

Living in Our Shoes Revisited

Walker, Janet; Misca, Gabriela

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Living in Our Shoes

Revisited

Phase One Report

January 2026



Living in Our Shoes Revisited

Phase One Report

Professor Janet Walker OBE

Newcastle University

Dr Gabriela Misca

University of Birmingham

January 2026

Research Project:

The Impact of "Living in Our Shoes" Five Years On:
Evaluating Progress and Determining Priorities for Meeting the Needs
of Armed Forces Families Going Forward

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The Review Team

The authors of this report¹:

Professor Janet Walker OBE FAcSS FRSA is Emeritus Professor of Family Policy at Newcastle University, UK. She was previously the Director of the Newcastle Centre for Family Studies where she led over 50 multi-disciplinary studies relating to all aspects of family life, including marriage and divorce, domestic abuse and family support. Many studies were commissioned by government departments, including the MOD, relating to policy evaluation and reform. Janet was appointed as the Chair of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households in 2022 which published its report, *'Love Matters'* in 2023. Janet has received several international awards for her contribution to family policy reform. She is a trustee of the Naval Families Federation.

Dr Gabriela Misca PhD CPsychol AFBPS Csci is faculty member at the University of Birmingham, UK and her 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. At the University of Birmingham, she is leading the development of the "Birmingham Military, Families and Community" interdisciplinary research network, situated at the intersection of policy, research and practice around supporting members of the Armed Forces community.

Janet and Gabriela worked together as Lead and Research Adviser respectively, on the first independent review commissioned by the MOD into understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families. They co-authored the *Living in Our Shoes* (2020) report which influenced the development of the UK Armed Forces Family Strategy (2022–2032), to which they have been Independent Advisers. In recognition of their research into Armed Forces families and its impact, they received the Special Award for FiMpacT from Forces in Mind Trust in 2021.

Phase One project team:

Professor Janet Walker OBE leads the direction and execution of the project, reporting and liaising with key stakeholders.

Dr Gabriela Misca is the Principal Investigator and award holder with overall responsibility for the planning, design and management of the research.

Mr Peter Davis OBE was a member of the project team during Phase One until Sept 2025 as consultant policy advisor.

CRedit² contributor statement:

Walker: Lead on Conceptualization, Formal analysis; Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; Contribution to all other aspects of the project.

Misca: Lead on Investigation, Methodology, Data curation and Visualization, Analysis, Resources, Project Management and Funding; Contribution to all other aspects of the project.

Davis: Contribution to Investigation, Data curation, Visualization, Formal Analysis and Writing – initial draft.

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¹ Authorship of the report has been established in line with current guidance on [Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work](#)

² Established using the [CRedit Taxonomy](#)

Disclaimer:

All the views expressed, and the recommendations put forward in this report are those of the authors. The views are completely independent of Forces in Mind Trust, the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces and the Governments of the UK. Any factual errors contained in the report are those of the authors.

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Introduction

Living in Our Shoes Revisited

In 2020, the 'Living in Our Shoes' review³ considered the needs of UK Armed Forces families and drew attention to the challenges they experience. The review made 110 recommendations to address the concerns raised. For many years, Defence continuous attitude surveys⁴ have drawn attention to dissatisfaction with Service life which is evidenced in a recruitment and retention crisis. The most common reason given for the decision to leave the military is the impact of Service life on family life. While these surveys are limited in their scope, they are nevertheless a barometer of the mood within the military.

In autumn 2024 Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) funded a new review, 'Living in Our Shoes – Revisited'. This study is designed to consider the changes and progress since 2020 to meet the needs of Armed Forces families and to generate robust up-to-date evidence which will assist policy-makers in central, devolved and local government, and all those working with UK Armed Forces personnel and their families.

Living in Our Shoes Revisited is being undertaken at a time of significant change within Defence. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is currently taking forward the recommendations of the Strategic Defence Review 2025⁵ aimed at increasing the Armed Forces' readiness to fight, and has recently embarked on a significant programme of reform of its military and administrative structures. As part of these developments, new more flexible career pathways for Service personnel are under consideration to increase the attractions of a Service career. At the same time, the Government is making arrangements to extend the legal duty relating to the Armed Forces Covenant and to establish the role of the new Armed Forces Commissioner, a statutory appointment with the power to investigate welfare issues relating to Service life.

These changes in Defence are happening at a time of increasing geo-political uncertainty and a deteriorating security climate. There are arguably greater challenges for deterrence and defence than at any time since the end of the Cold War, so it is inevitable that families will feel the pressures of Service life more acutely. Understanding and meeting their needs is even more important.

The Aims and Objectives of the Study

'Living in Our Shoes Revisited' aims to:

- highlight the areas where positive action has been taken to meet the needs of Armed Forces families since the publication of *Living in Our Shoes* in 2020
- indicate those areas where the needs identified have not been met
- offer robust evidence on how and where progress needs to be accelerated
- make recommendations to support, guide and influence the development of relevant Armed Forces people policies
- guide the critical actions and policy development required from central, devolved and local government and the three single Services to improve the lives of Armed Forces families, which can then support both recruitment and retention, and contribute to a smooth transition out of the military
- offer the third sector and other organisations working with the Armed Forces community updated knowledge to help them revise and shape their own delivery strategies and improve their effectiveness in supporting military families, enabling them to feel valued and committed to serve the nation
- emphasise the critical importance of policy makers focusing on outcomes and measuring impact where this is feasible, offering ideas and strategies to support such an approach.

3 Walker, J., Selous, A., and Misca, G., (2020) *Living in Our Shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families*, MOD; see also *Living in Our Shoes Revisited: Briefings One, Two and Three*

4 AFCAS and FamCAS 2024 and 2025

5 *The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad*, GOV.UK



The overall objective is to offer a constructive and timely contribution to the thinking that underpins the changes being embarked upon in this new era for Defence. Our research approach is iterative. We share our learning through regular collaboration with the MOD, FiMT and the three single Services, and benefit from discussions with the three Families Federations and members of our expert Advisory Group.⁶ Briefings are available on the FiMT website⁷ and we welcome discussion on these and any other issues relevant to our study.⁸

Phase One – Assessing Progress and the Current Position

The study is being undertaken in two phases. The focus in Phase One was on reviewing the progress made to meet the needs of Armed Forces families since 2020 by:

- mapping progress at the macro level with implementation of the recommendations in *Living in Our Shoes*, identifying gaps and emerging priorities, and indicating the need for greater or lesser urgency in relation to implementation
- assessing in high level terms, the achievements and impact of interventions of government, the three single Services, and the third sector since the publication of ‘*Living in Our Shoes*’
- considering the changes in the Defence context (international, political, and economic) and the implications for meeting the needs of the Armed Forces community
- determining the effectiveness of the mechanisms that government has developed to drive change across the Armed Forces families agenda since 2020, specifically in respect of the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032⁹
- making recommendations to support, guide and influence the development of relevant Armed Forces people policies.

