

# SCiP Alliance

## Connected Forces (November 2021 to February 2023)

### Evaluation Report



**“Connected forces is a chance for military kids to feel less isolated in the unique situations they find themselves in.” – Participant**

**“A place where students from armed forces families can feel connected, understood and part of a big family who can connect with yourself and your experiences.” – Participant**

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

## Contents

|                                                                 |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Glossary .....                                                  | 1  |
| Executive summary .....                                         | 2  |
| Key data, conclusions, and recommendations.....                 | 2  |
| Introduction.....                                               | 4  |
| Aims.....                                                       | 4  |
| Activities and delivery.....                                    | 5  |
| Theme one: the first version of Connected Forces.....           | 6  |
| Theme two: adapting project design to encourage engagement..... | 7  |
| Theme three: piloting new ideas .....                           | 7  |
| Methodology.....                                                | 8  |
| Data sources and collection tools .....                         | 8  |
| Data analysis.....                                              | 9  |
| Findings.....                                                   | 9  |
| Engagement.....                                                 | 9  |
| Impact .....                                                    | 12 |
| Participant A.....                                              | 12 |
| Participant B.....                                              | 13 |
| Participant C.....                                              | 14 |
| Quality.....                                                    | 15 |
| Conclusion and learnings .....                                  | 18 |
| Appendix A.....                                                 | 19 |

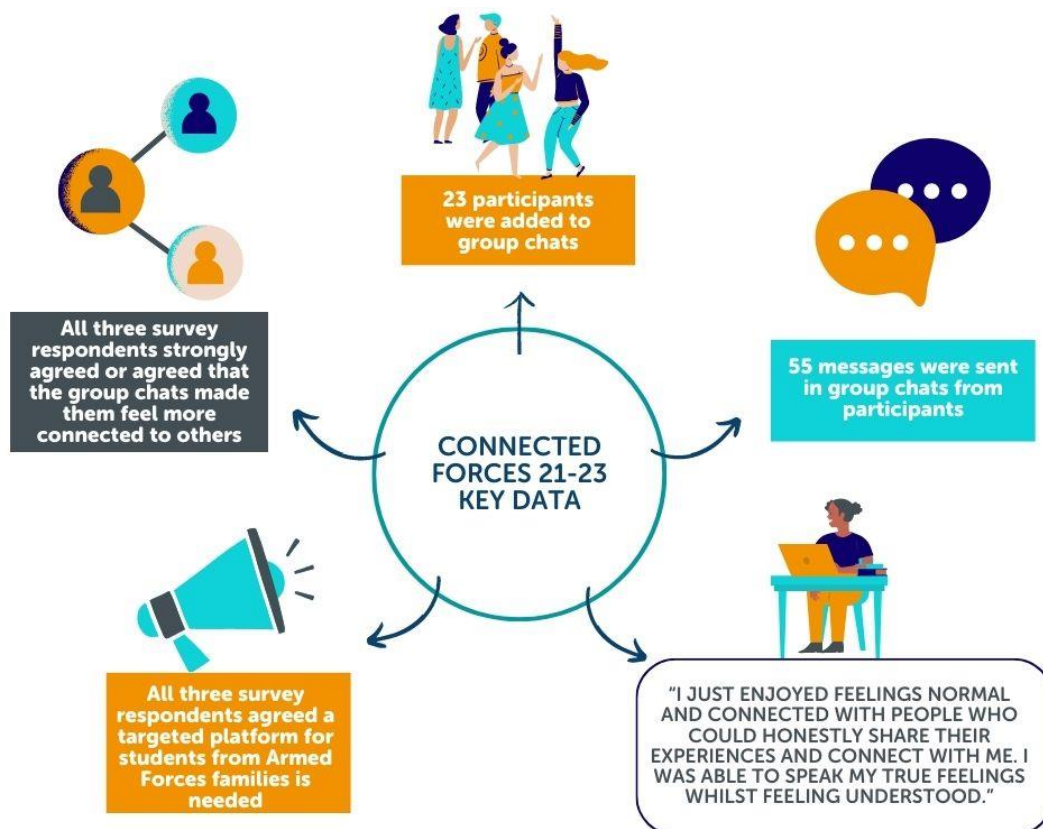
## Glossary

- **Participants:** Young people aged 16-19 whose parent or carer serves in the regular Armed Forces or as a reservist, or has done at any point during those young peoples' lives.
- **Ask the Expert:** A feature on the Brightside platform that provides a space for all users on projects to ask questions to experts. Experts are recruited from specific fields, enhancing participant understanding and giving them additional insights.
- **Communities:** A feature on the Brightside platform that act as a forum. Communities are open and accessible to all participants giving all project users the opportunity to engage with each other. Posts can be made anonymously.
- **Conversion:** The number of participants who have joined a group chat out of those participants who joined the platform.

