to Serving personnel.

In both civilian and military life, we must never assume that if people do not ask for help then all is well. The challenge across society is to find new ways of reaching out to families even if they do not seek help themselves. This is even more important within the Armed Forces with its expectations and cultural norms built up over hundreds of years.

413 CSJ (2019) *A Review of the Family Test*, CSJ.

414 Ibid. p8.

415 MOD, *Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017–2022*, op.cit. p29.

The welfare staff we have met are undoubtedly well aware of the pressures on Service families; the challenges of contacting and communicating directly with them, and in providing information; the importance of supporting a potentially vulnerable group; and the barriers families face in seeking help. As dedicated and caring staff, they want to do more but are not always sure how to do this within the current structures. They much appreciate the support they and families receive from military charities and from voluntary and public sector organisations, but the amount and nature of that support varies from Service to Service and from base to base.

Small acts of kindness can increase resilience and bolster self-sufficiency. Peer group support can go a long way to alleviating stress. We met several members of the Military Wives Choirs, all of whom spoke about the ways in which joining a choir had helped them to cope with the pressures of military life. Encouraging this kind of peer support network is a vital part of ensuring that small acts of kindness proliferate. Preventative interventions require a more pro-active approach to support and wellbeing. Offering Serving personnel and their partners better preparation for military life, increased understanding and knowledge about the challenges families face, and more coordinated information and guidance about when, where and how to access support, are all important in changing the culture and reducing the potentially negative impacts of a life which is required to put operational effectiveness first.

In the final chapter we bring together the evidence from the review and make a number of recommendations for a more holistic, systemic approach to meeting the needs of Service families.

Our Recommendations

Welfare support: short term

Recommendation 89

The Armed Forces/Military Charities to:

- continue to facilitate access for Serving personnel and their families across all three Services to independent, professional relationship support services outside the Chain of Command
- promote through-life support and encourage Serving personnel and their families to seek timely and appropriate help.

Recommendation 90

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to:

- support the use of a range of robust, validated and appropriate evaluation tools to measure outcomes, benefits and the effectiveness attributable to each project/programme of work
- consider the appropriateness and modifications needed to use the Outcomes Measurement Framework with UK Serving personnel and their families
- ensure learning is widely disseminated and best practices identified to enable replication of projects which are effective and which meet a clear support need
- continue to encourage greater coordination of support services for military families and ensure the long-term sustainability of effective interventions
- take the lead in building a directory of evidence as to 'what works' in supporting military families.

Recommendation 91

The Ministry of Defence to:

- take into account the learning from welfare approaches elsewhere
- encourage increased international research to build the evidence base of 'what works' in providing welfare support for Service families
- encourage further research into the effectiveness of early intervention programmes which aim to enhance the wellbeing of military families and prevent relationship breakdown.

Recommendation 92

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

- encourage the replication of good practice across the Armed Forces to support military children and young people
- strengthen the delivery of the Defence Youth Offer through appropriate resourcing and investment in community spaces for military children and young people
- ensure that all children and young people from military families are able to access specialist, confidential counselling if they need it.

Welfare support: medium term**Recommendation 93**

The Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence to:

- encourage small acts of kindness, including a welcoming committee to engage with families moving into a new area
- promote pro-active support to enhance wellbeing through a family centre/family hub on every military base as the safe 'go to' place for information, group activities, education, co-working hubs, children's activities, informal peer support and professional support programmes, and to encourage community integration
- develop support through webinars, FaceTime/zoom/skype and Apps to include dispersed families unable to access family centres in person
- break down barriers to help-seeking by reaching out to families and adapting the military culture of maintaining a 'stiff upper lip' to make it acceptable and normal to ask for help.

Recommendation 94

Charities and organisations offering support to Armed Forces families to work closely together; cooperate, collaborate and combine their resources wherever possible; reduce complexity; and ensure clear information and referral pathways to provide better coordinated support for military families.

Recommendation 95

The Ministry of Defence to establish a dedicated Serving Families Gateway, separate from the Veterans' Gateway, to collate information and advice about the support available, and ensure greater coordination of the range of interventions and how to access them.

Chapter 10

Recruit the Person and Retain the Family: Strengthening The Armed Forces Covenant

This review set out to understand the support needs of military families and to assess whether the current support available to them is meeting their needs. We were asked to focus specifically on spouses and civil partners, couples in long-term cohabiting relationships, and children and young people. During the review we have looked carefully at the various aspects of military life that impact on the everyday lived experience of Serving personnel and their families in the three single Services, and visited a number of military bases in the UK. We have considered evidence from a variety of research studies in order to contextualise the findings from the review, and made a number of recommendations that we believe would reduce some of the more difficult aspects of Service life, highlighted in Chapters 3 – 7, and lead to positive substantive change for military families. In Chapters 8 and 9 we focused specifically on the pressures that cause particular distress in family relationships, and looked at the welfare and other support services available to military families. In this final chapter we draw together the evidence from across the review and make some further recommendations for change.

It has been an enormous privilege to undertake this review, travelling across the UK to visit Naval bases, Army garrisons, and RAF stations to talk to Serving personnel and their families and to see for ourselves the places where they work and where many of them live. During the review we have met many inspirational and committed members of the Armed Forces at all levels, and talked to equally committed family members who do their very best to support Serving personnel in the vital work they do to keep us all safe and free. We have been consistently impressed by the pride Serving personnel, their spouses/partners and their children feel in being part of the military community. Enormous pride in the Armed Forces to which they all contribute has been manifest throughout our conversations. We have also met many civilians who dedicate their time and commitment to serving the military community, whether it be through charitable work or as providers of statutory, voluntary or public sector services, including education and health.

Although our focus has been on Serving military families, we very much welcome the significant strides which have been made in recent years to draw attention to the needs of veterans and their families and to improve their ongoing care and support. This is not only necessary but also a moral duty for society, and it must continue. We believe, however, that this review has been timely in shining a spotlight on those currently Serving, the work they do in all parts of the globe, and the families who, for the most part, stay at home and provide a stable base despite the many sacrifices they have to make. In this regard we believe that the nation should take more seriously its responsibilities to Serving men and women and to their families, accord them all the same respect as is offered to veterans, and live up to the promise made in the Armed Forces Covenant.

Throughout the review and in writing this report we have been at pains not to indulge in special pleading on behalf of Serving personnel and their families. No member of the Armed Forces community has asked us to do that or to regard Service personnel and their families as special. We recognise, too, that many of the pressures felt by Armed Forces families in terms of access to high quality education and health care, the availability of affordable and accessible childcare, and opportunities for employment for non-serving partners, are experienced by civilian families. What makes military families unique, however, are the obligations inherent in military service which put operational efficiency and commitment to 'duty first' as the number one priority. Family life is secondary. Yet family stability is essential to the ability of the Serving person to do his or her duty to the best of their capability at all times and in all circumstances. The majority of military families experience a level of mobility and repeated periods of separation which are unparalleled in civilian life. They also live with the knowledge that their loved ones may face the kind

of danger which may require the ultimate sacrifice for their country. By supporting military families and building their resilience the nation is also protecting its Serving personnel and enabling them to give of their best. In our view, the resilience military families demonstrate day after day and their pride in the work they do for the nation, does make them special and they fully deserve the nation's respect.

Our sense is that, for the most part, military families are resilient, stoic and uncomplaining. Moreover, they are probably less well represented than the rest of the population. For example, the Army Families Federation made the point to us that very few Armed Forces families make contact with their Member of Parliament, nor do they seek or attract media attention. We were told by some family members that it would seem disloyal to contact an MP and that it might have serious repercussions for the Serving partner. We understand, however, that there is considerable Ministerial correspondence in the MOD which indicates that some Service personnel and their families do contact their MPs. Families told us, nevertheless, that they do not seek to draw attention to themselves. Only more recently have veterans spoken out about their experiences. Maintaining a stiff upper lip characterises the military community. That is why the Armed Forces Covenant is so important in its promise that Armed Forces families should not experience any disadvantage. We return to the role of the Covenant later in the chapter.

We have made the point throughout this report that the Serving personnel who responded to the Call for Evidence and those we met on military bases have stressed their love for their work, a sentiment endorsed by their spouses/partners and children. Many people apologised for expressing negative comments when telling us about the stresses they had faced. For example, in a very detailed and thoughtful response, a Naval officer and his wife wrote:

“ Although we have strived to highlight positive practices, there is inevitably a negative tone. Despite the many benefits of military life, there are significant struggles which are even more frustrating as most of them are avoidable. Generally they stem from the mobility required for Service families, together with significant periods of separation. ... We do not wish these criticisms to be seen as a plea for sympathy or pity. As a family we have made (and continue to make) a positive choice to be a military family. There are many benefits ... but this does not mean that the disadvantages should be tolerated and that action should not be taken to address the many challenges that are faced by the Armed Forces community. ”

In common with many people, this couple pointed to the long periods of separation; the inability to plan family life; forced and frequent moves which disrupt children's education; having to move away from friends; being offered poorly maintained houses; the challenges for spouses/partners to obtain employment and build a career; uncertainty about future assignments; and the lack of a permanent and enduring support structure as putting undue pressure on personal relationships and, very often, as we reported in Chapter 7, causing the Serving partner to 'make the invidious choice between career and family'.

In this report we have examined all of these challenges through the lens of the Serving community and those working with them, and would agree with the Naval family quoted above that some of them are almost certainly avoidable if there is a willingness to make changes. The challenges and stressors should be acknowledged and addressed if military life is to become less stressful and more rewarding. In this final chapter we highlight some of the main findings and suggest other changes that could make a difference to the quality of Service life and thereby aid retention.

Addressing Accommodation Challenges

In Chapter 3 we discussed the current concerns about the state of military accommodation and the importance of everyone living in a place they are happy to call home. Accommodation was the most frequently raised issue throughout the review and one which caused the most serious discontent. We make no apology for returning to it in this final chapter. In June 2019, The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee examined military housing and commented:⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁶ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *Military Homes: One Hundred and Second Report of Session 2017–19*, HC 2136.

“ The Ministry of Defence acknowledges the fundamental importance of good quality accommodation in retaining service personnel, yet too many personnel find themselves in living quarters where the standard is simply not good enough. Poor accommodation puts a strain on working and family life and is detrimental to morale.⁴¹⁷ ”

The Public Accounts Committee made a number of recommendations, including that there should be continued improvements in satisfaction levels relating to SLA and SFA, a clearer approach to the housing needs of Armed Forces personnel, and a deeper understanding of the diverse real-life circumstances of military families. We hope that our review has provided a better understanding of the diverse needs of modern military families and the problems which lead many to feel thoroughly frustrated about the conditions in which they live, not least the perpetual problems of damp and mould, and the poor track record of Amey in managing repairs and maintenance. The evidence was compelling:

“ The amount of stress we endure to move and support the military only to be offered accommodation that is well below standard and have no choice of location ... why are we fighting these battles EVERY two years! ”
(Army non-serving partner)

“ The standard of housing is absolutely appalling. ... In sum, SFA in the Armed Forces is embarrassing and is failing Service personnel and their families. ”
(RAF Serving partner)

The Public Accounts Committee stressed that:

“ the whole issue of military housing needs to be given far greater priority within senior levels of the MOD.⁴¹⁸ ”

It also called for reform of the rules relating to long-term partners occupying SFA, along the lines of our recommendations in Chapter 3.

There is no doubt that the state of housing provision has been a major source of continuing unhappiness for some families and, as one RAF Serving partner, pointed out:

“ The SFA and SLA that service people are expected to inhabit I believe makes the biggest impression on an individual's and family's desire to remain in the Forces ... because if my family is not happy with the conditions they have to live in that affects everything, both in work and with home life. ... I could be doing the dirtiest job or working long hours and that would be bearable with a decent place to live, but you add dirty and poorly maintained accommodation into the mix then there is no escape...you feel undervalued [our emphasis]...The initial impression of a site and the accommodation sets the tone for the rest of the tour. ”

This RAF Serving partner explained how the state of the accommodation they moved into when the family moved to his current posting, which was both dirty and poorly maintained, had affected every aspect of his relationship with his wife and the family's quality of life since. His wife had described the accommodation as no better than 'living in a prison' and the couple had sought counselling due to the pressures it had caused between them. He went on to comment that because his wife was so unhappy he was no longer performing properly at work. This story was not unique.

The problems with accommodation are well-known and documented. While we are aware that satisfaction levels with SFA fluctuate, it is clear that living in poorly maintained property affects relationships, the quality of family life, mental health and, ultimately, the quality of the work undertaken by the Serving partner. We are well aware of the decisions taken by previous governments in respect of the Defence estate and the endless complaints about the maintenance contract:

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. Summary p3.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid. p6.

“ *The biggest mistake made was allowing Amey to retain the housing contract as they seem to care more about saving money than actually fixing issues and the service received from them is appalling.... Engineers are rude and unhelpful and do sub-standard work.* ”

(RAF Serving partner)

Clearly there needs to be more investment to bring the habitable estate up to an acceptable standard, and a serious conversation about just how much SLA and SFA will be required in future. The Future Accommodation Model which offers families more choice is expected to change the demand for military housing but until the pilots are complete several years hence, many families, especially those in the Army, will continue to live in military accommodation. A substantial number of Naval families and an increasing number of RAF families already choose to rent privately or own their homes in order to create a stable base for the family while the Serving partner travels home at weekends when not on deployment or exercises.