During Phase One evidence has been drawn from:

- conversations with key members of the three single Services, including the Service Chiefs, and the Chief of Defence People and his team
- a conversation with Al Carns MP, Minister for Veterans and People (MinVP) (now Minister for the Armed Forces)
- meetings to gather evidence with members of the three single Services
- regular liaison with officials in the MOD Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team
- conversations with officials in other government departments and the devolved administrations
- analysis of documents provided by the MOD and open source material
- meetings with the three Armed Forces Families Federations; charities who support the Armed Forces community; and academics engaged in research with the Armed Forces
- written submissions submitted by stakeholders
- reviewing funding decisions relating to projects managed under the auspices of the Armed Forces Families Fund
- liaison with and documents from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust
- attendance at meetings of the COBSEO¹⁰ Children’s Cluster and at other conferences
- online submissions from Armed Forces charities and schools, primarily those with significant numbers of pupils with a parent currently serving in the Armed Forces.

6 For the names of members, see [FiMT Advisory Group](#)

7 [FiMT briefings](#)

8 To contact the [Living in Our Shoes Revisited team](#)

9 [Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032](#), MOD

10 The Confederation of Service Charities



Evidence from Military Charities

Charities who support Armed Forces families, particularly those which contributed to the original *Living in Our Shoes* review, were invited to provide their experience via an online questionnaire about the extent to which the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations have been implemented and the role and achievements of the Armed Forces Families Strategy; and to share their current concerns in respect of addressing the needs of and providing support to Armed Forces families. Detailed submissions were received from 21 charities with a broad spectrum of service provision as illustrated in Figure 1. These charities work with a wide range of other organisations as illustrated in Figure 2.