- Engagement: A measure of how much the users engaged with the programme; in particular, how many messages they sent to their group chats.
- Eligibility criteria: Participants were required to be between ages 16 to 19 and from Armed Forces families.

## Executive summary

Key data, conclusions, and recommendations



The SCiP Alliance and Brightside delivered Connected Forces with the aim to provide near-to-peer (support and guidance from peers with a similar lived experience) sustained digital support for 16- to 19-year-olds from Armed Forces families to create a sense of community, build their confidence about the future, and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. 82 participants signed up, and 23 were added to the group chats. Nine participants sent at least one message to the 'Introduce yourself' group chat, and two participants messaged in the book club group chats. Although there wasn't a high level of engagement with the group chats, the messages exchanged showed participants checking in with each other, which aligns with the aim to build a sense of community.

The three participants who completed the baseline and exit survey all recorded a positive change in their confidence to refer to skills their Armed Forces background has given them when completing future job or education applications. All three participants went from being quite confident that university was their most likely next step in the baseline survey, to being extremely confident in the exit survey. Two participants also agree that their

family's Armed Forces background has given them useful skills and experiences for the future, and that they can articulate what these skills and experience are. The three participants who completed the surveys will be referred to as Participants A, B, and C throughout the report.

The key learnings from the project are:

- Baseline surveys are a barrier to conversion as 52 participants (64%) did not complete the baseline survey. Future projects should consider different ways to confirm participants are from Armed Forces families without a compulsory survey
- Recruiting participants at the same time and having one launch event where all participants join the platform at the same time could help engagement. This could encourage them all to message when first joining, which could build momentum and encourage continued engagement throughout
- All three participants agreed that they thought a targeted platform for students from Armed Forces families is needed, so future projects supporting this target group should be continued

## Introduction

This report evaluates the engagement, quality, and impact of Connected Forces, the first cohort of this project model delivered by the SCiP Alliance and Brightside. This project supported 23 participants from November 2021 to February 2023 to provide near-to-peer sustained digital support for 16- to 19-year olds from Armed Forces families to create a sense of community, build their confidence about the future, and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The SCiP Alliance and Brightside have been working together since 2020 when the SCiP Alliance and Brightside first discussed working in partnership to set up a community programme for up to 100 Service children to help tackle loneliness. The SCiP Alliance were successful in securing a grant from the Armed Forces Covenant Trust (AFCT) to enable them to carry out the community programme. SCiP had identified that separation and mobility have an impact on Service children with an increased risk of emotional, behavioural and attainment problems. They had also identified that projects supporting these young people are challenging to deliver, because these young people are spread out in small numbers, and hoped that a national programme could be more effective.

This report sets out the context of the project (its aims and activities) before outlining the evaluation methods we used to measure whether it met its outcomes. It analyses the engagement with the project, the impact of the project through a narrative case study, and the quality of the participant experience. As this was a pilot project, this report also focuses on different avenues explored in the project design and delivery. We've included learnings throughout and summarised them in the conclusions and learnings section.

## Aims

Brightside is a charity, creating inspirational mentoring relationships that support young people to make confident and informed decisions about their futures. We use our 20 years of experience as the UK's leading social enterprise for online mentoring to help organisations identify, reach, and inspire young people. We find and train mentors, connect them with young people, and support them as they work together through our online programmes. Our mentoring introduces young people to opportunities from employers and universities so they can develop the knowledge and confidence they need to succeed.

The Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance is a partnership of organisations focused on improving outcomes for children from Armed Forces families. It is hosted by the University of Winchester and supported by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The SCiP Alliance's vision is thriving lives for Service children, and its mission is to bring together practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders to build a stronger evidence base, better policy, and enhanced support for Service children's education and progression, placing their voices at the heart of all they do. The SCiP Alliance pursues this vision and mission by leading collaborative work to connect and support practitioners and influence the policy environment. Their responses are developed with and through young people with lived experience.

The overall aim of Connected Forces is to support 16- to 19-year-olds from Armed Forces families to create a sense of community, build their confidence about the future, and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. To achieve this, the project aims:

- To combat a feeling of loneliness and isolation
- To build a sense of belonging to the community of Armed Forces families and society more broadly
- To equip participants to recognise, understand, and articulate the skills/strengths/attributes they have as a result of their background
- To understand how online interventions can support this group

Our Theory of Change outcomes support our mission to help young people to make confident and informed decisions about their future. We developed these outcomes with CAN Invest and they're measured using rigorously and robustly tested scales and questions. Connected Forces aligns with Brightside's mission, and we measured human capital, our Theory of Change outcome focused on learning specific knowledge and skills.