We have made a number of recommendations in Chapter 3 in respect of SFA and we are pleased to note that the MOD is already making changes and taking a pro-active approach to tackling the housing problems. As we complete our review, the DIO has informed us that more than 90 per cent of SFA meets statutory and mandatory safety requirements; 97 per cent is at the government's Decent Homes Standard as a minimum, with 80 per cent at Decent Homes Plus. Substantial funding has been invested in upgrading SFA enabling new bathrooms to be installed in 1,400 properties; new doors and windows in 600 properties; new kitchens in 1,199 properties; and external wall insulation in 700 properties. Moreover, there has been investment in new-build properties. All these investments are to be welcomed and we are in no doubt that the poor state of military housing is an issue which is being taken very seriously by the MOD. It will take more time and money, however, to address the kinds of issues and complaints we have heard and to alleviate the detrimental impacts on family life for those who still occupy houses which are at an unacceptable standard.

The recent extension to the Forces Help to Buy scheme is much welcomed and offers families increased choice for the foreseeable future. It seems clear that the challenges associated with poor accommodation are being taken seriously. However, we also urge changes to the entitlement to SFA to include cohabiting partners. We recognise that there may be cost implications in extending entitlement, but in a modern world of diverse family relationships it is not acceptable for the Armed Forces to discriminate against families where couples are not legally married or in a civil partnership:

“ *If the military were willing to see a family as a 'family', and not as people with a piece of paper that says they are married, my life, my partner's life, and my daughter's life would have been a whole lot better.* ”

(RAF Serving cohabiting partner)

We referred to the critical importance of the Family Test in Chapter 9. This requires an explicit family perspective in the policy making process, and should ensure that potential impacts on family relationships and functioning are made explicit and recognised in the process of developing new policy. In this regard, the Armed Forces should take account of modern family living arrangements and respect the choices Service couples make.

The challenge of multiple changes

Aside from the concerns about accommodation, we addressed a range of challenges, all of which cause stress for many families. Military life consists of a series of repeated changes, not just in respect of relocation, but changes and transitions in daily living arrangements such as managing deployments, time spent apart and time becoming a family again afterwards. We described these briefly in Chapter 2. Every change requires family members to navigate the transition from one arrangement to another. We are aware that the term 'transition' in the Armed Forces refers primarily to the move out of military service into civilian life, which we discussed in Chapter 7. However, it is important to acknowledge that all families have to negotiate and adapt to life transitions during their lives and that these cause pressure points in relationships and family wellbeing. Military families have to manage more of these life transitions

than most other families, of which relocation is but one. Failure to recognise the impact of other shifts and changes can impact negatively on retention. We have referred to the perceived incompatibility of family life with Service commitments as a major driver in Serving persons leaving the Armed Forces early. Understanding the impact of shifts and transitions all military families face, irrespective of the number of times they relocate, is essential if families are to receive appropriate support.

The quest for stability

Moving home and relocating is one of the most stressful transitions that any family, civilian and military, can experience. Military families have to manage this change many times if they wish to stay living under one roof as a family. The other key transitions which cause the greatest stress for military families relate to children's education, spousal/partner employment, and access to health care. These normal features of family life are rendered more stressful because of the frequent moves some families have to undertake. Families worry about the impact on children and young people when they have to change schools multiple times unless they go to boarding school. Non-serving spouses and partners experience repeated challenges in building a career which is transportable or in finding and sustaining new employment every time they move location. In addition, family members have to search for a new GP and a new dentist every time the family moves to a new location, often experiencing discontinuity in care and losing their place on waiting lists for treatment. These transitions/changes can be particularly detrimental for children with special educational needs, and family members with chronic physical and mental health conditions or disabilities.

All these transitions/changes are the result of the requirement for Serving personnel, especially those in the Army and RAF, to move around from one location to another every two or three years. Stability is rare for Service families, especially those in the Army, unless they opt to find their own accommodation and stay in one place throughout the children's school years while the Serving person commutes to his or her home base, or unless the Serving person is in a job that does not require him/her to move. However, the vast majority of military families are mobile and jobs in the Armed Forces which do not include the requirement to move around are relatively rare.

The repeated transitions/changes are demanding and disruptive for family members and a model of Service life that enables greater stability in one area/region would relieve the pressures and minimise the disruptions to education, spousal/partner employment and healthcare. We have questioned the rationale for regular and frequent assignments to a new location at a time when the Armed Forces are having to adapt to the expectations associated with family life in the twenty-first century. Any expectation that families today will follow the flag presents particular challenges in modern Britain. We have suggested that this model of military life, which moves people around frequently, should be revisited with the aim of finding better ways to promote stability and certainty in family life while continuing to maintain operational capability. Fewer relocations would also reduce the financial cost to the public purse as well as the social, emotional and economic costs to the family.

Inevitably, operational effectiveness will require movement but whether this has to be as frequent as at present is a question that should be considered. We recognise that there are certain trades and expertise that require Serving personnel to move around more frequently. Army instructors, for example, move around as required. We are aware, however, of the development of super garrisons and of plans for a more regional clustering of air stations. The Navy is primarily located on three main naval bases and several sub-mariner families relocating to HMNB Clyde told us they were hoping that they could now settle down there and create a more permanent home without the prospect of having to move again for some considerable time. Stability, where it is possible, would be very advantageous to family life. We recognise of course that one size does not fit all, and that the model of Service life should embrace choice in family living arrangements and how relocations are managed.

The impact of uncertainty

We have seen over and over again during the review the impact that uncertainty has on Service families and the current perceived incompatibility of military life with the natural desire to establish a stable, secure family environment. All military families expect the Serving partner to spend time on deployment and separations are regarded as inevitable, but the length of some deployments, the additional time spent on

training and other courses and the uncertainty about when the Serving partner will be coming home, all add to the stressors on family life:

“It is the lack of knowing when anything is going to happen that I find really difficult. I do not mind long-distance too much and I do not mind deployments, but the dates constantly being changed and the postings always being a different time length than specified means that as a couple we can never long-term plan or emotionally prepare. This is something I massively struggle with.”

(Army non-serving partner)

This Army wife suggested that her life would be less stressful and more bearable if she could stay in one SFA and not have to keep moving.

A well-rehearsed saying is that ‘when one family member Serves, every family member Serves’. Although family members are not employed by the Armed Services unless both partners are Serving, the military way of life is all-encompassing and spouses/partners and their children all confront additional challenges to varying degrees. Armed Forces communities across the western world recognise this reality and have looked for ways to enhance understanding and to minimise the potentially negative impacts of Service life. It is increasingly acknowledged by governments such as those in Australia, the USA and the Netherlands, that society has a moral obligation to look after the whole military community.

Improving work-life balance

The issue of work-life balance would not have been a significant factor in times past, particularly when it was more usual for spouses/partners to stay at home and take primary responsibility for child rearing and running the home on a full-time basis. This is no longer the cultural or economic norm and there have been increasing tensions for Serving personnel in trying to balance their role within the military with their role in the family when the societal expectation is that this latter role extends far beyond that of being the breadwinner. Likewise, non-serving spouses and partners increasingly seek a better work-life balance, balancing their roles in the home with employment and career aspirations. We referred in Chapter 2 to the recognition that the military and the family are both demanding, ‘greedy’ institutions, each competing for attention.⁴¹⁹ When the balance between the demands of the military and the demands of the family becomes too difficult to sustain, it may result in the family breaking up or leaving the military, or both, in order to reduce the strain.

We are aware that the MOD, other government departments and the Devolved Governments are actively looking at how to minimise the difficulties families face when they move: the problems for children who move schools during the school year; the constant search for healthcare, and the difficulties spouses/partners face in finding employment. The Forces Jobs Platform launched by the three Families Federations and the introduction of co-working hubs are all positive changes to address the latter problem, but so much more could be achieved in addressing all the key stressors if the number and frequency of moves could be reduced, the length of deployments shortened as far as is operationally possible, and the frequency of trawls minimised, thereby increasing families’ ability to plan with a greater degree of certainty. In our conversations with families there seemed to be some consensus that four months is an acceptable length of time for the Serving member to be away from home. So many of the concerns raised in this report would be addressed constructively and the quality of life improved if the number and frequency of transitions/changes affecting family life could be reduced.

We believe that the Armed Forces should consider carefully whether the current operational tempo and the current pattern of moving units/Serving personnel every two to three years, particularly in the Army and the RAF, is sustainable in the twenty-first century and whether there are other models which would provide greater stability, involve fewer transitions and still retain operational capability.

419 Segal (1986) op.cit.

No longer ‘dependent’

The traditional historical model of ‘following the flag’ saw whole military families on the move going wherever the regiment went. In times past it was not unreasonable to regard spouses and children as ‘dependent’ on the Serving member. This is no longer the case in modern societies. Many spouses and partners expect to have a choice about whether they work or follow a career or whether they are a full-time home-maker. There is a growing literature about the status of non-serving partners and about the rejection of the term ‘dependent’ which is still used widely in the Armed Forces and in policymaking:

“Being called a ‘dependent’! How insulting can the MOD/Forces personnel be? I am an educated person, brought up to be independent in all senses of the word and I really struggle with this term. Our husbands/partners are just as dependent on us. Why not simply refer to Serving partner and non-serving partner?”

(Army non-serving partner)

This sentiment was expressed by many spouses/partners, and we have deliberately used the terms Serving and non-serving partner in this report. Language is very important in this regard and can so easily undermine partners and spouses who frequently feel as if they are ‘secondary’ to the cause of ‘mission first’ and undervalued. The majority of spouses/partners do not want to be classed as ‘dependent’ and would much prefer to have their own employment and income so as to contribute jointly to the family finances. Some spouses talked about being made to feel like unnecessary ‘baggage’ which the Serving person has to move around, as opposed to an equal partner sharing in the dual demands of military service and family life. The MOD is fully cognisant of the negative perception associated with the word ‘dependent’ and we have been assured that every effort is made to avoid using it. However, the term continues to be used both internationally and in UK law and there are therefore circumstances where we were told it is still necessary to use the term. We hope that that this will change. We are pleased to note that in all other policy making the MOD has directed that the term should be avoided.

A recent qualitative study⁴²⁰ of 29 Army spouses who accompanied their husbands on a posting to Cyprus provides a vivid illustration of what it means to be seen as ‘dependent’ and what the researcher describes as being ‘bounded into the hierarchical and patriarchal system of their husbands’ employer.⁴²¹ The author makes a powerful point that:

“Falling in love and marrying one’s soldier boyfriend is in no way a training ground for becoming adjunctive to a soldier husband during one’s time behind the wire.”⁴²²

We made a similar point in Chapters 8 and 9 when arguing for better preparation for non-serving partners who ‘join’ the military and are not sure what to expect or what is expected of them. The Cyprus study shows that many young soldiers get married fairly quickly after meeting their partner without living together in a cohabiting relationship first. Moving in together is almost invariably the first step to forming a committed relationship for civilian couples today,⁴²³ but this is difficult for those serving in the military given the restrictions on occupying SFA as a newly cohabiting couple. The recent changes in eligibility might reduce the speed with which young recruits marry in order to live in SFA. Until recently, however, restrictions on access to SFA have meant that not only are these young couples unprepared for military life but they may marry before they are ready to do so.

A series of transitions/changes which take place quite quickly, especially when Armed Forces personnel often conduct their couple relationship only at weekends and in between military activities, can be overwhelming for both partners if they do not receive appropriate support and education which can assist them to adapt to both married and military life. As one Army spouse said to us: ‘neither marriage nor military life come with a handbook’. Moreover, living away from extended family can add to spouses/partners’ feelings of social isolation and loneliness, which we highlighted in Chapter 8. Soldiers especially

420 Newman-Earle, E. (2019) *Patch Life: Army Wives Behind the Wire*, PhD thesis, Doctorate awarded January 2020.

421 Ibid. abstract.

422 Ibid. p15.

423 Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

tend to marry at a younger age than in the general population⁴²⁴ and have children earlier. These transitions carry their own challenges – challenges which were extremely evident in the Cyprus study.

Newman-Earle's study emphasises that the wives in Cyprus were regarded collectively as 'dependents' whose identity largely depended on their husband's position/rank as a soldier, and whose own identity was subsumed by his needs and that of the Army. Newman-Earle describes how, for some wives, the lack of a personal identity resulted in personal frustration, lethargy, atrophy, unhappiness, depression and resentment. Clearly not all spouses and partners experienced these feelings, and some perceived new opportunities as a result of an overseas posting. Even so, the Certificate of Status issued to all the wives in Cyprus to give them access to certain activities and locations in the garrison accords them a clear status as 'a dependent'. The Certificate records each non-serving partner as a 'Dependent of a member of the British Forces'. This contrasts with identity cards issued to non-serving spouses and partners in the US. The study shows how this status on the certificate in itself reduced the wives to what they perceived as 'second class citizens' within a paternalistic system where their identity is defined by their husband's service number and where their husband's permission is required for everything the wife wants to do, such as buy a TV or a car. Army spouses in the study described themselves as being 'invisible'. Even their own personal post was delivered to their husband's post box.