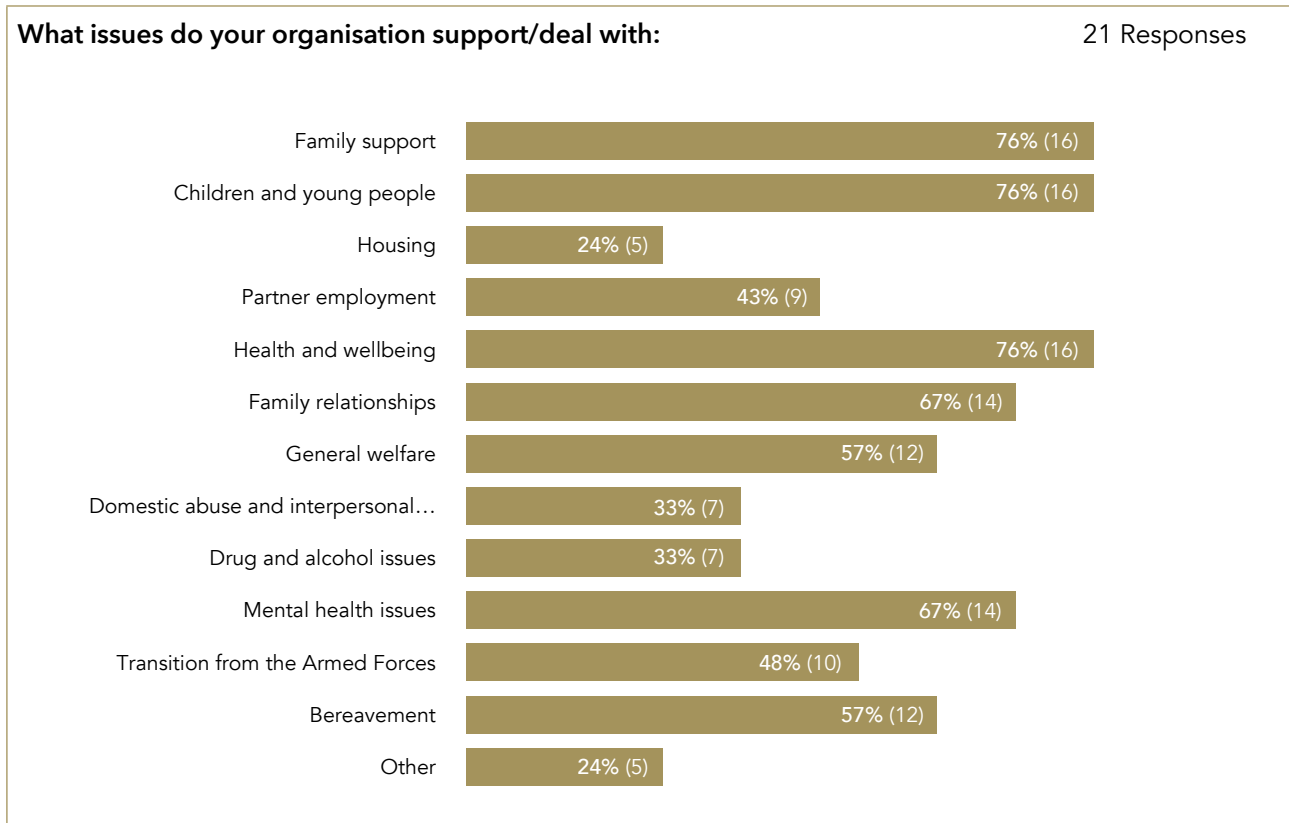


Figure 1: The Range of Issues Supported by the Charities

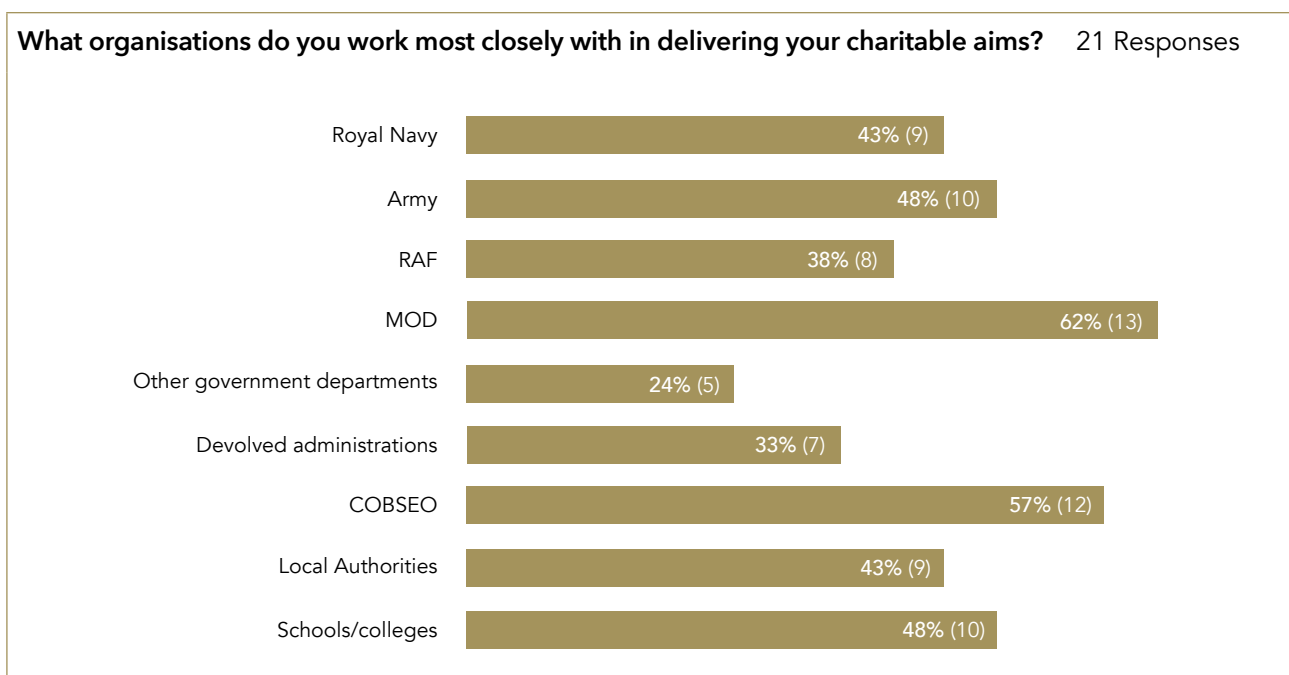


Figure 2. Organisations with which the Charities Work



Evidence from Schools

Similar questions were designed to gather information from schools with pupils from Armed Forces families. The aims were twofold: the first aim was to learn from their experiences about changes that have been made following the publication of *Living in Our Shoes* and the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032 in respect of the education and support of Armed Forces children; and the second aim was to understand schools' current concerns in respect of Service children's education. Personal invitations were sent to schools who had contributed to the *Living in Our Shoes* review. In addition, questions were distributed on our behalf across the four nations of the UK as follows:

- In Wales via the SSCE (Supporting Service Children in Education) Cymru newsletter
- in Scotland, via local authorities leaders cascading the request to targeted schools, head teachers and staff, in their areas; and directly to around 50 schools (primary and secondary)
- in Northern Ireland, via targeted schools
- in England, via SCISS (Service Children in State Schools)

Unfortunately, the study team had no control over the distribution of the invitation except to those schools which received personal invitations. We do not know whether or how many other schools received the invitation, and we had no way to follow up with them. Detailed responses were received from 12 schools, offering an insight into their concerns. This insight was supplemented by the evidence obtained from conversations with head teachers and others who had contributed to *Living in Our Shoes*.

Phase Two - Looking Forward: Investigating Opportunities for People Policy within Defence Reform

Phase Two will explore in more depth the evidence from Phase One which has identified a need for change and opportunities to develop a transformational, more integrated, One Defence approach to meet the needs of Armed Forces personnel and their families across the whole Armed Forces community.

Working collaboratively with MOD, MInVP, the three single Services, the Families Federations and other key stakeholders, the focus will be on:

- in-depth evaluation of the priorities and mechanisms for transformation and integration of families policy identified in Phase One
- accumulating new evidence from members of the whole Armed Forces community and those working to support them, to understand families' needs as military careers change, in order to inform people policy integration
- gaining a deeper understanding of the disadvantage different families face at different times and in different contexts
- determining the actions needed by central, devolved and local government, the three single Services, and others, including the third sector, to mitigate disadvantage
- considering the mechanisms for breaking down barriers between the Armed Forces and Society
- identifying examples of best practice to support the whole Armed Forces community, including international benchmarking
- developing recommendations which inform, support and guide the implementation of comprehensive people policies in Defence which are data-driven and evidence-led.

Two Delphi panels will contribute to the learning in Phase Two:

- Panel One: consisting of high-level key stakeholders
- Panel Two: consisting of experts, including experts by experience

The final *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* report is due in 2027.



This Phase One Report

This report presents the findings from Phase One of the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* review. A Summary of this Phase One Report is also available.¹¹

The evidence presented was collected in the period up to July 2025. During summer 2025, while preparing the Phase One report, the findings and emerging recommendations were shared with MinVP (Al Carns MP until September 2025), MOD officials, the Service Chiefs and people policy leads, Chief of Defence People, FiMT, the three Families Federations and Members of our Advisory Group.¹² This enabled informed discussion about the evidence being presented in the Phase One report, and key stakeholders to give initial reactions to the recommendations for change.

The evidence is presented in the following six chapters:

Chapter One: Setting the Context.

Chapter Two: Tracing the Development of Families Policy within Defence

Chapter Three: Growing Up in the Armed Forces

Chapter Four: Not Just a Partner: Careers, Employment and Childcare

Chapter Five: Looking After Military Families: Housing, Health and Wellbeing

Chapters Three to Five assess the progress made since 2020 in meeting the identified needs of Armed Forces personnel and their families, highlight the continuing challenges, and consider the opportunities for change heralded by Defence Reform and the Strategic Defence Review 2025.

Chapter Six: Assessing the Evidence: A New Era for Families Policy in Defence

Chapter Six brings the Phase One evidence together and offers high-level recommendations for addressing the identified challenges and delivering change.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to all those who contributed to Phase One, for their enthusiasm for this review and their willingness to share their experiences and concerns, and for giving generously of their time. In addition, our sincere thanks go to four key groups: members of the three single services and especially the First Sea Lord, Chief of the General Staff, Chief of the Air Staff and Chief of Defence People; the Head of MOD Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding and members of his Armed Forces People Policy, Defence People Team, who met regularly with us, provided documentary evidence, and supported the review throughout Phase One; members of our Advisory Group; and Forces in Mind Trust for their long-time commitment to and support for *Living in Our Shoes*, and for encouraging, funding and supporting the current *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* study.

We welcome discussion about the findings contained in the following chapters and our recommendations for change, and look forward to continuing collaboration with all those who contributed to Phase One.

¹¹ [Living in Our Shoes Revisited – Summary of Phase One Report](#)

¹² We invited members with a range of expertise to form an Advisory Group, chaired by Air Commodore Alan Opie; [members list](#)



Chapter 1

Setting the Context

“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.”¹³

This chapter sets the context within which progress in supporting Armed Forces families since 2020 was reviewed. It refers to the:

- findings and recommendations from the *Living in Our Shoes* review¹⁴
- government response to *Living in Our Shoes*¹⁵
- changes which have taken place in society and in Defence since 2020 which provide the wider context for the current review and Phase One observations.

Living in Our Shoes

In January 2019 the then Defence Secretary commissioned a review to consider the diverse needs of UK Armed Forces families, assess whether the current support offer was meeting these needs, and make recommendations accordingly. The review explored in depth the issues being raised by Service men and women and their families in the annual continuous attitude surveys at a time when concerns about both recruitment and retention in the Armed Forces were increasing.