In the UK, access to opportunities is more determined by where a person grew up or what their parents do than what they want to do. For a young person to reach their potential, guidance is crucial. A 2021 UCAS<sup>1</sup> report found that two in five students believed that more information would have led to making better choices.

At the beginning of Connected Forces, participants were asked their reason for participating in programme. The quotes below show participants' reasons for seeking guidance and support for their next steps:

**“Some more friends that are going through the same thing as me and more support when needed.”**

**“Advice on life at University being an Armed forces child.”**

**“Meet some new people with similar experiences particularly about coping with concerns about deployed family members. Also, it would be nice to hear information about Uni/career options from people closer to me in age.”**

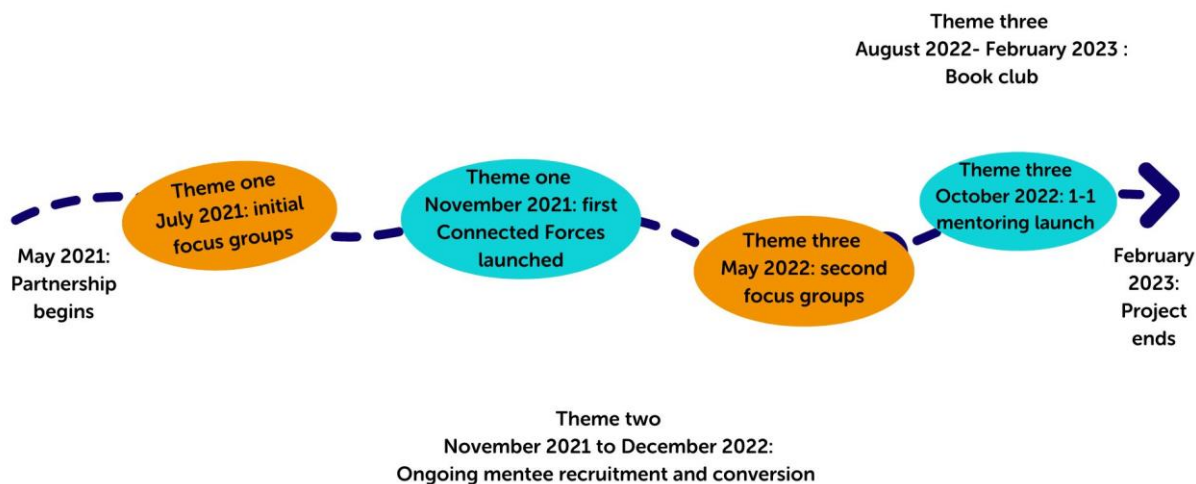
The quotes above show the need for Connected Forces and links to the overall project aim of participants building their confidence about the future and reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation.

## Activities and delivery

To demonstrate the overview of project design and delivery, the below timeline shows key milestones that is then broken down into three themes we'll explore throughout the report:

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<sup>1</sup> *Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?* UCAS, March 2021.



### Theme one: the first version of Connected Forces

Brightside ran two focus groups in July 2021 to inform project design. One focus group had three 16- to 18-year-olds, the target age group for Connected Forces, and the other had four 19- to 23-year-olds in higher education. The focus groups asked participants to reflect on what support they may have needed when they were younger. From these focus groups, we recommended setting up Connected Forces using the Communities functionality and group chats on the Brightside platform to support those from Armed Forces families. To learn more about the findings from these focus groups, please refer to the individual report.

In November 2021, we launched the first iteration of Connected Forces. Three student ambassadors from Armed Forces families joined the project to lead the topics. The first version had three channels, each offering a different way to create a community and support participants:

#### 1. Ask the Expert

We launched Ask the Expert to create a space where individual experts could join the platform temporarily and answer participant questions on specific future pathways. We scheduled three experts across the project: an outreach manager at a university, a Communications Officer from the UniConnect programme, and a Widening Participation Officer at a university. No questions were asked, so no experts answered questions.

#### 2. Communities

We used Communities, a topic-based forum, where participants and student ambassadors could both post. These topics were designed to be student ambassador-led and focus on careers, education, and dealing with challenges when being from an Armed Forces family.

This space was created to allow participants to have a space where they can communicate with older role models (i.e., student ambassadors).

### 3. Group chats

The purpose of these was to create a social space for participants. This is different from Communities as it was planned to be for participants only and not student ambassadors. Participants were placed into group chats based on age with other participants. This was done due to feedback from focus groups in May 2021, which indicated that group chats would be helpful for young people to message each other like they do with their friends, which was based on a finding from the focus groups in May 2021.