We heard similar comments during our review:

“ How do I continue to support my husband in the military when it's such a thankless task? My husband almost died in Afghanistan. He works away regularly...I have sacrificed my career and at times my happiness to support him in fighting for our country. He is hailed a hero. **I remain invisible.** [our emphasis] ”
(Army non-serving partner)

This Army partner also told us:

“ As a military wife I have felt for a very long time like part of a totally voiceless community. A community that provides an invaluable service to our Armed Forces and in turn, our country, but a community that has lost its voice. **However much we scream and shout no-one appears to listen.** [our emphasis] ”

The use of military language is also evident in terms such as 'marching in' and 'marching out' of SFA, processes which many spouses/partners described as demeaning. While families recognise that the processes for moving in and moving out of military accommodation need to be thorough, they see no need for military language to be used involving the term 'marching' to describe them. We understand that in policy the terms 'move in' and 'move out' are used, and so it is important that this language is emphasised on all bases and within the Chain of Command. Newman-Earle's qualitative study of Army wives in Cyprus demonstrates vividly the ways in which military cultures and traditions dominate everyday life, particularly in a garrison where the vast majority of families live on the patch and their daily life revolves around military requirements and expectations about what is appropriate behaviour. The study concludes that in moving as a unit, the spouses:

“ became incorporated into the baggage carts of the modern army, moved and housed according to their husband's rank. Their sense of possession and control over their own lives became lost, subsumed into their husband's service number, dispossessed from their own name and...their sense of self.⁴²⁵ ”

Moreover, in a overseas posting with few employment opportunities for spouses and partners, friendships are also determined to a large extent by the military community. It is not surprising that the Spousal Employment Support Trial⁴²⁶ we discussed in Chapter 5 proved to be an important innovation that resulted in those military wives in Cyprus who took part feeling 'valued'. Newman-Earle has argued that until the term 'dependent' is removed from the language to describe non-serving partners, then they will continue

424 ONS (2019) *Marriages in England and Wales 2016*.

425 Newman-Earle (2019) op. cit. p299.

426 Caddick et al (2018) op.cit.

to carry an identity that is defined primarily by their husband's career and which deprives them of their own identity and agency.

An earlier study⁴²⁷ which included interviews with spouses/partners in all three Services, also pointed to similar concerns about military spousal identity. These included: the subjection of spouses to military structures and hierarchies; the provision of welfare; their lack of recognition as individuals; and the ambiguity of their status as neither military personnel nor civilians.⁴²⁸ The author emphasised that military spouses reported feeling marginalised and disconnected. As a result, many struggled to find a sense of purpose as individuals and could suffer, or potentially suffer, from mental health issues. She suggested that this has an impact not only on the individual's well-being but also on the family unit and Serving person, and on military cohesion. The spouses in Thompson's study experienced a number of detrimental consequences stemming from their lack of control in relation to day to day living as 'quasi-members' of the Armed Forces community. These factors appeared to be contributing to a growing resentment towards the military.

Given the expressed desire by the MOD and the Armed Forces to encourage Serving personnel and their families to be less dependent on the military and to exercise more choice in respect of their living accommodation, for example, it is unfortunate that the use of the term 'dependent' continues to be applied in everyday parlance to family members. In Defence policy they are considered to be members of the Armed Forces community and, as such, deserve a status in their own right. We believe that the terms Serving and non-serving partner/member are more appropriate and less likely to infer that non-serving spouses/partners are an appendage to their husbands/wives who are Serving in the military.

Civilian spouses/partners do not expect to be identified/defined by their partner's career in a society in which it is increasingly common for both partners to be in employment and to share responsibility for home-making and family life. We note that the identity card issued to non-serving spouses/partners in the USA does not contain the term 'dependent'. Instead it has the name of the Serving partner as the 'Sponsor'. Being sponsored is a perfectly acceptable status in all sorts of situations in everyday life and does not imply dependency. We urge the MOD and the Armed Forces to remove the term 'dependent' and ensure that documents and policies recognise military spouses/partners as individuals in their own right. This simple change would demonstrate respect and appreciation of the vital role that non-serving spouses and partners play in supporting the military. Children under the age of 16 are normally and rightly referred to in UK policy and practice as 'dependent children' and this is an acceptable use of the term 'dependent', which indicates their position in the family as minors who are indeed dependent on parents/carers during their childhood and adolescence. Families talked of the Armed Forces as being old-fashioned in its approach to spouses and partners:

“ In the twenty-first century the Armed Forces have exposed themselves as being well behind the times, and a failure to adapt to the career profiles of modern families may result in a continued outflow. ”
(Army Serving partner)

In Chapters 8 and 9 we referred to the term 'welfare' as being unhelpful, demeaning and out-of-date, and one which smacks of a paternalist culture, rather than a culture in which seeking and receiving support is normal and non-stigmatising. We welcome the Royal Navy change of terminology in respect of its welfare support service to Naval Service Family and People Support, and suggest that the other Services consider adopting terminology that does not refer to 'welfare'. These small changes would indicate respect for families and a more modern approach to supporting them. Many people have commented to us along the following lines:

“ If our people are our greatest resource, as we are told frequently, then the goal should be to respect and value every single person who contributes to the health and wellbeing of Serving personnel. Our families are almost certainly the Service person's greatest resource! ”
(Army Serving partner)

427 Thompson, G. (2017) *People, Places and Military Spouses: an independent analysis of the dependent*.

428 Ibid. p1.

Feeling valued

A consistent theme which emerged regularly during our review and which is closely connected to the rather archaic language used to identify non-serving spouses/partners, was the huge importance of feeling valued. Many Serving and non-serving partners who responded to the Call for Evidence and those we met told us that they do not always feel valued by the Armed Forces. This was particularly prevalent amongst spouses/partners but Serving personnel frequently referred to a culture in the Armed Forces which does not value its people.

The 2018 survey about life in the RAF⁴²⁹ found that 50 per cent of Serving personnel did not feel valued, and that this was linked to issues of retention. If people do not feel valued then they are more likely to leave the military. High workloads and long working hours featured as aspects which are not sufficiently valued. This may also be the case in other professions where workloads are high, but for some professionals this is compensated by higher salaries and bonus payments. Among the non-serving partners who took part in the survey, 40 per cent reported that they felt the RAF offered appropriate support to families, and this dropped to 35 per cent who felt they were sufficiently supported during deployments. Non-serving partners' sense of not feeling valued is heightened by multiple factors such as: the poor state of SFA; the inability to plan; the uncertainties around being able to enjoy family life; difficulties in finding employment because of frequent postings; and time spent apart. It is the constant churn in family life which causes distress for spouses/partners and a feeling of being unimportant, second best, and often invisible.

The 2018 FamCAS survey⁴³⁰ reported that 56 per cent of spouses/partners did not feel valued by the Services, and the 2019 survey⁴³¹ reported that just 15 per cent of spouses/partners agreed that they felt valued by the Services, 31 per cent were neutral about being valued, and 54 per cent did not feel valued. Not surprisingly perhaps, 37 per cent said that they would feel happier if their partner left the Armed Forces. While we are aware that the proportion of spouses/partners completing the FamCAS surveys tends to be low, nevertheless, the results confirm the sense many have year on year of not being valued. An ex-RAF officer and current Reservist who has been connected to the military her entire life commented:

“ *The Serving person with a strong family behind them, stable schooling, spousal employment opportunities, comfortable housing and a supporting network will invariably deliver far more than their potential suggests....They must continue to feel valued...* ”

A qualitative study⁴³² of Army and RAF spouses/partners that looked at employment experiences indicated that being employed gave non-serving partners an identity beyond that of military spouse/partner. Not only does employment impact positively on wellbeing, but it also improves self-image and contributes to a sense of independence. This could remove spouses/partners' identity as 'just a military partner', identified by their husband's or wife's rank and number, and enable them to resist the label of 'dependent'. Other female spouses/partners in the study who were not in employment identified themselves first and foremost as mothers, again distancing themselves as 'dependents' through a role that was clearly their own and not attributed to them by the military. The study demonstrates how important employment is for self-esteem, amongst other benefits, and spouses who were wanting work but unable to find it were at higher risk of experiencing low self-esteem and psychological distress.⁴³³

In 2011, when President Obama increased the visibility of the sacrifices made by the military community, the US recognised that valuing veterans, Acting Service personnel and their families is an essential part of society's covenant with the Armed Forces. Serving personnel in the US wear their uniform with pride in public, and members of the public, young and old, frequently come up to shake their hands and say 'Thank you for your service'. Our discussions with US military personnel underlined the importance of being thanked. Nevertheless, they also emphasised that it can become somewhat routine and does not necessarily indicate that the civilian population really understand what military life is like. As one Serving

429 RAF Families Federation (2018) Life in the RAF, op.cit.

430 MOD (2018) Tri-Service FamCAS Survey 2018.

431 MOD FamCAS Survey 2019 op.cit.

432 Gribble et al (2019) *It's Nice to Just be You*, op.cit.

433 Sowislo, J. and Ulrich, O. (2013) *Does low self-esteem predict depression and anxiety? A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies*, Psychological Bulletin 139, p213–240.

person in the US military told us: 'it can be a bit repetitive when you walk down the street' [our emphasis]. It is clearly important for such actions to be sincere and meaningful, and not what has been described as a 'sugar coated' response that becomes routine. We were told that saying 'thank you' to a member of the Armed Forces is now ingrained in the national ethos.

There is also huge generosity in the US shown towards military families. The military identity card, for example, ensures a discount for families in many shops and restaurants, free entry to State Parks, museums, entertainment, free prescriptions, airlines waiving baggage fees and offering preferential boarding, fee-free credit cards, and insurance companies offering military discounts. The attitudes and courtesy shown to the military and to their families is generally one of respect and gratitude. Families are invited to ceremonies to mark the achievements of Serving personnel and awards/medals are given also to spouses/partners and children for their commitment to supporting the military. These small acts of kindness were appreciated by families we spoke to, who can openly share in the pride of achievement. Letters of thanks are also sent to spouses/partners to ensure that they also feel valued. Spouses/partners in the UK mentioned to us that they often feel as if no-one really appreciates the sacrifices they make to support the Serving person and that an occasional 'thank you' from the Armed Forces would go a long way in helping them feel valued:

“ *For 19 years I have happily taken a back seat and fully supported my husband's career but I have received NOTHING in return. We have to stop this mindset that families only need support during deployment...I don't expect special treatment, but a 'thank you' from 'the boss' would be nice. 'Dependents' have to be strong and organised in order to allow the partner to perform his duties.* ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

Another example of a small act of kindness and respect is the generosity of companies towards active duty personnel. During discussions with both British and American military personnel in the US, we were given a copy of a letter sent to a member of the US Armed Forces by a company specialising in Harley Davidson motor cycles. The company had been asked to store a much-treasured motor cycle while the Serviceman was on deployment. The letter reads as follows:

“ Dear, Enclosed you will find the check [sic] you mailed to us regarding the account of It is the policy of Reiman's Harley-Davidson to waive storage fees for our active duty members who are deployed. It is our honor [sic] to keep your bike safe and secure while you provide us with our freedom. We hope you return to us safe and sound. Until that time we will store your bike at no charge to you. **This is our way of saying 'thank you' for your service to our country'.** ”

We were told that this is not an unusual gesture. Joining the Armed Forces in the US is regarded as a valued profession, and young people are actively encouraged to join while they are still at high school.

This is in stark contrast to the views expressed to us by many spouses/partners in the UK who do not admit publicly that they are connected to the Armed Forces. They do not put any military clothing on the washing line, we were told, because civilians do not understand their way of life, or they have negative views of the military. A non-serving Army wife who was living in a small village made reference to her reluctance to indicate that her husband is a Serving soldier, especially when there had been some negative media publicity in 2019 about the behaviour of some soldiers:

“ *Living outside a military community I would never dream of leaving my partner's uniform drying in plain sight. I'd also be concerned about having any obvious association with the Army at a time when soldiers are targeted for their roles.* ”
(Army non-serving partner)

Some Service personnel living in mainly civilian communities told us that they had been asked by teachers not to wear military uniform to school as it would upset the other children and their parents. Young people told us that their parents had told them not to disclose that they had a parent in the military for fear that they would be bullied. Some young people at the DOYRMS told us that they had previously felt obliged to lie about what their Serving parent did for a living when they were attending

civilian primary schools, and other young people told us that they would never talk about their parent being away on deployment, because other children and parents would not understand. Rather than being inclusive and generous, the attitude in the UK can sometimes be seen as hostile towards and rejecting of the Armed Forces. It is well-known that children and young people tend to be very open and honest about sensitive issues, and children we met at the Service Children Schools' conference in Dover in 2019 asked that a message be given to Members of Parliament and the Prime Minister 'to do more to recognise the pride they have in their parents' role in the military and help other people to understand what their parents do for the country'.