It had long been recognised 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.”¹⁶

This important vision remains at the heart of policies which focus on supporting Serving personnel and their families today.

The review team conducted extensive consultations with military families and key stakeholders, and evidence was gathered through visits to 14 military bases, 4 schools, and meetings with over 100 stakeholders, including in devolved administrations and local authorities. Drawing on extensive qualitative and quantitative data, recurrent themes emerged about the challenges experienced by military families. Many suggestions were made by those with lived experience about the measures that could be taken to address some of those aspects of Service life which are detrimental to modern family life and relationships and, ultimately, to retention. Across all three Services, The Royal Navy, the British Army and the Royal Air Force, the key concerns raised related to:

- the poor state of Service Family Accommodation (SFA) and, to a lesser extent, Single Living Accommodation (SLA)
- the degree of mobility involving moves from one location to another, including overseas
- deployment and the amount of time Serving personnel spend apart from their families
- the impact of Service life on: military children and young people; the employment and careers of non-serving spouses/partners; personal relationships; and the health and well-being of Serving personnel and family members

¹³ Secretary of State for Defence, Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, (2019)

¹⁴ Walker, J., Selous, A., and Misca, G., (2020) *Living in Our Shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families*, MOD; see also *Living in Our Shoes Revisited: Briefings One, Two and Three*

¹⁵ *Living in Our Shoes understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families: government response (accessible version)*, June 2021, GOV.UK

¹⁶ Lt General Andrew Gregory, UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016–2020, p1.



- families not feeling valued for the sacrifices they make to support Serving personnel and operational readiness.

The contributions from Serving personnel and their families demonstrated the strong bonds that exist within the military community, and recognised the individual history, culture and core values which permeate each of the three Services. Members of the Armed Forces portrayed a great sense of pride in their work and acknowledged the sacrifices they and their families make. This was apparent in the contributions made by non-serving spouses and partners, and especially by their children, all of whom expressed their pride in being a member of the military community.

Living in Our Shoes documented the lived experiences of men, women and children within the Armed Forces community, using their voices wherever appropriate, to understand and portray what it is like to live in their shoes, and to shed light on the challenges they experience. The report:

- considered the context in which Serving personnel and their families were living, including changes in family life and relationships since World War II
- offered insights to assist the work already taking place to support military families
- encouraged scrutiny and evaluation of new initiatives being developed
- provided examples of good practice across the Armed Forces to encourage sharing and replication as appropriate
- recommended changes to strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant and foster resilient, thriving Service families who are treated fairly, have increased choice and are valued by the Nation.

Recommendations

The findings from the review led to 110 recommendations for change that could address the issues and challenges faced by military families. The recommendations focused primarily on changes that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Armed Forces themselves would need to consider. Some recommendations had 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. Most recommendations required 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.

The recommendations focused on the key issues discussed in the report, with the greatest number relating to the impact of Service life on children and young people:

- Housing – a place to call home [14]
- Children – the impact of Service life [31]
- Partner employment – career and employment challenges and opportunities [17]
- Health and well-being – looking after the health of Service families [15]
- Leaving the military – the final transition [2]
- Supporting Service families – a duty of care and moral responsibility/small acts of kindness [16]
- Strengthening the Armed Forces Covenant – recruit the person, retain the family [15]

The review team noted that some recommendations would require financial investment. The recommendations were grouped into three categories: short-term priorities; medium-term changes; and longer-term changes that were either aspirational in nature and/or would require policy change and/or greater financial investment.

The report was warmly welcomed in Defence and by key stakeholders as the first and most comprehensive study of Service family life undertaken in the UK. The Defence Secretary described it as a

“Brilliant piece of work – a report with evidence, really important for making the case...The challenge is to get on and deliver as many of the recommendations as possible...This report goes a long way to remind me of the obligations I have and also wider government that it needs to put more effort into understanding the military family.”¹⁷



The then Chief of Defence People described it as:

“a fantastic evidence-based report to inform future steps...”¹⁸”

The *Living in Our Shoes* report represents a landmark contribution to understanding and addressing the complex needs of UK Armed Forces families, and the evidence-based recommendations catalysed significant policy changes.

The Government Response

The government published its response in 2021,¹⁹ accepting the vast majority of the recommendations either in full (86) or in part (20). Just three recommendations were rejected, and one was re-directed to the charities sector. The government response included a detailed commentary on the ways in which the recommendations would be taken forward, noting who held responsibility for their implementation. The response also pointed to the changes which were already in train, and the considerable work to address some of the more pressing problems, including improving the condition of SFA, by the time *Living in Our Shoes* was published.

The final recommendation in *Living in Our Shoes* was for the MOD to establish a robust mechanism for an independent review of the recommendations, monitoring their implementation every six months, noting the progress made, and ensuring public accountability. In its response the government indicated that it had established a new Service Families Steering Group which would report at the highest level, link with the Covenant Reference Group, review the governance arrangements annually, and provide updates in the annual Armed Forces Covenant Report.

The government response and the associated commentary provided a benchmark for this review of the progress made in implementing the recommendations and the delivery of change.²⁰

A Changing World

Since 2020, much has changed and many of the events of the last five years were not anticipated. When assessing the progress made in meeting the needs of Armed Forces families it is essential to have regard to these events, many of which have had both national and international impacts.

1. The COVID-19 Pandemic

In late 2019 it became apparent that the world was on the brink of a global pandemic. By spring 2020, the British Prime Minister had taken the unprecedented step of locking down the country and requiring everyone, except key and emergency workers, to stay at home. One year later in the UK, more than 4.4 million people had been recorded as having contracted COVID-19,²¹ and by the beginning of 2023, COVID-19 had been recorded on 211,000 death certificates in the UK.

A series of lockdowns had an impact on everyone in the UK, as well as on populations elsewhere in the world. As the pandemic escalated and restrictions on daily life increased, long-term loneliness for some people was associated with an increased risk of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety and severe stress. Just nine months into the pandemic, the Mental Health Foundation indicated that almost 50 per cent of the UK population had felt worried or anxious.²² By the time all restrictions had been lifted individual experience of the pandemic varied considerably.²³ While some people found time to reflect and rethink the balance between work and family in a new, positive way, others experienced relationship strain and breakdown of communication; felt unsupported or unable to support others adequately; worried about

18 Lieutenant General Sir James Swift, January 2021

19 *Living in Our Shoes understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families: government response (accessible version)*, June 2021, GOV.UK

20 *Living in Our Shoes Revisited Briefings One, Two and Three*, FIMT

21 Misca, G., Walker, J., and Thornton, G (2022) Families and the COVID19 Pandemic in P.Fronek and K. Smith Rotabi-Casares (eds) *Social Work in Health Emergencies: Global Perspectives*. Routledge

22 Mental Health Foundation (2020) Wave 8: mental health pandemic – key statistics

23 *ibid*



others (children, grand-children, elderly parents); missed their social interactions; and experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness.²⁴

The Children's Commissioner for England described a toxic trio of domestic abuse, addiction and severe mental health affecting increasing numbers of children. Parental coping was an important predictor of children's wellbeing.²⁵ Teachers have continued to highlight the longer-term impacts for pupils who were fearful about returning to school.²⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic had a large number of negative impacts on everyday life in the UK, for civilians and members of the Armed Forces alike.