Originally, we planned a launch event in November 2021 during which all participants who were recruited through SCiP Alliance partners would join the platform. However, due to slow recruitment, the participants joined the platform gradually. Two live sessions were organised, but no participants attended. Instead, ongoing recruitment ran from November 2021 to December 2022, so participants could join the platform directly from recruitment materials (flyers and videos) and watch a short induction video when on the platform.

To ensure participants were from Armed Forces families, we explicitly asked in the baseline survey. Once participants had completed the survey and it was confirmed they were part of an Armed Forces family, they were invited to the platform. The baseline survey proved to be a barrier to participants, but it ensured requirements for participation were met. This is discussed further in the findings section of the report.

#### Theme two: adapting project design to encourage engagement

As Connected Forces was a pilot project, we made changes to the project while it was live to encourage conversion and engagement. In February 2022, recruitment was low with only 13 sign-ups, and no participants had engaged with Communities, so we closed the Communities feature. Participants were instead added to an 'Introduce yourself' group chat with student ambassadors to encourage conversations and build a community. Group chats were also made for different participant year groups; however, no mentees engaged with these. The engagement for the 'Introduce yourself' group chat is discussed further in the Findings section of this report.

#### Theme three: piloting new ideas

In May 2022, we ran two more focus groups to better understand young peoples' opinions on the current recruitment materials and the online platform to help improve recruitment and conversion. In total, 14 people aged 16 to 19 from Armed Forces families attended these focus groups. These 14 participants were not current participants on Connected Forces and were rewarded for attending with a gift voucher. Focus group participants gave positive feedback surrounding recruitment materials and suggested hosting more events and including one-to-one mentoring, so participants could also talk to a student ambassador one-on-one.



From these focus groups, four participants joined the Connected Forces project, and three sent messages into the 'Introduce yourself' group chat. This suggests that participants who attended live events were more likely to join the platform, but it is a challenge to get these participants to attend the events initially. Future projects could consider use incentives to encourage participants to attend live events. Additionally, it should be considered how to overcome the challenge of getting targeted students to events. Across the Brightside portfolio, we see success when schools bring students to live events. This suggests future projects should aim to build connections with schools and organisations that are aware of their students from Armed Forces families who can help students attend live events and inspire them to join the opportunity.

In August 2022, SCiP and Reading Force (a charity passionate about using books to bring Forces children and families closer together) set up two book clubs based on focus group findings; participants on the platform could opt into the book club and be sent a book. Group chats were made for participants to discuss their thoughts on the books to build a community around similar interests. Engagement for the book club group chats is discussed further in the findings each of this report.

In October 2022, we aimed to launch one-to-one mentoring so that participants would have the opportunity to join another project on the Brightside platform alongside Connected Forces. Participants would be matched with a mentor where they could have one-to-one conversations about future pathways and higher education. This opportunity was given to those already on Connected Forces; however, no participants joined the mentoring project despite being a recommendation from focus group participants.

## Methodology

This section provides an overview of the data sources, collection tools, and methods of data analysis employed to evaluate Connected Forces.

### Data sources and collection tools

To evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and identify areas of potential improvement or replication, we used the following data sources and collection tools:

- We measure engagement through quantitative data pulled from the online mentoring platform, which shows number of messages sent and received by participants and engagement trends
- We measure the impact of the project through baseline and exit surveys, completed by participants, that address project-specific and Theory of Change outcomes
- We use conversational data and open-text responses from surveys throughout the evaluation to better understand how and why certain outcomes were achieved for participants
- We measure the quality of the mentoring experience for participants through questions on the exit surveys and includes qualitative responses

## Data analysis

Of the 23 participants who were eligible to take part in the project, three completed the exit survey at the end of the project (a response rate of 13%). This low response rate was expected as only nine participants (45%) sent a message into the group chats. It should be noted that the participants were incentivised to complete the exit surveys with a £5 voucher due to low engagement with the project. To also encourage survey completion, the exit survey was made shorter, and we removed the aims that were no longer appropriate.

In a typical evaluation, we measure the impact of the project through baseline and exit surveys and analyse it at both a project and individual level. Since Connected Forces was a smaller-scale project, there is not enough survey data to draw conclusions about the quality or impact of the project for the rest of the cohort. We have chosen a narrative case study format for this evaluation to explore the individual journeys of the three participants that completed both entry and exit surveys. Throughout the evaluation, we will refer to them as Participants A, B, and C. While the limited sample size prevents us from drawing definitive conclusions about the programme's impact, the available data offers valuable insights into participants' experiences and suggests areas for improvement in future iterations.

## Findings

This section provides an overview of all engagement, impact, and quality findings from the data sources outlined in the Methodology section above.