One non-serving partner told us that, in her experience of living in a small village, civilian families have no sympathy for her or her children when her husband is away for months on deployment:

“ You get reminded frequently by 'Jo Public' 'it's what you signed up for when you married him' ... getting help is never easy and I have always chosen to just carry on 'getting on with it' for fear of upsetting my husband's career. ”
(RM non-serving partner)

We were told that the overall feeling of not being valued has grown in recent years, whereas

“ in the US, people are exceptionally proud to serve, and their country is manifestly proud of them. ”
(RN Serving partner)

This public expression of pride and gratitude goes some way to mitigate the impact of separations, disruptions and operational dangers which Service men and women routinely accept, and helps them to cope with the impact these stresses have on their families:

“ Having spent time recently in the USA it was extremely noticeable how differently they treat their military and families, and even as visiting personnel the help and services we received from healthcare, to discounts, to help and advice, was astonishing. ... I really hope the review will bring about real change to raise public awareness of the difficulties faced, and change attitudes in the public in how they can help and not disadvantage us. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ Although I am extremely proud of my husband and the job he does, I feel that the military in this country are poorly cared for or supported. Look at countries such as the US where they are proud of their Armed Forces, they support them, care for them. Rather than here where the military seems to be a dirty word unless we require them to help rescue stranded drivers in snow drifts, rescue people in flooded areas or deliver sandbags. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

“ We found a huge contrast between the culture towards Serving personnel in the US and the approach shown in the UK, with the US truly valuing and appreciating the sacrifices involved in military service. There is simply no comparison with the indifference and hostility that we have experienced in the UK. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

Serving and non-serving members in all three Services who were or had been serving in the US were keen to point out the difference they felt in the US and the ways in which they felt much more valued even as members of the UK military. They clearly welcomed the increased openness and respect. While travelling through airports in the US recently we were struck by the welcome given publicly to members of the military and the constant reminders about the value of their service. At Atlanta airport, for example, veterans and active duty Service personnel and their families were welcomed into airport lounges as they are in every airport in the US. Furthermore, the following announcement was made repeatedly on the tannoy system:

“ Atlanta airport welcomes active duty members of the US military. We thank you for your bravery. We thank you for your family's sacrifice and for keeping our country safe. ”

This is a strong statement heard frequently in the airports. The following poster is also prominently displayed in airports:

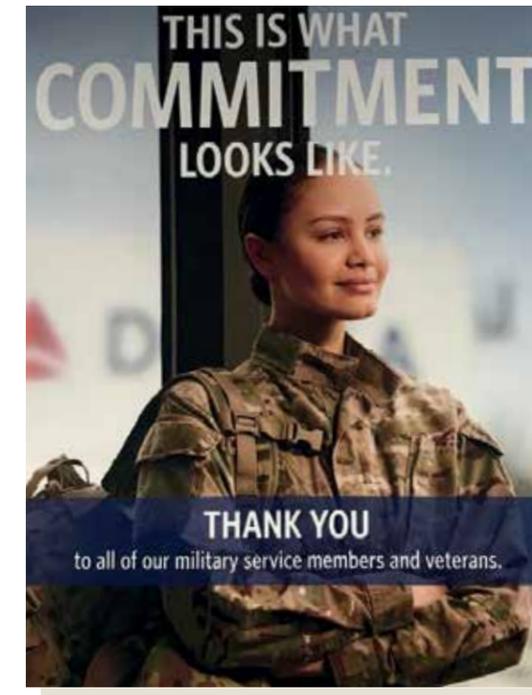


Photo 10.1 Poster at Miami Airport USA

We note that BAE Systems has indicated a clear message of respect for the military on posters in some underground stations in London. As we noted in the last chapter, small acts of kindness go a long way to help military families feel valued and to reduce social isolation, and we believe that much more needs to be done to bring about a shift in social attitudes in the UK. For example, we were told about a dentist who simply refused to take military partners for treatment, which amounts to blatant discrimination. We were told that the public change in attitude in the US, following huge criticism of the military after the Vietnam war, was only achieved because it came from President Obama himself working with the media to change public perceptions and increase understanding of the vitally important and frequently dangerous work the military undertake to keep America safe. This had the effect of massively increasing praise, respect and support for both veterans and Serving personnel and their families. The respect for veterans has undoubtedly increased in this country but respect for active duty military personnel and their families has a way to go it seems. Undoubtedly, the Invictus Games have shone a light on the bravery of Service men and women worldwide.

We are not suggesting that the UK should copy the approach taken in the US, and we know that US military personnel have mixed feelings about the routine use of 'Thank you for your service', but the contrast in positive public recognition of the Armed Forces and their families is evident and goes a long way to helping the military community feel valued. We believe the change in culture in the US since the Obama campaign to strengthen military families has been positive despite the somewhat repetitive nature of the public expressions of thanks, and that there are lessons to be learned about the small acts of kindness that could be considered in the UK. The Obama initiative sought to address the kinds of concerns that we have drawn attention to throughout this report. Any steps taken to value military families must be sincere and meaningful, of course, but simple thank yous to Armed Forces families would be inexpensive to implement if leadership comes from the top. We have recommended that the Prime Minister should take the lead in this. Recently, members of the Armed Forces have been visibly engaged in supporting the UK community following devastating floods and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, providing an ideal opportunity to ensure that their commitment to duty and service is appreciated across the UK.

The phrase 'Recruit the person, retain the family' emblazoned on walls in some US military establishments serves as a reminder that supporting the families of Serving personnel must be a priority. We received many

'thank you's' during the review from military spouses/partners who were simply pleased that someone was thinking of them. For example, one Army spouse said:

“ Thank you for thinking of this community [Service spouses/partners]. It is really wonderful to know that you are investing time and consideration into this. ”

She told us about the 'Forces Wives Challenge' which endeavours to bring spouses and partners together and to unite the community, raise awareness of the sacrifices they make and the skills and experience they offer, and to create a positive image of the military community: an example of the small ways in which military spouses/partners are promoting a more positive image of the Armed Forces. We also met members of the various Military Wives Choirs around the country who feel that their membership has given them something to be proud about and also portrays a different image of the military to the public in the UK. The recent film 'Military Wives' should also do a great deal to shine a light on what partners and spouses experience and the challenges they face.

Some people suggested to us that Armed Forces Day should realistically be Armed Forces Week each year to capture the nation's attention and increase interest in and respect for the military. This would enable activities and events to be held in schools, colleges and in organisations in local communities. There was a strong feeling that not enough attention is given to the current Armed Forces Day's events and that these can provide a good opportunity to publicly value the Armed Forces.

The urgent need for better communication with non-serving family members

“ Technology has moved on in the last twenty years and I'm fairly sure communication could too! I just find it difficult to accept the idea that 'this is how we've always done things so it must be right attitude, especially around communication with families. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

A key aspect of military life that causes immense frustration for families and for the Chain of Command is the apparent inability of the Armed Forces to communicate directly with families. The Army Families Federation⁴³⁴ told us that families:

- want information to be clear and accessible
- want information to be given directly to them
- want a communication strategy that allows them to feel informed, included, and valued
- want information to be accessible through a variety of channels, including email and social media where appropriate
- want information to be presented in a family-friendly manner without any acronyms
- do not want the Army to rely on the Serving person to pass on the information
- want the Army to engage directly with families [our emphasis].

We have heard all these requests from families in the Royal Navy and the RAF as well: the simple message throughout the review has been that relying on the Service person to pass on messages and information is not only ineffective, because many Serving personnel forget to do this or the information becomes diluted or scrambled when it is delivered, but also it is disempowering and belittling for spouses/partners to have to receive information from and be 'dependent' on the Serving person. Quite a few of the Serving personnel we spoke to in all three Services and in all ranks admitted that they are not good at passing on information to their spouses/partners, especially if they see them only at weekends. Spouses/partners who live away from military bases are even less likely to receive all the information they should have as they cannot go into a community centre regularly to check things out. The recent FANDF review⁴³⁵ of families with additional needs or disabilities has recommended that more needs to be done to ensure that carers are communicated with directly and are appraised of the support available to them.

434 Army Families Federation Submission to the Review, April 2019.

435 FANDF (2020) op.cit.

Writing in the AFF Annual Report and Accounts 2019, the Chair of the Trustees said:

“ There is no denying that some of the increasing numbers of enquiries [to the AFF] are due to the changes taking place in the defence landscape within which we operate. Policies and procedures change, and whereas the intent of the changes may be to improve the offer, without the right communication and engagement it can cause nervousness and uncertainty amongst many of the families we represent ... We have ... highlighted the importance of better and more timely communication with Army families to the Chain of Command as well as the MOD and other government departments. One of AFF's key objectives is 'to provide information and guidance that empowers Army families and encourages resilience...' ⁴³⁶ ”

The AFF has identified that many of the enquiries they had received from families could have been resolved had information been clearer and more easily accessible for families in the first place. All three of the Services' Families Federations are aware of the communication challenges and seek to do their best to keep families informed and to support them with a variety of issues. However, as several spouses/partners pointed out, while this is exceedingly helpful, they should not have to rely on these organisations to keep them informed:

“ We need direct links to the Armed Forces, we need to be able to communicate directly to the military and them directly to us. We don't need a third party to be our voice, we have a voice, it's just not listened to... Find someone who can coordinate the family support. ... The saying goes, that 'if the Army wanted a soldier to have a family, they would be issued one'. Times are changing, if the Army wants to have soldiers, they need to realise that they have been issued a family and it needs support too. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

The message from almost everyone who has been involved in this review was clearly articulated by two spouses: a sub-mariner's wife and an RAF wife:

“ Improve communication with spouses... not only through the Serving person. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ Bypass my husband: communicate directly with me. I'm an adult. I have got an Armed Forces Railcard and its expiring and I can't replace it by myself. My husband has to do it for me. Give me power... Recognise the fact that I do everything so that my husband can be in Africa for two months. I've hardly seen my husband in six years. It annoys me when I feel powerless because I do not feel a valid part of the Armed Forces community.... I just don't want to feel forgotten. [our emphasis] ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

We are in no doubt that the three Families Federations are an immensely valuable lifeline for military families. They play a critical role in supporting families and in providing information. They also provide an important link between Service families and the MOD and the three single Services. Many families were at pains to point out how helpful their Families Federation had been, but there is a strong and recurring view that families should not have to rely on their partners nor the Families Federations for communications from the MOD and the Armed Forces.

The challenge of GDPR?

We were told that the solution to providing better information to spouses/partners is not simple, and that permission has to be given by the Serving person for direct communication to be made with the non-serving partner. This is to comply with the data protection requirements within the Data Protection Act 2018, commonly referred to as GDPR. We were also informed by welfare staff that they cannot call on families moving into SFA as they are not allowed to know who has moved in because of GDPR. This view was challenged by families in a meeting we held on one base who were feeling that they had not been welcomed to a new patch, and had not been provided with information directly. In the past, new families were routinely welcomed directly but this had ceased as a response to GDPR.

436 AFF (2019) *Shaping the Future For Army Families: AFF annual report and accounts 2018/19*.

The Data Protection Act provides seven core principles for the protection of personal data and a number of guidelines as to how to apply them. It would seem that interpretation of these by the Armed Forces has had unintended consequences for how the Services are communicating with spouses/partners, especially while Serving personnel are on deployment. We believe that the situation needs to be reviewed as a matter of urgency:

“ I think improvements in this area [communication with families] would help massively with morale and therefore mental health of both the person who is away and the family left at home. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

We were told by the RNRMC that ‘an informed family feels more valued’. This view was endorsed by the RNRMC Children’s Fund⁴³⁷ who wrote to us saying:

“ There is a need for better communication with families and not just through the Serving person. ”

The Armed Forces Family Strategy Action Plan 2018–2020 refers to the 2018 FamCAS Survey:

“ A common theme that runs through many of the responses comes back to how effectively we (MOD and the single Services) are communicating with families. ... Understanding the views of Service families is vital to policy development.⁴³⁸ ”

The Action Plan continues:

“ One of the strongest themes that emerges from stakeholder engagement and survey responses is the challenge of being able to directly communicate with Service families. In response to that challenge a ‘Families’ page of the new Armed Forces Covenant website has been developed with families as a key audience.⁴³⁹ ”

This is obviously intended to ensure that information is readily accessible for families on the website and the Action Plan also sets the objective of developing an App for families. While these are commendable steps, they do not meet the request from families to receive communications directly to them personally via the existing channels of communication including emails and social media. We referred in Chapters 8 and 9 to the fact that information needs to be tailored to individual needs and circumstances if it is to be valuable. Websites can contain generalised information, but personalised communication and information are likely to be more valued and more useful.

New ways forward

During the review, many people have suggested that Apps could be designed for family members to use: one for spouses/partners; and one for children/young people. These would provide easy and instant access to information and advice.

We understand that significant advances have been made by the RAF in developing the concept of a universal welfare support App for RAF personnel and their families wherever they are serving in the world. The RAF is working with the RAF Families Federation, RAF Benevolent Fund and the RAF Association to develop the RAF Families Federation website to become a central and easily accessed repository of information for RAF personnel and their families. There is an expectation that the software from the ‘Map of Need’ Project (essentially a map of services) being funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund for the Veterans’ Gateway can be adapted to provide a comprehensive search engine for easy access to the information held on the RAF Families Federation website. The initial focus is to demonstrate and prove the concept through a pilot scheme that will provide information for RAF Families assigned to the USA in conjunction with the British Defence Staff. The RAF Families Federation, with the RAF’s support, is conducting analysis to understand the technical challenges and resourcing requirements for the App.

⁴³⁷ Submission to the review from the RNRMC and the RNRMC Children’s Fund.

⁴³⁸ MOD, *UK Armed Forces Families’ Strategy 2016–2020: Action Plan 2018–2020*, p3.

⁴³⁹ Ibid. p4.

Developing specific Apps for Service families will undoubtedly be an important step forward in addressing the communication needs of military families. These will still need to be complemented by personalised communications. The expressed intent of the Armed Forces Families’ Strategy is to ensure that families feel informed and engaged in Service life, and ‘communication is fundamental to the success of delivering the strategy’.⁴⁴⁰ The subsequent Action Plan promises to explore innovative ways to improve communication with families, which include social media and the development of digital communications, as well as more traditional ways.