2. Cost of Living Crisis

In the immediate aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, the UK was plunged into a rapidly growing cost of living crisis in 2021. In the 12 months to August 2022, domestic gas prices increased by 96 per cent and domestic electricity by 54 per cent. Food prices also rose some 13 per cent and continued to rise rapidly in the early months of 2023.²⁷ There is abundant evidence that the increase in the cost of living caused serious difficulty for many individuals and families. In the years since 2020, prices have continued to rise.

These impacts will have been felt in all walks of life, including in Armed Forces families with their own existing and recognised vulnerabilities.

3. Wars and Conflicts

A changing world order and the deteriorating security climate in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and beyond, have set potentially greater challenges for security, deterrence and defence than at any time since the end of the Cold War. In Spring 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to many families fleeing their homeland to find safety in the UK and other European countries. In addition to providing a safe haven for families, the UK has been contributing weaponry and equipment, and hosting a training programme which is supported by several allies.²⁸

In October 2023, the Hamas regime in Palestine undertook an attack on Israel, killing many people and taking hundreds as hostages. A counter-attack by the Israel Defence Forces on Gaza has resulted in thousands of deaths, the almost total destruction of the Gaza strip, and a humanitarian crisis.

These and other threats to world security and the pressure to increase UK defence spending continue to draw political and media attention to the potential role the Armed Forces might play in the future. The impacts of these conflicts are regularly reported in the media and Armed Forces personnel and their families are acutely aware of them and the implications for Defence.

Recruitment and Retention in the Armed Forces

Concerns about recruitment and retention in the Armed Forces over the last decade have been well documented. After the end of combat operations in Afghanistan the Armed Forces consistently failed to meet workforce requirement targets in the years between 2015 and 2019. The reports of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body (AFPRB) during this time point to the wider economic situation, including a strong labour market, as a partial explanation for recruitment difficulties. On 1 January 2015 the Armed Forces full time trained manpower requirement was 151,790 and the trained strength was 145,690 – a deficit of 4.0%. This deficit increased year on year and by 1 January 2019 stood at 6.7% (a strength of 134,990 against a requirement of 144,640).²⁹ Total trained strength for the three Services combined declined by a further 3.8% between July 2019 and July 2024. This was despite a strong rally between 2020 and 2021³⁰ during which outflow fell below inflow at tri-Service level for the first time in some years.³¹ The previous trend was

24 Misca, G. (2023) *Families Un-locked: Relationships emerging from Covid-19 into the new normal*, Report on wave 1 qualitative data. Unpublished report, University of Worcester.

25 Children's Commissioner. (2020). *Childhood in the time of Covid*. In Children's Commissioner for England Report 2020.

26 *Love Matters: Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households* (2023)

27 UK Parliament, House of Commons Library, October 2022

28 *Detailed timeline of UK military assistance to Ukraine (February 2022–present)* (July 2025)

29 *ibid*

30 *Quarterly service personnel statistics 1 July 2024*, Figure 1

31 Armed Forces Pay Review Body 51st Report (2022); Paragraph 2.33, Figure 2



restored in the following two years, when total outflow from the regular Armed Forces again exceeded total intake across the three Services.

In 2024 the MOD acknowledged an ‘acute’ workforce crisis, which it attributed to a range of factors including a post-pandemic correction, a particularly tight labour market, changes in societal attitudes and workforce behaviours.³² Of the 5,700 personnel stationed overseas at that time, around two thirds were in Europe (66%), while 14% were stationed in North America, 6% in North Africa and the Middle East, 6% in Asia and 5% in Sub-Saharan Africa. In November 2024 the MOD revealed that the Armed Forces were losing 300 more people than they could recruit each month.³³ In 2024/25 there was a fall in the overall number of personnel, with 1,140 more personnel leaving the force than joining it³⁴. In the same period, 5.9% of trained personnel voluntarily left the UK Regular Forces before the end of their agreed engagement or commission period. This was down from 6.4% the previous year.

On 1 April 2025 the total size of the UK full-time trained and untrained Armed Forces was about 147,300 personnel. Over half of personnel were within the Army (56%), with the remainder being split fairly equally between the Royal Navy/Royal Marines (RN/RM, 23%) and the Royal Air Force (RAF, 22%).³⁵ All three branches of the Armed Forces were below their target size: the Army by 3%, the RN/RM by 8% and the RAF by 13%. Overall, the UK Armed Forces are 8,590 personnel (6%) below target. The majority of Serving personnel are male with just 11.9 per cent of the UK Regular Forces being female (16,300 personnel). The RAF have the greatest proportion of female serving personnel in the UK Regular Forces. The nature of the roles is different in each of the Services, which is partly explained by restrictions on the historic roles available to women. As at 1 April 2025, 25.8 per cent of the UK Regular Forces were under 25 years of age.

Between 2020 and 2023, two reviews highlighted the changing security situation and the implications for addressing the recruitment and retention crisis:

(i) The Integrated Review 2021

The Government published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR21)³⁶ on 16 March 2021. The review acknowledged the deteriorating security situation where the nature and distribution of global power was changing. It identified four overlapping and interacting trends that would be of particular importance to the UK over the ensuing decade:

- geopolitical and geo-economic shifts such as China’s increasing power and assertiveness internationally
- the intensification of competition between state and with non-state actors
- rapid technological change
- transnational challenges such as climate change, global health risks, illicit finance, serious organised crime and terrorism.