### Engagement

The table below shows the number of participants who signed up, met the requirements for the project, and didn't meet the requirements for the project:

|                                                                               |    |                                                                   |    |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-----|
| <b>Total number signed up</b><br>(created accounts on the mentoring platform) | 82 | <b>Total in group chats ('Introduce yourself' and book clubs)</b> | 23 | 28% |
|                                                                               |    | <b>Total who joined that didn't meet requirement</b>              | 7  | 9%  |

Participants accessed the sign-up information for the project from the recruitment materials, which directed them to sign up to the Brightside platform. They then had to complete the baseline survey to confirm that they were from an Armed Forces family.

82 participants signed up from these recruitment materials, and 30 participants completed the baseline survey (a 37% response rate). Seven participants who completed the survey didn't meet the requirements, and six of these were because they were over the age of 19. 23 did meet the requirements and were added to all channels. This shows that the surveys were needed to ensure the correct target audience were being added to group chats; however, the small proportion of participants completing the survey suggests it created a challenge for conversion. Future projects should consider different ways to confirm this. For example, two baseline surveys could be used. One could be a short, one question survey, that asks them to confirm they are from an Armed Forces family, and the other then collecting impact data. The second survey could be administered once participants had started to engage with the group chats.

In the 'Introduce yourself' group chat, 20 participants were added. The table below shows the engagement of participants in that group chat:

| Number of messages sent by participants in 'Introduce yourself' group chat |             |             |             |             |              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                                                                            | 1+ messages | 2+ messages | 3+ messages | 5+ messages | 10+ messages |
| No. of participants                                                        | 9           | 6           | 5           | 4           | 1            |
| % of participants                                                          | 45%         | 30%         | 25%         | 20%         | 5%           |

Overall, 50 messages were sent into the 'Introduce yourself' group chat by nine participants. Five of these participants went onto send three messages, and one sent ten or more messages. The conversation excerpts below show that participants used the 'Introduce yourself' group chat to talk about qualifications and university and to check in with each other, which aligns to the aims of the project:

**“Oh nice! Have fun!! What are you gonna study?”**

**“I have applied for the navy police, so hopefully its successful. But if not then I would like to be a sports physio.”**

**“How did they go?”**

**“Well done on the exams and that's going to be a long wait, hopefully it goes well.”**

Due to the length of the project, we expected that engagement with the group chat may fluctuate throughout. When looking at the 'Introduce yourself' group chat, 24 messages (48% of total messages from participants) were sent by participants from 18 May to 25 May 2022.

On 18 May, a focus group was run where four participants joined the platform, and three of them started messaging in the group chat. This suggests that onboarding participants and adding them to the group chat at the same time helped to boost engagement in the group chat. This supports the learning that getting participants recruited and onboarded onto the platform in a live session at the same time could increase momentum of the group chats as participants would all start messaging at the same time.

For the 11 participants that did not message in the 'Introduce yourself' group chat, five participants did not log back into the platform after signing up and completing the survey. To encourage engagement on the platform, Brightside used a range of methods:

- Introducing each participant to the group chat when added to encourage peers to welcome them

- Reminders to participants on the platform, via email and phone, about the project and how to log in
- Promoting live Zoom events for Armed Forces families
- Updating the platform with relevant resources (e.g., book club information, higher education resources)

In February 2022, 18 participants were phoned to understand why they weren't engaging with the platform. Four answered, and two participants did not know what the project was. One participant said:

**“If someone else started convo it would be better.”**

Future projects should consider other ways to remind participants to log back into the platform and remind them what the project is. This could include making the schools/colleges aware they are taking part in the project, so they can help encourage participation. Additionally, letters could be sent to the school and participants' families to strengthened the support network.

The other six participants who did not send a message did log back in after joining the platform and completing the survey. They may have decided not to engage with the group chat if a message hadn't been sent for a while by their peers, which again supports the recommendation of all participants joining at the same time. This is supported by the participant feedback from the phone calls above.

The three student ambassadors in the group chat also helped guide the conversation with participants, which can be seen from the quotes below:

**“Hi everyone! Great to meet you and looking forward to getting started 😊 I'm thinking of setting up a thread on being a service child at university - did you guys both go to uni too? Maybe we could all share our experiences?”**

**“It's been a relatively good week, but very busy! Had a lot of things to sort out, however looking forward to the weekend and my day off next week!! Any plans for the weekend? I imagine you will be celebrating the end of your exam period! 😊”**

**“Oh very interesting \*participant name\*, a combination of coursework, sports-based and fashion! What do you want to do in the future career wise?”**

**“If you and any of your friends from an Armed Forces family are bookworms, this could be a great activity to take part in! This could be a great opportunity to also meet new people from a similar background who share common interests and have fun! If you're looking for a new hobby or a way to branch out- this could be for you 😊”**

All three student ambassadors sent at least one message in the 'Introduce yourself' group chat. One student ambassador took a more leading role from April 2022 and sent 12 messages in total to the group chat. Student ambassadors were encouraged to send messages into the group chats frequently and respond to fellow student ambassador messages to create a community feel, however due to low participant engagement, student ambassadors may have been demotivated to message.