During the review we have worked closely with NS FPS to explore ways in which, under the current system, Service personnel can be encouraged to ensure that their families can receive communications directly and not just via the Service person. When the Service person is asked for permission on the JPA Self Service (Employee) DPA Compliance page, which relates to the Service person giving consent for their contact details to be used in a variety of circumstances, including to receive information relating to welfare provision, it should be possible to ask for permission to make direct contact with the Service person’s spouse/partner. It needs to be explained that this would be in order to give information to them personally relating to welfare provision, invitations to events, the cycle of deployment and so on. At the moment the GDPR Compliance section is buried in a drop-down menu which many Service personnel do not access; there are no tips or pop up ‘help buttons’ to assist them in completing their preferences (in Yes/No tick boxes), and the statements are minimalist and vague. Moreover, it is not mandatory for the Service person to complete the tick boxes. This process as it currently exists does little to address the communication problem which all three Services have identified as deeply problematic and which is probably the most significant single issue that causes discontent for families and for those aiming to support them.

We suggest that it would be relatively straightforward to make changes to this section of JPA and to make it a mandatory requirement for every Service person to complete it. For example:

- the questions about permission need to be made more relevant
- a question along the following lines should be inserted: ‘ I give permission for the Service to contact my family/spouse/partner/next of kin to provide relevant information and to help keep them informed and supported’
- the statements should all be supported with pop-up tips and help buttons: to give more information about what they are consenting to; the kind of communications that spouses/partners would receive; why it is very important that family members are kept informed and are supported at all times; and how this will benefit the Serving person, especially while they are away from home
- the completion of this section and the preferences should be a mandatory requirement.

There are now excellent examples of how permission can be requested and given online to contact a spouse/partner (for example, on divorce advice, couple counselling digital platforms) which conform to GDPR requirements. Pop-ups on the online platform would include a script encouraging the Serving partner to realise the potential benefits of their spouses/partners being able to receive direct communications and being included in ways which could reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness. These methods are GDPR compliant and are used frequently by a range of professionals providing interventions and services online. Some families talked about whether there could be an ‘opt-out’ system which presumed that non-serving partners would be contacted unless specifically barred from doing so, and this may indeed be a consideration for the future.

When we suggested a change as outlined above to the DPA Compliance page to Serving personnel and their spouses/partners during all our visits, only two Serving partners said they would refuse permission for their partner/wife to be contacted as they did not want anyone in the military having permission to contact their spouse/partner in any circumstance. The vast majority, however, thought it a good idea and one that would substantially increase and improve communications directly to families. We noted considerable enthusiasm for the option from spouses and partners, welfare staff and the Chain of Command. Spouses/partners can also be given information of these options via the Families Federations, the Hives, community centres and through the welcome packs, so as to be able to ask/encourage their Serving partner to accord them permission to be contacted.

⁴⁴⁰ Armed Forces Families’ Strategy 2016–2020 p2.

Once permission is granted, the Service can ask for the contact details of the spouse/partner and their preferred mode of communication. When the spouse/partner has been contacted directly they can then be offered options about the kind of contact they would welcome and they would also have the option of saying that they would prefer not to be contacted. In other words the gaining of consent would be an interactive process which respects the choices made by each family. This process would open up a key and vitally important channel for addressing the current communication problems. It would be especially beneficial for dispersed families who cannot easily attend deployment briefings, for example, but who could be informed about how to access webinars and briefings online, and be provided with essential information via email. The challenge of directly communicating with families seems to be a universal problem for all three Services, and one which the Chain of Command believe is essential to resolve if the Armed Forces are to uphold their commitment to supporting Service families effectively and the priorities in the Action Plan are to be delivered.

Some spouses and partners have already established Facebook pages to stay in touch with each other and ensure informal communication when their Serving partners are away on deployment. This is valuable but there is a risk that incorrect messages could be circulated if there is no quality control. Families must be able to trust the source of the information. Other partners have suggested that a 'round robin' scheme could be established for speedy information provision:

“ We are a submariner family. I have no issues with deployment lengths or lack of communication while my husband is away, those are anticipated and expected. However, communication from the Royal Navy when the boat is away is appalling. On one occasion the boat got bumped...this in itself was not unreasonable. However, I did not receive official correspondence relating to this for two weeks and then it was posted second class. I don't find that timescale acceptable...It would take just a few hours to make sure all the families were informed by telephone. Or they could set up a text service (like schools do) to disseminate information quickly. No security issues need to be breached as information can be kept to an absolute minimum. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

In summary, then, our review has shown that communication with families is a major issue for all three Services, all of whom want to find a solution as speedily as possible. There are a number of ways to improve the situation and doing so is urgent. With modern communications and technology it must be possible to have direct communication links with spouses/partners unless the Serving person or non-serving partner prefers for this not to happen. From our conversations with Serving personnel and families during the review we firmly believe that the vast majority of Serving partners and their families would welcome the suggested changes and that these will boost morale and ensure better support for family members. Project Frontline, discussed in Chapter 8, provides a good example of the benefits for everyone, including the operational effectiveness of the Navy, of joining up the welfare support response for Naval personnel away on operations and their families at home when communication is direct and immediate.

Improving communication should relieve some of the pressures and concerns associated with frequent transitions/changes and assist families to build greater resilience. It should also increase knowledge about how to find support for specific issues and break down barriers to seeking help. We understand that the Royal Navy would be willing to take our suggestions forward and to pilot the changes proposed via the JPA. We strongly recommend that this should be progressed.

Supporting the families of Foreign and Commonwealth Serving personnel

During the review we were conscious of the needs of families from the Commonwealth who come to the UK with their Serving partners, and also of the status of those members of the Armed Forces who join from Commonwealth countries. The Armed Forces in the UK have recruited personnel from the Commonwealth throughout the last century. From 1998 a further recruitment campaign took place. The vast majority of Commonwealth recruits enter the Army, with the RAF and the Royal Navy taking far fewer. In April 2019, the AFF told us that the Army currently employed approximately 5,000 Foreign and Commonwealth soldiers, with the expectation that 1,000 new recruits will come from these countries each year. By contrast, the Royal Navy employed just over 500 Commonwealth personnel in 2017, the majority coming from St Vincent, Fiji and South Africa.

The AFF deals with over 2,000 enquiries a year from Serving personnel, families and veterans who struggle to understand the immigration process and the implications of being from a Commonwealth country. On our visits to military bases we met a number of Gurkha Serving personnel and their families and also a number of Serving members in the Royal Navy from St Vincent. Their pride in being members of the UK military community was evident.

These Serving personnel and their families face the same challenges and transitions as all military families serving in the UK Armed Forces. However, they can face additional challenges on account of their foreign status. These challenges include language difficulties, employment issues for spouses/partners, and social isolation.⁴⁴¹ In March 2018, a study⁴⁴² about the needs of Commonwealth personnel and their families, funded by the Forces in Mind Trust, found that issues of immigration, settlement and visas have a profound impact on the individuals concerned and on the Commonwealth community, as well as on the organisations that try to support them.

The study shows that the most prevalent issues facing the Commonwealth Service community are those associated with the cost of visas to enter and remain in the UK, and the complexity of the immigration rules. The Armed Forces Covenant is equally applicable to Commonwealth Serving personnel and some members of the Armed Forces community told us that they believe that Commonwealth personnel and their families experience an element of disadvantage. We were made aware of the lack of understanding of the immigration requirements when personnel are recruited in Commonwealth countries and, despite a Guide issued by the British Army to assist the Chain of Command and welfare staff in supporting foreign national Service personnel and their families, this is not always utilised and the difficulties not always understood. We understand that clearer directions have been given to the Chain of Command and that the Army have updated their guides on supporting non-UK nationals and families. The Navy and RAF are in the process of updating their respective guides following the Army lead. The MOD will agree a series of tri-Service recommendations underpinned by an action plan to further improve the support to non-UK personnel with support from the Home Office.

The cost of visas for family members can be a significant financial undertaking. Serving personnel have to be earning £18,600 before they can bring a spouse with them to the UK; £22,400 before they can be accompanied by their spouse and one child; £24,800 to bring a spouse and two children; and an additional £2,400 for each additional child. With current military wages it can be several years before a Commonwealth soldier can bring his wife and all his children to live in the UK. The AFF have submitted evidence to the review in which they claim that this breaches the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant, although this argument has not been regarded by the Home Office as persuasive, and also the Government's Family Test, referred to in Chapter 9, which requires policies to take account of any negative impacts on family life. The AFF make a case for Commonwealth military personnel serving in the UK Armed Forces to be exempt from the minimum income requirement in recognition that they are Serving the nation and contributing in the same way as all other members of the Armed Forces.

We understand that the MOD is investigating further options with the Joining Forces Credit Union to support non-UK personnel to build savings. This includes advances of Service pay to help fund visa costs. Moreover, the Defence Transition Policy is introducing a programme to support non-UK Forces leavers and their families at discharge with the cost of visas, naturalisation, settlement or returning home after service. The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust now funds an extra Foreign and Commonwealth caseworker for the Army Families Federation. The issues for Commonwealth families underline the importance of military families being valued and of being able to play a full part in supporting their Serving partner. The call is for some greater flexibility in policies which can have a detrimental impact on military families from Commonwealth countries.

Welfare officers we met expressed their concerns for Commonwealth families who they regard as being asked to pay very high visa costs. Some referred to the recent Windrush issue as an example of perceived discrimination against people who are recruited to work in the UK. Commanding officers also referred

⁴⁴¹ Ware, V. (2012) *Military Migrants: Fighting for YOUR Country*, Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴⁴² Pearson, C. and Caddick, N. (2018) *Meeting the eds of Commonwealth Personnel and their Families: a Map of Need*, Forces in Mind Trust.

to the issues for Commonwealth families as being unfair and unjustifiable. We were told by the Home Office that immigration and nationality fees are set within strict financial limits agreed with HM Treasury and Parliament. The level of any fee is also aligned with clear principles that balance several complex factors. Nevertheless, there are clear perceptions of unfairness within the military. The study of the Map of Need referenced above suggests that other issues such as debt, employment, housing and family breakdown can emanate from the pressures of immigration. We were made aware of a particular difficulty for Commonwealth Naval personnel whose family members are not permitted to enter the UK temporarily to assist with childcare when Service personnel are deployed for very long periods and when the accompanying spouse is also in employment. This situation is relevant to all three Services.

It was also pointed out to us that Commonwealth families have a low take-up of welfare support. This may be because of cultural differences and language barriers for spouses/partners, and it suggests that a more pro-active approach, as we recommended in previous chapters, would be helpful. We noticed that the Gurkha community is very supportive of its own families, providing a ready network of support through which information and communication from the Services can flow.

In March 2019, a debate in the House of Commons⁴⁴³ drew attention to the challenges faced by Commonwealth recruits to the Armed Forces and highlighted the need for the minimum income threshold to exempt military families. The Minister for Immigration, in concluding the debate, said:

“ We greatly value the contribution and Sacrifices made by Commonwealth members of the Forces, and their families, in ensuring the security of the UK and protecting our citizens. We want them to go on playing an important role in our Armed Forces, and we are committed to upholding our obligations to them.⁴⁴⁴ ”

There is no doubt that the biggest concern relating to Commonwealth families relates to immigration and the costs and difficulties associated with this. Although we did not receive many responses from the Call for Evidence from Foreign and Commonwealth families, those we received made a heartfelt plea for more understanding and support:

“ While I totally understand that we are immigrants and cannot claim public benefit, we NEED support too. A lot of times, Serving personnel are committed to their jobs and foreign wives are giving up a life overseas with their families to support the UK's Armed Forces. ... We don't want special treatments, but do consider that when we miss home, it is a few hundred pounds and hours of flights away. We don't have our families to help with childcare, and we are even more lonely when they deploy...I must emphasise that I am not whinging...but I wish politicians can take this into account. ”

(Non-serving partner)

This wife asked us not to disclose anything that could reveal her identity as she was scared that she could be penalised for speaking out about how she feels. Her submission draws attention to the need to be vigilant about the difficulties foreign partners/spouses face and the social isolation and insecurity they can experience, especially during deployments.

We also uncovered issues about young single Commonwealth Serving personnel who told us that they could not afford a flight home to see their families. Some young Royal Navy women from Commonwealth countries had never been home since joining up, had not seen their families for several years, and their family members could not afford to come to the UK. Welfare staff questioned why these Serving personnel could not claim a get-you-home allowance at least once a year. This would not cost any more than UK Serving personnel claim for weekending when they live off the base and travel home at weekends. We were told that in respect of one naval base the average cost for a Serving Naval person on a 'get-you-home allowance' would be about £160 per month. The cost of the scheme is some £18m per annum for 9,500 Serving personnel on a specific Naval base. It would seem reasonable for Commonwealth personnel who are single or Serving unaccompanied to be able to receive a contribution at least to a get-you-home

443 Hansard Families of Commonwealth Soldiers, 5 March 2019, at col 930.

444 Ibid. at col 938.

allowance once a year. There is a strong case to be made that no Commonwealth member of the Serving community should have to face years of separation from their family. We recognise that this is a complex issue with additional costs involved but it is one which we believe merits some attention.

We are aware that the Home Office have put forward a range of options to address some of the issues raised and that officials from the MOD and the Home Office, together with representatives from the Army, have further meetings planned to discuss other options.

Strengthening the Armed Forces Covenant

We have argued throughout the report that some small acts of kindness together with more significant changes would have a huge impact on morale, wellbeing and retention in the Armed Forces. The substantive changes we have recommended include

- reducing the number and frequency of the changes and relocations families are expected to make during a Serving career
- providing greater stability and certainty in family life
- respecting the agency of spouses and partners
- ensuring choice in accommodation and making military homes fit for purpose
- communicating directly with families
- coordinating the plethora of charitable support and specialised interventions and making it easier and more acceptable to seek help.