The contribution of the MOD to meeting the challenges set out in IR21 was presented to Parliament on 22 March 2021.³⁷ This referred to a new Integrated Operating Concept (IOPC), which recognised that the notion of war and peace as binary states had given way to a continuum of conflict, requiring the UK to prepare its forces for more persistent global engagement and constant campaigning, while retaining the ability to fight wars. ‘Defence in a Competitive Age’³⁸ also contained a section on the Defence workforce which set out how

“we will attract and retain a diverse, inclusive, motivated and professional workforce, drawn from across the Union and the Commonwealth.”³⁹

32 MOD evidence to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body Report 2024

33 Allison, G., (November 2024) Military Defence Compensation, UK Defence Journal

34 [Quarterly service personnel statistics: 1 April 2025: 6. UK Regular Personnel](#), GOV.UK

35 Kirk-Wade, E., [UK Armed Forces personnel statistics](#), June 2025, MOD

36 Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy GOV.UK 16 March 2021

37 MOD (March 2021) Defence in a Competitive Age, Command Paper411, GOV.UK

38 *ibid*

39 *Ibid* paragraph 6.1



It committed to undertaking within the ensuing two years

- 6 a comprehensive review of how we pay and reward our military personnel.....[which] will guide our efforts to develop a modern, holistic, through-life approach to the military offer.⁴⁰ 9

Specific reference was made to Armed Forces families:

- 6 Service families are at the very heart of the armed forces community and it is vital that we provide our people with the appropriate flexibility and support to bring up their children while they serve. As part of a revised Families Strategy, we will introduce measures to ease the burden for parents who might be deployed at short notice, including investing £1.4bn over the next decade to provide wraparound childcare. Through spousal employment initiatives, increasing opportunities for flexible service and a modern approach to societal relationships, we are determined to make the armed forces a more family friendly employer, encouraging our people to pursue long and fulfilling careers in uniform.⁴¹ 9

At the same time, the document signalled the likelihood of additional stress points for some families in pointing to the new reality of a more globally deployed and expeditionary force upholding freedom of navigation, engaged in deterrence operations and capacity building in support of partners and allies, and developing a global network of adaptable airbases to enable rapid forward deployment in times of crisis.

(ii) The Haythornthwaite Review 2023

The 2021 Integrated Review, which was to be cost neutral, subsequently became the Haythornthwaite Review of UK Armed Forces Incentivisation (HRAFI).⁴² The review of pay and reward committed to in the Defence Command Paper took shape early in 2022. The ensuing Haythornthwaite report laid great emphasis on the speed with which the world is changing, not just in geo-political terms but also in relation to technological developments, and contrasted this with how the incentivisation model for Armed Forces personnel had remained largely static over many years. Its introduction referred to a worsening recruitment and retention picture, challenging Defence leaders to be bold and imaginative and for Defence to have the ambition 'to become a world-leader in incentivising and managing people'.

Echoing the Defence Command Paper, the report highlighted growing uncertainty in the length and frequency of future deployments and to the impact that this will have on families:

- 6 The increased complexity of conflict and competition will require personnel to take on new functions and move more rapidly between functions and missions. The frequency, duration and risk of operations will be increasingly uncertain, increasing stress on personnel and their families, including a likely increase in the requirement for overseas service generally and changes to patterns of separation for certain cohorts.⁴³ 9

The central importance of considering the family as a whole runs through the report (the words family and families are used 67 times in total) and is encapsulated under a heading 'actions to make people valued', where the report suggests

- 6 ...despite huge efforts to develop policies to support parents, exit surveys show that impact on family life is still the most cited reason for leaving. The Army does not seem ready to adapt to demographic trends and modern working practices such as divorce, families where both parents have careers, and higher levels of paternal involvement in bringing up children. The latter trend stands to have a disproportionate effect due to the high proportion of soldiers who are men.⁴⁴ 9

40 Ibid paragraph 6.5

41 Ibid paragraph 6.10

42 Haythornthwaite, R., (2023), *Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era – a review of UK Armed Forces incentivisation*, GOV.UK

43 Ibid Paragraph B.xxvi

44 Small, K., (2023) *Why we shouldn't wait to implement Haythornthwaite*, WavelRoom



In overall terms the report urged Government to make radical changes to career management and reward systems to better resolve the tension between career progression, operational effectiveness and family life, including making more explicit consideration of the family unit within the overall offer to Service personnel.⁴⁵ It also pointed to the need to:

- recognise that individuals should be thought of as part of a family unit
- increase investment in accommodation
- revisit the employment model to consider flexible working
- enable families to have more control over their lives
- compensate families for the need to be in a permanent state of readiness.

The Haythornthwaite report emphasised repeatedly that the impact of Service life on family life will remain central to people's willingness to serve their country. The report recommendations were designed to establish a holistic reward and incentivisation strategy to attract and retain skills, maximise operational effectiveness, and provide a modern, flexible and people-centric system fit for the future.⁴⁶ This will require not only changes to policy but a fundamental change in mind-set and culture.

While the UK government announced retention payments for thousands of military personnel and introduced other new measures such as wrap-around childcare, successive Defence Secretaries have recognised the critical role that families play in influencing retention, acknowledging that the feelings of families who stand with and support personnel are often decisive factors in whether Serving personnel stay or leave.

Although the UK Government has not issued a formal response to the Haythornthwaite report, in its 2023 refresh of the 2021 Integrated Review, the previous administration made a general commitment to act on its recommendations, with an initial emphasis on introducing more flexible career structures, simplified personnel policies and a modernised approach to reward.

Defence Reform 2025

A Defence Reform programme was introduced by the Labour Government when it came into office in 2024. This programme aims to strengthen defence with stronger leadership, clearer accountability, faster delivery, less waste, and better value for money.⁴⁷ In April 2025 a new four-pronged senior leadership structure was put in place consisting of the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) as the head of the Military Strategic Headquarters (MSHQ), in command of the Service chiefs for the first time, the Permanent Secretary in charge of the Department of State, a new Armaments Director and the Chief of Defence Nuclear. The implications of this new structure for specific functions and roles, including the Defence People Function, are currently being worked through.

Strategic Defence Review 2025

In June 2025 the Strategic Defence Review⁴⁸ (SDR) set a new and wide-ranging strategic framework for defence. Reflecting on the steadily worsening global security environment, the SDR signifies a 'landmark shift in deterrence and defence', by developing a fighting-ready force and setting 'a new vision for how our Armed Forces should be conceived.'⁴⁹ The SDR takes 'a whole of society approach – widening participation in national resilience and renewing the Nation's contract with those who serve'.⁵⁰ In achieving this objective it emphasises the importance of:

- breaking down of barriers between individual services, between the military and the private sector, and between Armed Forces and Society.⁵¹

45 ibid

46 ibid

47 *Defence Reform, Volume 765: debated on Tuesday 1 April 2025*, UK Parliament

48 *The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer, secure at home, strong abroad*, GOV.UK

49 ibid p 4

50 ibid p 4

51 ibid



The SDR makes it clear that integration is at the heart of transformation, with 'one force under the authority of the CDS, delivered by single services and strategic command.'⁵²

Implications of a Changing World for Living in Our Shoes - Revisited

In Phase One of this study the progress made in meeting the needs of Armed Forces families in the past five years has been reviewed in the light of a rapidly changing geo-political context, along with the opportunities offered by Defence Reform and the Strategic Defence Review for a different, more integrated approach to people policy.