Nine participants joined the two book club group chats (six in book club one and three in book club two). Three of these participants joined the platform solely for book club and were not added to the 'Introduce yourself' group chat. The table below shows the engagement of participants in the book club group chat:

Two participants sent messages in the book club chats. In book club one, one participant sent four messages, and in book club two, one participant sent one message. Book clubs were facilitated by SCiP, and a coordinator posted discussion questions and Zoom links for the books club in this chat. Quotes from the participants can be seen below:

**"Hi there!"**

**"So far it's really interesting!! I love the different POVs."**

As only one participant messaged per group, this may explain the low engagement as none of their peers replied. The seven participants not sending messages into the book club group chat may again be because participants don't feel confident posting if not many of their peers are. This again supports the learning that a group chat may be more engaged with more participants.

### Impact

The three participants that completed both the entry and exit survey were all from Year 11. The questions in the entry and exit surveys focused on project-specific questions, their next steps, human capital, and feedback about the project. These participant responses have been presented in a case study format to understand their individual journeys.

Project-specific questions asked in the entry and exit were:

- I think that my family's Armed Forces background has given me useful skills and experiences for the future
- I can describe what some of these skills and experiences are
- I am confident that I could effectively refer to these skills in future job or education applications

### Participant A

Participant A joined the project in May 2022 after attending one of the May focus groups and sent 11 messages into the 'Introduce yourself' group chat. Between the baseline and exit survey, Participant A moved from 'agreeing' to 'strongly agreeing' that they think that their family's Armed Forces background has given them useful skills and experiences for the

future, that they can describe what some of these skills and experiences are, and that they are confident that they could effectively refer to these skills in future job or education applications.

When asked in the exit survey what they discussed on the platform, Participant A said:

**“We discussed the affects being in the forces had on our feelings which was honestly hard to talk about at first but it actually made me feel a lot better. Talked about general life and future paths and ideas wanted to take, creating new ideas for me and resuming me my path ways were actually okay when I was nervous to discuss.”**

Participant A went from being ‘quite confident’ that university was their most likely next step in the baseline survey, to being ‘extremely confident’ in the exit survey. They also said ‘yes’ to knowing how to get qualifications and training needed to get a job they want in both baseline and exit surveys. The quote below shows Connected Forces helped to build participants’ confidence in their next steps:

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

In Participant A’s baseline survey when being asked what they are hoping to gain from the project, they said: **“New friends, new knowledge, a safe place.”**

When looking at Participant A’s conversations on the platform, we can see they used the group chat to speak to other participants about exams and coursework, which shows how the platform was able to support the participant to make new friends and gain new knowledge:

**“Thank you! How has your week been?”**

**“My last exam was biology today and I am so happy that I am finished 😊 My weekend will be relaxation.”**

**“What coursework subjects do you take? Or have done?”**

**“Oooh they both sound pretty cool, after school I want to study archeology.”**

Participant B

Participant B joined the project in July 2022 and said they had heard about the opportunity through their parent. Participant B was a member of the ‘Introduce yourself’ group chat and group chat for book club one. In these group chats, they sent 10 messages (six in ‘Introduce yourself’, four in ‘Book club one’).

Between the baseline and exit survey, Participant B moved from agreeing to strongly agreeing that they think that their family's Armed Forces background has given them useful skills and experiences for the future. They moved from ‘disagreeing’ to ‘agreeing’ to be able

to describe what some of these skills and experiences are, and from disagreeing to strongly agreeing that they are confident that they could effectively refer to these skills in future job or education applications.

In Participant B's baseline survey when being asked what they are hoping to gain from the project, they said: **"Just getting to know more people from forces families who might have similar interests."**

Like Participant A, Participant B went from being 'quite confident' that university was their most likely next step in the baseline survey, to being 'extremely confident' in the exit survey. They also said 'yes' to knowing how to get qualifications and training needed to get a job they want in both baseline and exit surveys. The quotes below show the group chat was able to help Participant B engage in conversation with other participants about university:

**"Which Uni are you going to [participant name]?"**

**"Oh nice! Have fun!! What are you gonna study?"**

The exit survey comments from Participant B below suggests they met people from Armed Forces families with similar interests:

**"I enjoyed the connections that I made with other military kids"**

**"I really enjoyed the book club as I felt connected to people with similar interests and the books we read were really interesting and different"**

Participant C

Participant C joined the project in May 2022 after attending one of the May focus groups and sent four messages into the 'Introduce yourself' group chat.