Several small acts of kindness would also have significant impact. These include:

- being more pro-active in providing support to families, especially to those who do not live on or near their home base
- actively valuing Serving personnel and their families for their contribution to the military community and to operational effectiveness
- introducing new ways to say 'thank you' to family members.

The Armed Forces Covenant provides a mechanism through which to achieve many of these changes. We recognise that increasing stability and certainty in military family life is a big ask which to a large extent implies a change of culture and reviewing a model which has been dominant in the history of the Armed Forces. However, we note that steps are already being taken to create clusters of military activities which should minimise the distances families have to move. Nevertheless, the operational tempo can result in a clear perception that deployments are more frequent and that time spent away from home has increased in recent years. We welcome trials being undertaken by the Royal Navy to reduce the length of deployments and our evidence suggests that this would be much welcomed by families. We are aware that there is a difference between being 'good busy' and being 'bad busy'. The latter refers to tasks and activities which are perceived as filling in time rather than being absolutely essential to maintaining security and military commitments.

We are also aware that for Serving personnel military life can be exciting when they are working in different parts of the world, and that being at sea is what most Royal Navy personnel join up to experience. On the other hand, staying at home and managing everyday family life, balancing work and home commitments, and generally being supportive, can be stressful and lonely for some non-serving partners. Pressures on personal relationships are considerable and each partner will have a different perception of their impact on health and wellbeing. We recall being told by an Army Serving partner of some 22 years that being in the military, and in the Army in particular, is 'a young person's life'. In his view the excitement and the perceived rewards lessen over time and family life becomes more important. This presents challenges for the Armed Forces who have an established way of working and of ensuring 'duty first'. Given the emphasis on both recruitment and retention, this is a good time to review the concerns expressed to us and to find new ways to ensure that there remains a balance between the needs of the military and the personal needs of military families.

The Armed Forces Covenant embodies a promise by the nation to ensure that people who serve or who have served in the Armed Forces, and their families are treated fairly and do not suffer disadvantage. At no time during the review has any member of the military community suggested that military families should be advantaged in any way. Families are prepared to make adjustments to support Serving personnel and are proud to do so. The recommendations we have made would enable them to feel more valued, to be able to lead a more fulfilling family life, and to be better able to deal with the demands and expectations of Service life.

The role of the Armed Forces Covenant

The 2019 FamCAS survey found that just 9 per cent of those who responded had heard of the Armed Forces Covenant and knew a lot about it, 33 per cent had never heard of it, a further 19 per cent had heard of it but knew nothing about it, and 39 per cent had heard of it and knew a little about it. Officer spouses had a greater awareness than spouses/partners of Other Ranks, and a higher proportion of Army spouses/partners had never heard of the Covenant compared to RN/RM and RAF spouses and partners. The 2019 AFCAS survey of married Service personnel showed that 67 per cent had heard of the Covenant and knew a little about it. Although the surveys may not be truly representative of the Armed Forces community as a whole, the statistics reveal that the Armed Forces Covenant does not feature highly in the minds of most Service families. Very few people mentioned it to us, and those who did were largely negative about its value:

“ I know the Armed Forces Covenant exists... but I highly doubt employers are aware of it and they need educating. ”
(RN non-serving partner)

“ Although the Armed Forces Covenant appears laudable, it currently is little more than a ‘paper tiger’, promising much and producing shiny press releases but actually delivering very little in terms of improvement for military families. ...There is widespread cynicism towards the Covenant within the military community. There is a real sense that the Covenant is about obtaining pictures for publicity rather than producing real and tangible benefits. ”
(RN Serving partner)

In 2016, The then Chief of Defence People, Lt Gen Andrew Gregory, in his Foreword to the first Armed Forces Families’ Strategy wrote:

“ ...our personnel can only fully deliver their Defence task if they have the support of their families as well as the confidence that their loved ones will be able to access the right support when required ... We already expect a great deal from our military families.⁴⁴⁵ ”

He referred to the lack of choice military families have about periods of separation, their childcare responsibilities, and the day to day realities of Service life as placing considerable additional pressures on Armed Forces’ families. He expressed his determination to ‘do everything to make sure they are given the support and recognition they deserve’⁴⁴⁶ The importance of valuing families is central to the purpose of the strategy and the Covenant. The Covenant recognises the vital role families play in supporting the operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces and, in return, recognises that the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of all three single Services and their families. The vision statement is simple and clear:

“ Resilient, empowered, thriving Service families, who are treated fairly, have increased choice, and are valued by the Nation.⁴⁴⁷ ”

Four principles underpin this vision: fairness; choice; empowerment; and resilience. The concerns expressed throughout this report and the recommendations made are all about upholding these principles. Much has been achieved since 2016, but it is evident from our review that more needs to be

445 UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016–2020, p1.

446 Ibid.

447 Ibid. p2.

done to ensure that the principles are an everyday reality for Serving personnel and for their families, and that these principles are fully understood and embraced by all the nations of the UK: the local authorities in England, the business sector, public services, and the general public.

Two key reports published by the Forces in Mind Trust⁴⁴⁸ have looked specifically at how far the pledges in the Covenant have been achieved. They were undertaken in the context of concerns that implementation of the Covenant had been inconsistent since its introduction in 2011. The 2017 study looked at the responses of local councils to implementing the Covenant and found that there were misunderstandings amongst the military community about what the Covenant was designed to achieve, often resulting in unrealistic expectations, and that most local councils had appointed an Armed Forces Champion, but fewer had an action plan in place as to how to take the Covenant forward. A toolkit and core infrastructure were developed to help councils to implement the Covenant more effectively.

The 2019 study involved the public, private and voluntary sectors and looked at how organisations can play their part in implementing the Covenant pledges.⁴⁴⁹ One of the most important findings from the study is the potential to encourage more organisations to sign the Covenant and to meet the pledges within it. Some 24 per cent of the 548 organisations surveyed had heard of the Covenant, and just 8 per cent had signed it. A key learning point is that lack of awareness is a significant barrier to organisations being keen to sign it and act on it. There are four important steps to addressing the challenge of greater Covenant action:

1. Increasing awareness of the Covenant.
2. Encouraging organisations to sign up to it.
3. Developing an action plan.
4. Implementing the action plan.

Overall, there are some 4,660 signatories to the Covenant and it is important to determine what specific actions they have taken as a result. The 2019 survey revealed that of 87 per cent of 2,391 organisations who had signed up to the Covenant to support the employment of Service spouses/partners, for example, just 22 per cent had acted on this pledge. The survey also revealed that the smaller the organisation, the less likely it is to be aware of the Covenant, to have signed it or to have taken any action. As we have indicated earlier in this report, the Employer Recognition Scheme encourages employers to be Forces-friendly, but as we have heard from the many spouses/partners who contributed to our review, many employers continue to be wary of employing a military spouse/partner because of the frequent moves and the gaps in their employment history, and some employers we were told, openly reject anyone associated with the military.

The Defence Relationship Management branch of the MOD are actively pursuing ways to encourage organisations to sign up to the Covenant and support military families. Members of the Armed Forces also need to play an active role in raising awareness, and Armed Forces Covenant Champions are critically important to getting the messages about the benefits of joining up to the Covenant across to all sectors of society. The 2019 FiMT survey showed that a key barrier identified by many organisations was not knowing what specific action they should take to support the Covenant, or how to take it. The FiMT report concludes that there is considerable scope to build networks of good practice and to offer mentoring to improve awareness and implementation.

The most recent evaluation report published by FiMT⁴⁵⁰ presents evidence of local partnership approaches between local authorities in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire to hold a training event to support local authorities to bring the Covenant to life. Training was given to 13 local authorities and staff at two universities. The feedback suggests that such an event increased enthusiasm for implementing the Covenant and increased the confidence of local authorities to put action plans in place to deliver on the pledges made. It is these initiatives to spread the word and help organisations to take the pledges in the Covenant seriously which can bring the Armed Forces Covenant into greater public consciousness.

448 FiMT (2017) *Our Community – Our Covenant Second edition*. FiMT, *Benefit not Burden: How to improve the delivery for organisational pledges made under the Armed Forces Covenant*.

449 FiMT (2019) *Benefit Not Burden*, op.cit.

450 FiMT (2019) *Bringing the Armed Forces Covenant to Life: Evaluation Report*, Charnwood, Melton and Rushcliffe Borough Councils Partnership.

The Armed Forces Covenant could act as the facilitator and catalyst of a change of culture in the UK to one which values Serving members of the Armed Forces and recognises the role they play, the dangers they can face, and the commitment they and their families make to ensuring the security and protection of our freedoms. We believe that to reach its potential as a promise to the Armed Forces community, the Covenant needs to be much better understood by everyone in society, and indeed in the Armed Forces community. Organisations and agencies should be helped to realise the benefits to them and to the military of signing up to the Covenant, the pledges made should be closely monitored, learning and good practice should be widely shared, and those who breach the principles underpinning it should be robustly challenged.

We would argue that the Covenant ‘needs more teeth’ and must be much more than a paper tiger. It is not just a question of signing the Covenant and making pledges. Pledges have to be acted on and they have to be seen to make a positive difference. It cannot be acceptable for employers to ask spouses/partners if they are likely to move because of their connection with the Armed Forces; it is not acceptable that some employers state that they do not employ military spouses/partners, nor that spouses and partners find themselves having to fudge the gaps in their employment history; and it cannot be acceptable for a dental practice to refuse to register members of a military family, or for GPs to be reluctant to take children of dual-serving parents, nor for children and spouses/partners to fall to the bottom of health waiting lists. We are delighted that the current Government intends to legislate in respect of the Covenant. We welcome this and regard it as being a matter of some urgency.

Military families should not be made to feel like second-class citizens, nor should they be afraid to acknowledge their military connection. There must be increased emphasis on removing disadvantage, both perceived and real, for the families of currently Serving personnel. We believe that blatant acts of discrimination against military families should be called out and prosecuted and families encouraged to report such discrimination. Just as any discrimination is not tolerated in respect of sexual orientation, religion or ethnic identity, so discrimination levied at the Armed Forces community must be dealt with. It is for these reasons that we believe that a separate Serving Families Gateway is needed that distinguishes Serving personnel and their families from veterans and their families. While some of their support needs are the same, many are different and need to be recognised as such.

The Covenant could be heralded as the mechanism for a concerted campaign by government to take steps to ensure that Armed Forces personnel and their families are valued and appreciated, and that they are supported in their local communities as well as on military bases. All three Families Federations have drawn our attention to the general lack of awareness and understanding of the Covenant, and a lack of understanding amongst organisations and service providers in local communities about the impact of being a member of an Armed Forces family. We know from the FamCAS surveys that many families do not know where to go for support and information while their partner is away. Yet we have noted in Chapter 9 that there is a plethora of support available. The Covenant can play a key role in coordinating that support, reducing the post-code lottery which currently determines what is available for whom and where in the UK it can be accessed. With increasing Tri-Service activity it is even more essential that the offer to Service families is equitable and that there is parity of support.

The Armed Forces Families Strategy talks about providing a credible and realistic offer to the Service family. The Service Personnel Support Covenant Team together with the Service Families Working Group have a central role to play in supporting the Strategy and in ensuring that a robust evidence base is built detailing ‘what works’ for whom, and in what circumstances, and determining the gaps in provision, to inform future policies and the delivery of the Strategy in line with the promise embedded in the Covenant. We view the Covenant as the vehicle for:

- encouraging and promoting good practice in supporting Service families
- ensuring public education about the contributions Serving personnel and their families make to society and the sacrifices they make to keep the country safe
- ensuring that any obvious discrimination against Armed Forces families is challenged and the perpetrators called to account.

The Armed Forces Covenant must be much more than a ‘paper tiger’. We believe that there are exciting opportunities ahead.

The need for robust research

Our review of the support needs of Service families has given Serving men and women, their families and their children a voice. We have endeavoured to reflect their lived experiences of military life faithfully and to highlight their concerns and the issues they face. We did not attempt a rigorous study using scientific methods, but invited people to contribute in their own way. We have discussed the main issues that impact on Service families and on the quality of their everyday lives, suggested a number of recommendations for change, and argued for the provision of more targeted support and interventions. However, it is critically important that the interventions and the support provided are fully evidence-based. We have embedded our review within other studies but we believe that it is now essential to undertake further research using robust methods to develop a clear understanding of ‘what works’ in welfare support, with which groups and in which ways. Meeting the support needs of Service families requires a good evidence base and we trust that we have contributed to achieving this.

The recommendations from the review

Throughout the review we have made a number of recommendations for change. They are important because military families are primarily uncomplaining and do not seek publicity for their concerns. We acknowledge that some of these recommendations require investment and a willingness to review traditional ways of working. We continue to believe, however, that there are many recommendations in the report which can be implemented fairly easily and speedily if there is a will to do so. By unlocking the door to improved communication, especially directly to families, much of the stress associated with military life can be mitigated. The overall goals of any changes introduced must be to:

- strive for greater stability in family life wherever operationally possible
- ensure more pro-active personal support which addresses the concerns families have that asking for help will threaten the Serving person’s career progression and appear to be a sign of weakness
- find new ways to demonstrate that the contribution families make to military life is highly valued and to celebrate the Armed Forces and the work they do
- provide through-life support for Serving personnel and their families
- make the Armed Forces Covenant stronger and more effective
- remember the importance of small acts of kindness.