To achieve these opportunities, the evidence from Phase One suggests that it will be imperative to 'think family' as transformation is undertaken. Although families are mentioned eight times in the SDR, they are not presented as central to the changes outlined, but our evidence suggests that supporting Armed Forces families must be an important consideration well beyond the investments in military accommodation which are flagged in the SDR. Indeed, giving full and proper consideration to the needs of families is central to addressing the recruitment and retention crisis and vital for the development of the new flexible and people policies that Haythornthwaite envisaged. In this context, we note the comment made in the SDR that:

‘The whole of defence must change how it supports the Armed Forces as part of a more flexible policy response’.⁵³

The next chapter considers how the history of families policy in Defence influenced the government's response to *Living in Our Shoes*. The progress made since 2020 in meeting the needs of Armed Forces families and the continuing challenges are discussed in chapters 3, 4 and 5. In assessing progress since 2020, we have been mindful of the incredibly complex and challenging context for Defence and Government in the last five years, not least in respect of international security, pressures on resources, and the changes in society generally, and of the undoubted commitment of all those seeking to ensure that families are not disadvantaged by life in the Armed Forces.

52 Ibid p 15

53 Ibid p 34



Chapter 2

Tracing the Development of Families Policy in Defence⁵⁴

6 ...all government departments have been asked to help determine 'what more could and should be done to demonstrate our commitment to the Armed Forces and our gratitude for their service and sacrifice'⁵⁵ 9

During Phase One of the study we reflected on the steps taken by the MOD to take forward the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations. Central to this was an in-depth look at the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032. Following the publication of *Living in Our Shoes* and the government's response, a new ten year families strategy was developed with the aim of providing a vision and structure to drive lasting change. It was heavily influenced by *Living in Our Shoes* and gave substance to the government's public commitment to implementing the vast majority of the recommendations.⁵⁶ However, the strategy built on a long history of policy development designed to support Armed Forces personnel, and it is helpful, therefore, to understand the mechanisms through which Defence has approached this task and their legacy since 2020.

This chapter briefly reviews the history of Armed Forces families policy prior to the publication of *Living in Our Shoes*⁵⁷ and considers the way in which the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032 has been implemented.

Brief History of Families Policy Development

Over the decades since 1946, when the UK Ministry of Defence was established, a number of reforms relating to people policy have taken place. The primary focus within the people framework until this century, however, was on Serving personnel rather than on their families, with support for families confined largely to the development of the single Service welfare organisations and to the widening network of government-owned schools dedicated to the education of Service children in overseas locations. The last twenty years have seen a number of changes, highlighted below.

1. Cross-Government Support to the Armed Forces 2008

Explicit recognition of the sacrifices made by families to support Serving personnel was included in a Command Paper in 2008,⁵⁸ which identified many of the issues subsequently raised in *Living in Our Shoes* some twelve years later, including: access to dental services; retaining places on NHS waiting lists; disadvantage in educational attainment among Service children; disruptions in support for children with special educational needs and disabilities; gaps in the supply of childcare; disadvantage for foreign and commonwealth (non-UK) families and for non-serving partners seeking and maintaining paid employment; and the lack of direct communication with families. These concerns were far from new in 2020 and many of the issues identified in 2008 and 2020 are still recognisable today.

The 2008 Command Paper also highlighted the wellbeing of service children. The *Every Child Matters*⁵⁹ initiative in 2003 aimed to improve the overall well-being of children and led to various local authority governance reforms, including the creation of a Director of Children's Services post in every local authority in England to provide a single focus of accountability for education and children's social services. At this time, the leadership and management of MOD schools in overseas locations was the responsibility of the Service Children's Education agency (SCE)⁶⁰ managed by the Army and, in organisational terms, owned by the Adjutant General

54 This chapter is based on: Davis, P., Walker, J., and Misca, G., (2005) LiOS-Revisited [Briefing 4: Tracing the Approach to Armed Forces Families Policy in Defence](#), FIMT

55 The Nation's Commitment to the Armed Forces Community: Consistent and Enduring Support Cm7674, July 2009

56 [House of Commons; Ministry of Defence: Written Statement made by: Minister for Defence People and Veterans](#) (Leo Docherty)

57 For a fuller history of people policy in Defence see: Davis et al op.cit.

58 The Nation's Commitment: Cross-Government Support to our Armed Forces, their Families and Veterans Cmd7424 July 2008

59 [Every Child Matters](#), (2003), GOV.UK

60 Executive agencies are governmental organisations, established with a degree of independence from their owning departments in order to encourage innovation and the development excellence in service delivery, free from unnecessary and excessive



(AG). The SCE headquarters were in Germany, where the majority of MOD schools were located.

The 2008 Command Paper committed the MOD and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)⁶¹ to:

- 6 continue to work together to ensure the basis of England's Every Child Matters agenda is delivered for Service families. 9

In light of this, a new post was established in Defence, the Director of Children and Young People (DCYP), in 2011. In 2013 all MOD schools were brought under the direct management of DCYP, based at Upavon in Wiltshire. In the years that followed the DCYP post evolved significantly in terms of scope and ambition. New teams were created, most notably to provide a focus for safeguarding, for effective engagement and advocacy across government in support of the interests of Service children throughout the UK and, latterly, the capacity and expertise to respond to growing political interest in creating Defence-wide policies to help meet the childcare needs of Armed Forces families.

2. Defence Reform 2011

In 2011 a Defence governance model for Service personnel was affirmed in Lord Levene's report on Defence Reform.⁶² This model aimed to strike a balance between the responsibility of individual Services to manage their people and the need for effective corporate policy. Within this framework the MOD set overall people policy, including Terms and Conditions of Service and remuneration policy, while the single Services remained responsible for personnel planning and career management, including recruitment.

Among other things, the report's recommendations led in 2013 to the creation of the post of Chief of Defence People (CDP), originally styled Chief of Defence Personnel, to coordinate the operation of the entire Defence 'people function', although the single Service Chiefs – the First Sea Lord, the Chief of the General Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff – continued to be responsible for developing and delivering policies related to those personnel matters reserved to them, and retained significant influence on the development of tri-Service personnel policies.

3. The Armed Forces Covenant 2011

Successive governments promoted the principles of 'no disadvantage and special treatment where appropriate' for Service families, which were enshrined in the Armed Forces Covenant in May 2011.⁶³ Although the idea of a Covenant between the nation and those who risk their lives to defend it was not new, in 2011 the Covenant explicitly recognised the role that families play in supporting operational effectiveness:

- 6 Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families. They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment...

This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces ...⁶⁴ 9

The developments in the Covenant required the MOD to engage with other government departments, the devolved administrations, and the principal military charities, to co-ordinate actions aimed at removing disadvantage for serving personnel, veterans and their families. This task was allocated to the Armed Forces People Support team within CDP's Defence People Team, as was the task of developing and publishing a new strategy for Armed Forces families.⁶⁵

interference.

61 Executive agencies are governmental organisations, established with a degree of independence from their owning departments in order to encourage innovation and the development excellence in service delivery, free from unnecessary and excessive interference.