Between the baseline and exit survey, Participant C 'strongly agreed' in both baseline and exit that they think that their family's Armed Forces background has given them useful skills and experiences for the future. Participant C 'agreed' in both baseline and exit that they can describe what some of these skills and experiences are. Like Participant A and Participant B, they recorded positive change (went from agreeing in baseline to strongly agreeing in exit) that they are confident that they could effectively refer to these skills in future job or education applications, which suggests this is a strength of the project.

Like Participant A and Participant B, Participant C went from being 'quite confident' that university was their most likely next step in the baseline survey, to being 'extremely confident' in the exit survey. They also said 'yes' to knowing how to get qualifications and training needed to get a job they want in both baseline and exit surveys. The quotes below from the exit survey and Participant C's messages on the platform support the group chat was used to discuss higher education options:

**"Most of our chats were about the academic side of school and getting to know other people a little bit about them from around the country."**

**“Oh very nice I want to do physiotherapy when I leave school 😊”**

In Participant C’s baseline survey when we asked what they are hoping to gain from the project, they said: **“To meet new people that have been/or are going through the same things as me.”**

In their exit survey, when we asked what they enjoyed about the Connected Forces project, Participant C said:

**“Seeing a different type of platform where it’s somewhere where forces children can talk about school and associate with people that I’ve a similar background.”**

All three participants were also asked if they thought a targeted platform for students from Armed Forces families is needed. The responses below show these participants do think there is a need for projects like this:

**Participant A: “Honestly when first starting this is thought hmmm no but after first hand experiencing it I would definitely say yes. It allows you to feel normal and part of a community who understands your thoughts and feelings”**

**Participant B: “Absolutely- it can be isolating to be a military child so it’s nice to have connections to other people in the same situation”**

**Participant C: “Yes I think for me I don’t feel it as much anyway because I’m in a forces background school but when you’re in a school and there’s not many people with forces families it is hard to speak about it if someone doesn’t really understand being a forces child so platforms like this are nice as it allows people to be open and speak to children of forces parents that can relate and nah know the feeling of what they are going through”**

### Quality

All three participants strongly agreed that they enjoyed the Connected Forces project and they all agreed that they got on with the people in their group chat. Participants A and B agreed they learned new things through conversations with others on the platform, and Participant C disagreed with this. When looking into Participant C’s responses further, when asked to expand on what they liked/disliked about the project they said the below:

**“I liked the chatting platform but after the first few weeks the chat had stopped and not many people were socialising anymore which I found a shame but it was good while it lasted.”**

This quote again supports the learning that more engagement from participants is needed to encourage other participants to engage. This could be done by having one main launch period, rather than ongoing recruitment, to create momentum. Another learning could be that expecting participants to engage regularly throughout the whole project is unlikely, and instead shorter projects should be run with a main launch period. As one aim is for



participants to feel they have a community, participants could be encouraged to share details at the end of the project to stay in contact with each other.

This learning can be further supported by other participant comments in the exit survey:

**“If there was more people having conversations on it as well as it felt a bit awkward at first just like I was shy.”**

**“If other people made an effort to communicate.”**

Participants A and B strongly agreed that the group chats made them feel more connected to others from Armed Forces families, and Participant C agreed to this. This speaks to the aim of the project to build a sense of belonging to the community of Armed Forces families, and the quotes below support this:

**“Connected forces is a chance for military kids to feel less isolated in the unique situations they find themselves in.”**

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

The participants were asked how useful different channels of Connected Forces were:

| Group chats   | Response        |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Participant A | Very useful     |
| Participant B | Somewhat useful |
| Participant C | Somewhat useful |

| Attending a webinar | Response        |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Participant A       | Somewhat useful |
| Participant B       | Somewhat useful |
| Participant C       | Did not use     |

| Joining a Reading Force book club | Response         |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Participant A                     | Did not use      |
| Participant B                     | Extremely useful |
| Participant C                     | Did not use      |

| Using platform resources (Bright Knowledge or other resources posted on the platform) | Response |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|

|               |             |
|---------------|-------------|
| Participant A | Very useful |
| Participant B | Very useful |
| Participant C | Very useful |

All three participants said using platform resources like Bright Knowledge (a resource section on the Brightside platform with offers articles on higher education and jobs) were very useful. This is interesting and reminds us that participants may be impacted by the project without engaging in the group chats.

The quote below from a participant demonstrates that webinars and group chats were useful:

**“I recalled enjoyed the access I had through the platform to connect and talk to people who had had the same journey's as me and could connect with me on a level people who don't understand what it's like being in a forced family could. I found the webinars to be fun and actually really useful, something different which had the best possible outcome. I have met new people, bonded and ultimately created so many new friends from the project, it's been a truly insightful experience.”**

Out of the three student ambassadors, one student ambassador completed the student ambassador survey. They strongly agreed to enjoying the project and that they knew where to go with extra questions when on the Brightside platform. They agreed to thinking it was a useful intervention for participants, their confidence talking to young people has increased, they learnt new skills, and they will include this experience on their CVs/job applications.