The active duty military lifestyle is demanding and often very rewarding. As society changes so too must the military. Family structures continue to evolve, as do individual’s expectations. Society is witnessing increasing challenges for families associated with knife crime, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and intimate-partner violence and abuse. Serving in the military requires discipline, professionalism, flexibility, devotion to duty, bravery, personal sacrifice, compassion and a commitment to Serving the nation. Strong Armed Forces require strong families. During the review we have met very many Serving personnel and their families who live up to the demands military Service makes and who are immensely proud of what they do. That pride needs to be reflected in society.

The vast majority of all those who have contributed in one way or another to this review have been extremely positive about what it might achieve and the difference it might make. A few, however, have been sceptical as to whether anything will change:

“ I don’t see any of this [concerns about housing, education, health, spousal employment] changing in the future no matter what comes out of this report as the government will brush it under the carpet or the MOD will deny all of these issues. ”

(RAF Serving partner)

“ A survey is only useful if there is anything positive to come out of it. I regularly fill in the families’ survey , but see precious little evidence of any changes made. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

“ We are being told ‘people first’ but is your report another gesture rather than a concerted effort to make some real improvements to Service life? ”

(Army Serving partner)

“ Despite numerous continuous attitude surveys run by all three branches of the military and their families federations etc, nothing has changed over the last 12 years... ”
(Army non-serving partner)

We believe that there is an appetite for challenge and change that is sensible and which meets the overriding need for operational effectiveness. As we have visited different military bases, people we have met have welcomed our review and we detected a huge willingness to do more for families in future. We hope that we have reflected their concerns and their suggestions accurately. We believe that it is important for reviews such as this to be considered carefully and that any changes made as a result should be monitored. We suggest that our recommendations are reviewed every six months for the first five years, and the progress recorded and made open to public scrutiny.

Finally, we believe that the Governments of the UK and society itself have a critical role to play in supporting Service families, and our recommendations reflect this.

Our Recommendations

Overriding recommendations for change: short term

Recommendation 96

The Prime Minister to spearhead a change of culture to:

- make the recognition and care of Armed Forces families a national priority
- ensure that the UK population understands the critically important role played by the Armed Forces in keeping our country safe
- promote pride in and respect for Serving personnel and their families; and ensure that all Serving personnel and their families feel valued.

Recommendation 97

The Armed Forces to ensure that families are recognised and thanked for their service and commitment whenever possible.

Policy: short term

Recommendation 98

All Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces policies and procedures should:

- fully embrace a range of family structures and remove any disadvantage
- apply the Family Test and actively consider the impact on Service families.

Recommendation 99

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to address improvements in communication with families as a key priority by:

- exploring and implementing changes to the JPA DPA questions to encourage Service personnel to give permission for their spouses/partners to receive direct communications
- supporting the development and availability of online Apps for family members to access and receive information.

Policy: medium term

Recommendation 100

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to review legislative requirements and remove the use of terminology which is regarded as being out-of-date, demeaning and disempowering, particularly references to non-serving partners/spouses as 'dependants', in all policies and procedures which relate to everyday military family life.

Recommendation 101

The three single Services to:

- review current policies which require frequent moves and repeated upheavals in family life
- make a commitment to facilitate greater stability and choice for military families while maintaining operational effectiveness
- review the length of deployments and associated training activities pre- and post-deployments to minimise the additional time spent away and provide greater certainty about return dates wherever possible.

Recommendation 102

The Armed Forces to ensure that, as far as is possible, Ministry of Defence Harmony Guidelines and reasons for breaching them are fully understood by military families and that they are adhered to and breached only in unavoidable and exceptional circumstances.

Recommendation 103

The Ministry of Defence to promote research to develop a greater understanding of 'what works' to support Serving families to aid recruitment and retention.

Foreign and Commonwealth: short term

Recommendation 104

The Ministry of Defence to:

- ensure that, prior to coming to the UK, recruits to the Armed Forces from Foreign and Commonwealth countries and their families are always very well informed about the immigration, settlement and visa requirements and costs that could have a significant impact on their family life
- implement a series of Tri-Service recommendations underpinned by an Action Plan to improve the support to non-UK personnel
- review the availability of a 'get-you-home allowance' on an annual basis for single and unaccompanied Foreign and Commonwealth members of the Armed Forces.

Foreign and Commonwealth: medium term

Recommendation 105

The Home Office to undertake a review of the policies relating to the Minimum Income Threshold and settlement requirements as applied to Foreign and Commonwealth members of the UK Armed Forces, and take action to reduce the negative impacts on their families and their family life as required by the Family Test.

Recommendation 106

The Home Office and the Ministry of Defence to review the cost of visas and the settlement process for Commonwealth Service personnel and their families in the light of the Armed Forces Covenant.

Armed Forces Covenant: short term

Recommendation 107

The Ministry of Defence, Government Departments in England, and the Devolved Governments to:

- reinvigorate and strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant through legislation to drive recognition of the critical role played by the Armed Forces and their families, and raise ambition across society to harness better targeted support for Service families
- ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant eliminates real and perceived discrimination of Armed Forces families
- ensure children and young people are not disadvantaged in pursuing sport and leisure activities in their local community because of frequent relocations
- ensure all organisations and agencies that sign up to the Covenant are held accountable for acting on their pledges and delivering them to Serving personnel and their families
- work together with all organisations that have signed the Covenant to actively promote it throughout society
- ensure that those who deliver their pledges are recognised and rewarded.

Recommendation 108

The Ministry of Defence, in collaboration with the Chain of Command and the Families Federations, to ensure every Serving member of the Armed Forces and every spouse/partner knows about the Covenant and understands how it can benefit them.

Armed Forces Covenant: medium term

Recommendation 109

The Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence to work together to introduce the Armed Forces Covenant in schools and colleges to increase awareness among children and young people of the nation's promise to Armed Forces personnel and their families.

Final recommendation

Recommendation 110

The Ministry of Defence to establish a robust mechanism for an independent review of the recommendations in this report, monitoring their implementation every six months, noting the progress made, and ensuring public accountability.

ANNEXE A Review Methods

As we explained in the Introduction, we did not set out to conduct a robust scientific research study relating to the support needs of Service families. It was anticipated that the review would take some six months to complete, involve gathering the views of Service personnel, family members and key stakeholders, and visiting some military bases. However, we were of the view that simply presenting an anecdotal description of the comments made by Service personnel without attempting to place these within the context of the considerable literature on military families would be irresponsible and fail to give the MOD and the Armed Forces the evidence they would need to consider recommendations for change. It was made clear to us that without strong evidence it would be difficult to support our recommendations. We also considered the commission to be an extremely important opportunity to explore the current issues in military life that contribute to dissatisfaction and disaffection that could result in Service personnel leaving the Armed Forces prematurely. We were aware that there is a retention problem and that, frequently, the reason given for leaving is the incompatibility of military life with family life.

Our task, therefore, was to design a review that would enable us to gather as much robust information as possible with a very small review team and without a designated budget. Our understanding of the research undertaken in the UK and overseas, specifically in the US, pointed to a number of key issues that can contribute to dissatisfaction with Service life. These included the impacts of frequent relocations and long deployments; the many disruptions experienced by families, especially children in their education, and spouses/partners in respect of their careers and job aspirations. We were also aware of the challenges for continuity in health provision and the perceived lack of consistent welfare services available for families. This information provided us with a number of key themes to explore as well as enabling Service personnel and their families to raise other concerns whenever they wished.

We were mindful that much has changed over the past 60 years in the ways in which all families choose to live their lives, and that these societal changes need to be understood and recognised within a military culture which has strong traditions and ways of doing things. So it was important to contextualise the review within our knowledge about family change and about military expectations in the twenty-first century. As a result, we were clear that we must ensure that the review is evidence-based and contextually sound.

The Call for Evidence

Our first step was to issue an open call for evidence within the Armed Forces community. However, we could not access Serving personnel and their families directly and had to depend on the help of the MOD, the three single Services, the three Families Federations and the Chain of Command in each Service to distribute invitations to contribute. Although we started to receive responses very quickly, it soon became clear that distribution was by no means universal and that some military personnel and indeed, whole units, did not receive the invitation. Moreover, all communications with non-serving partners/spouses has to go through the Serving partner. Therefore we were completely dependent on the Serving person to share the invitation with their spouse/partner. When we visited bases it was obvious that large numbers of non-serving partners had never heard of the review and had not received our Call for Evidence. This highlights one of the most critical issues within the Armed Forces and one which we have discussed in some detail in Chapter 10. We experienced the restriction and inability to communicate directly with non-serving partners. This lack of direct access to family members has emerged as a major issue for all three Services during the review. Not only does it impact on the ability of researchers to undertake robust studies of military life, but it is a problem which severely impacts on the provision of appropriate support to Service families. This lack of direct access to family members has to be resolved going forward.

We were nevertheless delighted with the number and quality of the responses we received. They were thoughtful and detailed and provided us with a significant data base at the start of the review. In total we received 287 responses as follows:

- Serving personnel 162 (56.04%)
- Non-serving spouses/partners 98 (34.01%)
- Unstated 7 (2.05%)
- Other 20 (7%)

The pie charts below illustrate the distribution of the responses we received.

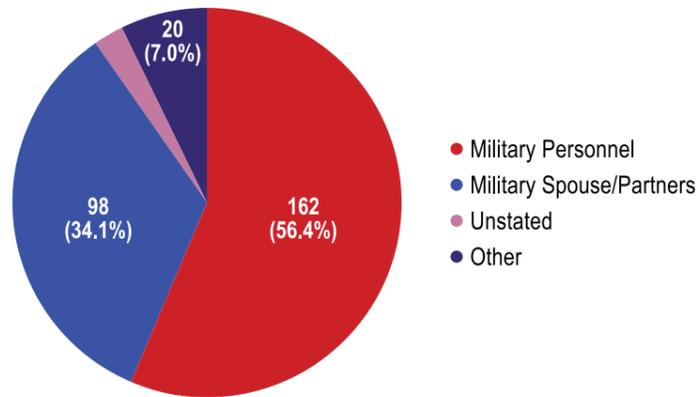


Figure A.1 Responses to the Call for Evidence

It is not surprising that we received more replies from Serving personnel since spouses/partners were not contacted directly. It was clear, however, that some of the responses had been submitted by the Serving and non-serving partner jointly. We were pleased to have some replies from families thinking about leaving the Armed Forces and others who had already transitioned out. Although we had expected the Call for Evidence to be closed after some two months, we kept it open throughout the review when we realised that some invitations had not been distributed until several months after we had begun the review.

Looking across the three single Services, the responses were from:

- Army 98
- RAF 63
- RN 56
- RM 8
- Army retired 5
- RAF retired 3
- Reserves 4
- Retired Reserves 2
- Joint Forces 5
- SAS 1
- Other 16
- Unstated 24

We illustrate the distribution in the pie chart below. We have combined some groups of responses with very small numbers into the Other category in the chart.

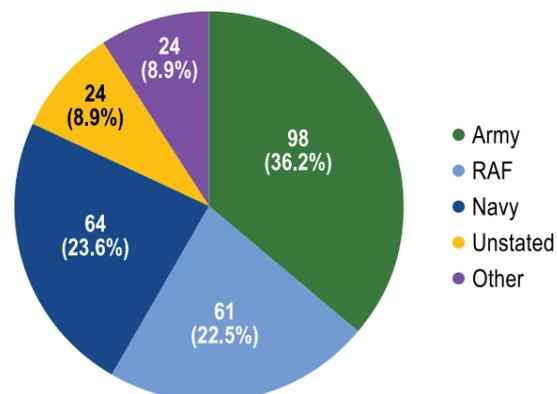


Figure A.2 Responses to the Call for Evidence by Service

We cannot claim that the responses constitute a representative sample and we have no way of knowing the ways in which it might be biased. However, our visits to military bases would suggest that the responses we received from the Call for Evidence were typical of those expressed by the Serving personnel and their families who we met on the bases. We are fairly confident, therefore that we have captured the key issues of concern and obtained descriptions of lived experiences that are common amongst the wider military population. They also reflect findings from other research, as we have identified in the body of the report.

Visits to military bases by Andrew Selous and Janet Walker

During the review we visited fourteen military bases:

The Royal Navy:

- HMNB Portsmouth
- HMNB Devonport
- HMNB Clyde

The Army:

- Catterick Garrison
- Aldershot Garrison
- Wellington Barracks
- Tidworth and Bulford Garrisons
- Kendrew Barracks
- Leuchars Station
- Infantry Battle School, Brecon

The RAF:

- RAF Waddington
- RAF High Wycombe
- RAF Wittering

Our visits followed a similar pattern, and we stayed overnight at the three naval bases. We met with the Commanding Officer(s) and senior Serving personnel; we held meetings with groups of male and female Serving personnel from across the ranks; we met with welfare staff and padres/chaplains, and had conversations with non-serving spouses/partners, and occasionally with their children. At each base we were given a tour of the various facilities, including family centres and Service accommodation.

During these visits we gained an invaluable insight into life in and around the base, inside and outside the wire. Each visit added to our knowledge and enabled us to extend our understanding of the issues causing concern. We could see first-hand the various initiatives which seek to address the support needs of Service families. Our conversations were open-ended, unscripted and free-flowing, enabling everyone to explore the issues of importance to them.