The student ambassador disagreed to feeling like they made a difference when messaging in the group chat, which may be explained due to the lower engagement in the chats. As this was a pilot project, these learnings can be used to set expectations for future projects that use student ambassadors to facilitate discussions with participants.

When asked how to improve the project, this student ambassador said the below. These ideas could be used in future projects:

**“Implement its use of it on social media, more fun activities/ challenges so participants can interact with the platform more, more push through social media and possible reminders/nudges to use the website as you would have to remember to do so yourself.”**

They also provided some ideas for how to engage group chats:

**“Icebreakers for participants and mentors, participants asking more questions, quizzes and activities for ambassadors and participants.”**

## Conclusion and learnings

### Engagement

82 participants signed up for the Connected Forces project, and 23 were added to the group chats (28% conversion rate). 52 out of the 82 participants did not complete the survey, and seven of the 82 participants did not meet the eligibility criteria. Nine participants sent at least one message into the 'Introduce yourself' group chat, and two participants messaged in the book club group chats. Although there wasn't high engagement with the group chats, messages showed participants checking in with each other, which aligns with the aim to build a sense of community. Engagement in the 'Introduce yourself' group chat increased after focus groups.

Learnings around engagement are:

- Create clearer recruitment process to reduce people signing up who aren't eligible
- Surveys are a barrier to conversion; future projects should consider different ways to confirm participants are from Armed Forces families without a compulsory survey
- Recruit participants at the same time and have one launch event where all participants join the platform at the same time could help engagement by building momentum and encouraging continued engagement throughout
- Participants were motivated to engage with focus groups and exit surveys through monetary incentives
- Participants need to be reminded in other ways to log back into the platform in addition to reminders from Brightside, including making schools/colleges aware they are taking part in the project so they can encourage participation

### Impact

The three participants who completed the baseline and exit survey all recorded a positive change in their confidence to refer to skills their Armed Forces background has given them when completing future job or education applications. All three participants went from being quite confident that university was their most likely next step in the baseline survey, to being extremely confident in the exit survey. Two participants also agree that their family's Armed Forces background has given them useful skills and experiences for the future, and that they can articulate what these skills and experience are.

Learnings around Impact are:

- All participants agreed that a targeted platform for students from Armed Forces families is needed; future projects supporting this target group should be continued

### Quality

Participants A and B strongly agreed that the group chats made them feel more connected to others from Armed Forces families, and Participant C agreed to this. This speaks to the aim of the project to build a sense of belonging to the community of Armed Forces families.

Learnings around quality are:

- Set expectations for student ambassadors around participants' engagement

## Appendix A

Brightside's quality and impact framework was developed with CAN Invest, a leading social impact advisor for UK charity, social enterprise, and other social-purpose organisations. Brightside's Theory of Change outcomes are measured through baseline and exit surveys for participants, and quality is measured through exit surveys for participants and mentors. The following Theory of Change outcomes were used in this project to measure impact of mentoring on confident and informed decision-making:

| Outcome                | Question                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Answer Options                                                                                                                                | Source                                                                    |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Human capital</b>   | Do you know how to go about getting the qualifications or training you need to get the job you want?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Yes / No / Not Sure                                                                                                                           | Based on the LSYPE (Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) survey |
| <b>Decision-making</b> | (Participants are asked to select their most likely next step (e.g. Go to university, start an apprenticeship etc) and then a follow-up question):<br>How confident are you that this decision is right for you?<br>(exit survey only): How much of this decision was because of your involvement with the Brightside programme rather than other people or influences? | Extremely confident / Quite confident / Not very confident / Not at all confident / I don't know<br>None / Some / A lot / Almost entirely/All | Developed by CAN Invest and Brightside                                    |

The following quality questions were designed to indicate the quality of the mentor and participant experience:

| Quality Indicator                                         | Question                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Answer Options                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Quality of the mentoring experience (participants)</b> | I got on with the people in my group<br>Conversations with others on the platform helped me feel optimistic about the future<br>I learned new things through conversations with others on the platform<br>I have been able to keep in touch with others who no longer live close by<br>All things considered, I enjoyed the Connected Forces programme | Strongly Agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree |
| <b>Quality of the mentoring experience (mentors)</b>      | I felt like I made a difference when messaging in the group chat<br>I understood the mentees' needs<br>I enjoyed taking part in this project                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Strongly Agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree |

|  |                                                               |  |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------|--|
|  | I thought this was a useful intervention for the participants |  |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------|--|