Visits to schools

We visited four schools with significant numbers of Service pupils on their rolls in order to talk with teachers and pupils:

- RAF Benson Community School
- Cottesmore Academy, Kendrew Barracks
- Le Cateau Primary School, Catterick Garrison
- Duke of York's Royal Military School, Dover

Meetings and conversations with Serving personnel and non-serving partners

In tandem with the Call for Evidence we met with a number of key military personnel to discuss a range of issues from a range of perspectives. In these discussions we were able to delve in more depth into the concerns and issues raised in the responses to the Call for Evidence and during our visits. We were also able to contextualise these concerns within the day to day operations of the three Services. We also met with a number of key stakeholders from Service charities and other charities supporting military families, policy-makers, and academics. Professor Walker also visited the Centre for New American Security in Washington DC during two personal visits to the US. During her visits to the US she met with US Serving personnel and with UK Serving personnel from all three Services, together with their partners, on assignment to the US.

All our discussions were carefully noted and we have drawn on these during the report. The key people we met individually or in small groups during the course of the review are listed below. It is a partial list in that we have not recorded the names of all the Serving personnel, welfare staff, padres/chaplains, and DMS staff who spoke to us on the bases we visited.

List of people who met with and gave evidence to the review team

(The ranks and posts held are listed as at the time of our meetings in 2019)

David Adams, Head of Families Policy, MOD

Sara Baade, CEO, Army Families Federation

Matt Bacon, Researcher, University of Winchester

Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Baines, Garrison Commander, HQ Aldershot Garrison

Lieutenant Colonel Jamie Balls Garrison Commander, Tidworth, Netheravon and Bulford Garrisons

Phil Bannister, Pupil Premium and School Food Division, Department for Education

Jo Barker, Head, Armed Forces Accommodation Policy, MOD

Rear Admiral Mike Bath, Naval Secretary and Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff (Personnel), HMNB Portsmouth

Lieutenant General Sir Ben Bathurst, Commander, Household Division, Wellington Barracks

Major Charlie Beare, Army Strategic Engagement Team, MOD

Adrian Bell CBE, CEO, Royal Navy Royal Marines Charity

Anneka Bellet, Assistant Head Teacher, Cottesmore Academy, Kendrew Barracks

Flight Lieutenant Lou Blakemore, RAF Wittering

Nicholas Blaney, Senior Policy Officer, Department for Education

Matt Blyton Senior Education Adviser and Strategic Lead for Service Pupils, North Yorkshire County Council

Wing Commander Margaret Boyle, RAF Wittering

Sharon Bristow, Co-Founder Military Wives Choir Foundation

Emma Brown, Acute Care and Provider Policy, Department of Health and Social Care

Major General Bob Bruce, Chief Secretary to the Army

Canon Peter Bruinvels, Military Liaison Adviser, Surrey County Council

Squadron Leader Biz Calvert, RAF Wittering

General Sir Mark Carlton-Smith, Chief of the General Staff

Brigadier Ian Caws (ret), COBSEO

Colonel Shaun Chandler, Commanding Officer, Infantry Battle School, Brecon

Colonel Simon Chapman RM, Captain of HMNB Devonport

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Chesterfield, Station Commander, Kendrew Barracks

Lieutenant Colonel Andy Childs SO1 Personal Plans, Aldershot Garrison

Jenna Clare, People-SP Support Covenant, MOD

Major Sean Clarke, Defence Primary Health Care, Kendrew Barracks

Emma Clink, Educational Psychologist, Cottesmore Academy, Kendrew Barracks

Charlotte Cole, Founder and Trustee, Warrior Programme

Russell Collier, Principal Education Officer, Directorate Children and Young People, MOD

Andrea Collins, Head of Communication and Engagement, NHS England and NHS Improvement

Carline Cooke, Head of Policy, Forces in Mind Trust

Mike Cooper, Director, Directorate of Children and Young People, MOD

Commodore Peter Coulson RN, Base Commander, HMNB Devonport

Giles Crompton-Howe, Acute Care and Provider Policy, Department of Health and Social Care

Kate Davies CBE, Sexual Assault Referral Centres, NHS England

Mark Davis MBE, Community Development Officer, RAF Wittering

Squadron Leader Jennifer Dennis, RAF Wittering

Philip Dent, Director, SCiP Alliance Researcher, University of Winchester

Amy Drew, Department for Education

Captain Chris Earle, 2PWRR, Kendrew Barracks

Air Vice-Marshal Chris Elliot, Chief of Staff (Personnel) and Air Secretary, RAF High Wycombe

The Rt. Hon. Tobias Ellwood MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, MOD

Debra Exall, Strategic Relationships Adviser, Kent County Council

Wendy Faux, Producer, writer and photographer, Recruit For Spouses

Steph Fawdry, Head Teacher and Chair of SCISS, RAF Benson Community School

Professor Nicola Fear, Director of the Kings Centre for Military Health Research, Kings College, London

Louise Fetigan, Founder and Operations Manager, Little Troopers

Alex Foreman, Principal, Duke of York's Royal Military School, Dover

Matt Fossey, Director, Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research, Anglia Ruskin University

Bishop Christopher Foster, Bishop of Portsmouth, Cof E Lead on Defence

The Rt. Hon. Mark Francois MP, House of Commons

Captain Nick Gibbons RN, Base Commander, HMNB Clyde

Shelley Gilmour, Centre Manager, Drumfork Family Centre, HMNB Clyde

Chief Petty Officer Victoria Glassey, Social Work Advisor, Naval Service Family and People Support

Brigadier Simon Goldstein, Lead Adviser, Francois Review

Sarah Goodman, Community Projects Officer, Surrey County Council

Revd Martyn Gough, Chaplain of the Fleet, HMNB Portsmouth

Wing Commander Stu Graham, SO1 Community Support, HQ Air Cmd, RAF High Wycombe

James Greenrod, Head, Armed Forces People Support, MOD

Sir Andrew Gregory, CEO, SSAFA

Dr Rachael Gribble, Kings Centre for Military Health Research, Kings College, London

Captain Chris Guest, Adjutant, Royal Yeomanry

Alistair Halliday, CEO, RFEA, the Forces Employment Charity

Bryony Hamilton, People Support, MOD
 Ed Harris, Senior Education Officer, Directorate Children and Young People, MOD
 Helen Helliwell, Director Armed Forces Policy, MOD
 Captain George Holdcroft, Army Inspectorate
 Commander Simon Howell RN, NPS Executive, HMNB Portsmouth
 Debbie Hustings, Young Military Carers, NHS England
 Zoe Jackson, Operations Manager, Aurora New Dawn
 Sebastina Johnson, People-SP Support, MOD
 Captain Simon Joll RN, Head of Armed Forces Welfare Policy, MOD
 Admiral Sir Philip Jones, First Sea Lord
 Lieutenant General Ivan Jones, Commander of the Field Army
 Aidan Jones OBE, CEO, Relate
 Ali Joy, Advisor, Army Welfare Service
 Billy King, AFP-Sp Welfare Families, MOD
 Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy Lamb MC, Army Strategic Engagement Team, MOD
 Helen Lampport, People Support, MOD
 Katherine Lawrence, Researcher, University of Winchester
 Group Captain Joanne Lincoln, Station Commander, RAF Wittering
 Mandy Lindley, Director of Relationships and Funding, Royal Navy Royal Marines Charity
 Air Vice-Marshal Ray Lock (ret), CEO Forces in Mind Trust
 Mark Logie, SO1 Military Integration, HQ 4 Infantry Brigade and HQ North East
 Meg Lucas, Head Teacher, Cottesmore Academy, Kendrew Barracks
 Maria Lyle, Director, RAF Families Federation
 Warrant Officer 1 Stefano Mannucci, Base Warrant Officer, HMNB Clyde
 Sue Mason, Head Teacher, Brompton-Westbrook Academy
 Angela Maxted, Head Teacher, Cheriton Primary School
 Julie McCarthy, Director of Volunteer Operations, SSAFA
 Dr Judith McCullouch, Senior Lecturer, University of Winchester
 Major Conor McGrory, Army Inspectorate
 Lieutenant Colonel Fraser McLeman, Station Commander, Leuchars Station
 Lieutenant Commander Rob McMurrin RN, HMNB Clyde
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 Emma Moore, Research Associate, Military Veterans and Society Program, Centre for New American Security, Washington, DC
 The Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP, Secretary of State for Defence, MOD
 Commander Al Murray RN, Royal Navy Casualty and Recovery Management
 Ian Mottram, Head Teacher, Le Cateau Primary School, Catterick
 Lieutenant Colonel Craig Mullen, Army Welfare Service
 Nicky Murdoch, Chair NHS England Armed Forces Public Patient Participation Involvement Group, NHS England and NHS Improvement

Air Vice-Marshal David Murray, Controller, RAF Benevolent Fund
 Major General Sharon Nesmith, Director Personnel, Army HQ
 Dr Elizabeth Newman-Earle, Researcher, Essex University
 Lieutenant General Richard Nugee, Chief of Defence People, MOD
 Air Commodore Alan Opie, Air Command HQ, RAF High Wycombe
 Lieutenant Colonel Brad Orgeron, US Air Force, Centre for New American Security, Washington DC
 Sheila Owens-Cairns, NS FPS Head of Service
 Melloney Poole OBE, Chief Executive, Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust
 Captain Andy Price, Captain of the Base, HMNB Devonport
 Zoe Proctor, Defence Strategy, Health and Veterans, MOD
 Wendy Quinn, Families Engagement Officer, Naval Families Federation Scotland and Northern Ireland
 Admiral Tony Radakin, First Sea Lord
 Air Commodore Wendy Rothery, Head of Accommodation, Defence Infrastructure Organisation
 Warrant Officer 2 Chris Rowlands, Army Inspectorate Review Team
 Jessica Sands, Podcast Host, The Independent Spouse
 Colonel Nathan Sempala-Ntege, Assistant Head Army Personal Services
 Grahame Shepherd, Former Head Teacher, Le Cateau Primary School, Catterick Garrison
 Sara Smith, RN Children's Fund
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 Vicki Stewart, Pupil Premium and School Food Division, Department for Education
 Sarah Stone, Founder/CEO, Military Co-Working Network
 Brigadier Jon Swift, Northern Ireland Garrison
 Jon Sykes, Head Teacher, Hipswell C of E Primary School, Catterick Garrison
 Anna Vrahimi, SEND Lead, Directorate Children and Young People, MOD
 Sarah Walker, SUH Project Manager and Armed Forces Champion, Chamber of Commerce
 The Rt. Hon. Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, MOD
 Colonel Charlie Wallace, Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Scotland
 Lieutenant Colonel Iain Wallace, Army Personnel Policy Branch, Army HQ
 Lieutenant Commander Steve Warner, RN Chief of Staff, Naval Service Family and People Support
 David Wateridge, Royal Navy and Royal Marines Welfare Manager, HMNB Portsmouth
 Air Chief Marshall Mike Wigston, Chief of the Air Staff
 Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Williams, Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment, Hyde Park Barracks
 Kayla Williams, Director, Military Veterans and Society Program, Centre for New American Security, Washington, DC
 The Rt. Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Defence, MOD
 Michelle Woolman-Lane, Armed Forces Covenant Officer, Rutland County Council
 Anna Wright, CEO, Naval Families Federation
 Wing Commander Paul Yates, Base Support Wing, RAF Waddington
 Nickie Young, Service Pupils Champion, North Yorkshire County Council

Analysis of the data and information received

In order to do justice to the many detailed and thoughtful responses received we extended the duration of the review to be able to look at every submission carefully. The responses to the Call for Evidence were analysed thematically and emerging issues drawn out. The information from our meetings and visits was analysed to inform the emerging themes and provide the military context. Recommendations were developed from the analysis and our observations, and refined as the review continued. Extracts were selected to illustrate the key messages and concerns. We endeavoured to select these to provide a balanced view across the three Services and to faithfully represent the concerns and issues discussed. Everyone was assured of confidentiality and no-one is personally identified in the report. Individual permissions were sought to include the photographs and the Figures.

Acknowledgements

In addition to those we have acknowledged in the Introduction to this report we would like to thank everyone listed above for their invaluable help and support throughout the review, and also all those listed below who checked individual chapters for accuracy and commented on the wording of the recommendations:

David Adams and colleagues, People Support Policy team, MOD

Emma Browne, Acute Care and Provider Policy, Department of Health and Social Care

Phil Bannister, Pupil Premium and Food School Division, Department for Education

Russell Collier, DCYP MOD

Giles Crompton-Howe, Acute Care and Provider Policy, Department of Health and Social Care

Kate Davies CBE, Director of Health & Justice, Armed Forces and Sexual Assault Services Commissioning, NHS England and NHS Improvement

Debra Elliott, Director of Transformation - Armed Forces Health Commissioning for England, NHS England Corporate Team

Cerys Gage, Education and Public Services, Welsh Government

Ed Harris, DCYP MOD

Paul Hood, Team Leader, Defence Policy Unit, Defence, Security & Cyber Resilience Division, Scottish Government

Janet Jones, Head of Partnerships North Wales and Lead for the Armed Forces community in Wales, Welsh Government

Mark Knight and colleagues, Strategy, Ageing Society and State Pensions, Department for Work and Pensions

Michael Sim, Policy Manager, Defence Policy Unit, Defence, Security & Cyber Resilience Division, Scottish Government

Oliver Rodin, Policy Adviser, Employee Benefits and Expenses Policy Team, Individuals Policy Directorate, HMRC

David Stockton, Head of Armed Forces Liaison Team, HMRC

Frances Walker, Social Housing Division, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Ann Williams, Armed Forces Policy Unit, BICS and Europe Group, Home Office

Nicholas Wood, Armed Forces Policy Unit, BICS and Europe Group, Home Office

Living In Our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families, June 2020

Authors: Janet Walker, Andrew Selous and Gabriela Misca

This report and a summary report of the review are available at www.gov.uk

Hard copies of both reports are available on request from:

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