62 Defence Reform – an independent report into the structure and management of the Ministry of Defence, June 2011

63 *The Armed Forces Covenant* (2011), Ministry of Defence

64 Ibid, p1

65 See: Davis, P., Walker, J., and Misca, G., (2005) op.cit.

The Armed Forces Covenant remains a centrally important element in the current Defence people framework and in respect of the changes heralded by the Strategic Defence Review 2025.

4. The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015

The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review of 2015⁶⁶ included a commitment to ensure that a career in the Armed Forces could be balanced better with family life and to make the changes necessary to enable the Armed Forces to work flexibly, reflecting the realities of modern life and expectations.

The Strategy also included a commitment to develop a new accommodation offer to help more Service personnel live in private accommodation and meet their aspirations for home ownership. These commitments influenced policy making for years to come, in particular in relation to accommodation and to policy initiatives such as 'Forces Help to Buy'. Accommodation policy was the first area where a commitment was made to broaden entitlement to reflect the increasing societal trend away from marriage and civil partnerships to long-term cohabitation as the relationship of choice. This commitment was subsequently formalised in the Defence Accommodation Strategy 2022.⁶⁷

The 2015 Review also committed the MOD to launching the first comprehensive families strategy for the Armed Forces, with a focus on spousal/partner employment, healthcare and children's education.

5. Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016-2020

The initial Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016–2020 was developed to operationalise the commitment enshrined in the Covenant, with a growing understanding that while military families face the same stressors as civilian families they also experience additional challenges as a result of the demands associated with Service life, including separations and deployments, frequent moves, dangerous work settings and combat-related activities. The strategy provided policy direction in an Action Plan with a clear vision to promote:

6 Resilient, empowered, thriving Service families who are treated fairly, have increased choice and who are valued by the Nation⁶⁸ 9

The plan 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). Although FamCAS captures the views of a relatively small proportion of Service families, it continues to provide the only regular feedback to policy-makers. Both surveys have consistently highlighted a range of concerns about the negative impact of military life on families and revealed considerable ongoing dissatisfaction with the support offered.

Nevertheless, progress was made in the years since the Covenant was introduced to improve the support offered, and many initiatives were established to support the Armed Forces community. It is notable that while these substantially increased the support for veterans, and the Office of Veterans' Affairs (OVA) was set up within the Cabinet Office in 2019, there remained an identifiable gap in the support offered to families of Serving personnel. It was at this time that an in-depth review was commissioned by the then Defence Secretary to identify the needs of Armed Forces families and make recommendations for change, resulting in the *Living in Our Shoes* report in 2020.

6. Review of the Director of Children and Young People (DCYP)

In 2019, while the *Living in Our Shoes* review was taking place, another review examined the governance arrangements for issues relating to children and young people across Defence as a whole. This review recommended that DCYP should no longer be responsible for policy issues relating to children and young people on the grounds that this was a MOD function that conflicted with DCYP's responsibilities for service delivery through MOD schools. Subsequently, on 1 April 2021, DCYP's policy responsibilities were transferred, along with around 20 posts, to the Defence People Team, where they joined existing families policy staff to form the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team. The new team had responsibility for:

66 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom, November 2015 – ISBN 9781474125956

67 Ministry of Defence (2015) UK Armed Forces Defence Accommodation Strategy – ISBN 978-1-5286-3192-1

68 UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016–2020 p 1



- developing a new Armed Forces Families Strategy and overseeing its implementation
- the children and childcare agendas inherited from DCYP
- the overall co-ordination of the families policy agenda, including aspects of policy led by other staff within CDP's area, and those areas of policy where the single Services remained in the lead
- resourcing those areas of families policy flagged by *Living in Our Shoes* that had received scant previous attention from policy makers, including policies relating to dual-serving couples.

The rest of DCYP remained within the Army and was retitled 'Defence Children Services' (DCS). In the years since its formation, DCS has endeavoured, within available resources, to expand its remit and capability to look after the interests of all Service children in overseas locations from both a safeguarding and educational perspective whether they attend MOD owned schools or settings, or whether they receive their education and care from local service providers.

The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032

6 ... I am thankful that we have the full support of our partners across government, in the devolved administrations and the charitable sector, as demonstrated by the collaborative approach in producing the strategy and responding to the *Living in Our Shoes* report. [...] The strategy will be supported by an action plan that includes the commitments made in the Government's response to [the] *Living in Our Shoes* report'⁶⁹ 9

As noted in Chapter One, Service families were explicitly referenced in the Defence Command Paper, 'Defence in a Competitive Age', published in March 2021⁷⁰ as the MOD's contribution to the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. This review described Service families as being 'at the very heart of the Armed Forces community' and announced the intention as part of a revised Families Strategy, to 'introduce measures to ease the burden for parents who might be deployed at short notice', including a commitment to implement the Wraparound Childcare project.⁷¹ In practice, work on a new Families Strategy was already well under way within the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team by 2021.

Following extensive consultation, the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032⁷² was published in January 2022. It was a key mechanism for addressing the challenges and recommendations in *Living in Our Shoes* and the wider Defence context and government priorities. In line with its predecessor, the Armed Forces Strategy 2022-2032 was created with the intention of providing a clear ambition and establishing a robust mechanism to drive activity to achieve its vision within the strategy's 10-year timeframe.

The current strategy is both ambitious and comprehensive, addressing most aspects of military family life identified as potentially detrimental and creating disadvantage. We were advised that it was seen as a potential game-changer in offering much greater support for Service families.

Vision, Purpose and Principles

The Strategy has a clear vision and purpose, underpinned by a set of principles. The vision is defined as follows:

6 The armed forces community is an environment that is welcoming and attractive to families. It supports and nurtures family life and its diversity is reflective of wider society.⁷³ 9

69 Minister for People and Veterans, Leo Docherty, MP, January 2022

70 Ministry of Defence (2021), *Defence in a competitive age*; ISBN 978-1-5286-2462-6 op.cit.

71 Thus honouring a Conservative Party Manifesto commitment from 2019

72 [UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032](#), GOV.UK

73 Ibid p13



The purpose of the Strategy is to:

- 6 inspire partnership working across the UK, honouring the enduring pledge of the Armed Forces Covenant and to provide direction to policy makers, the single Services and public service providers to empower armed forces families to live rich and fulfilling lives alongside their loved ones.⁷⁴ 9

This would be achieved by providing:

- 6 both the context and the framework for the delivery of a range of practical interventions designed to strengthen and improve policies and service provision across the armed forces families agenda, leading to improved retention and enhanced operational effectiveness.⁷⁵ 9

The essential elements of the framework for delivery are three essential and underpinning principles and the creation of formal core work streams through which the requisite changes would be delivered to achieve the vision. The supporting principles are that families deserve to be:

- recognised and respected for the critical role they play in supporting the Service person
- informed with timely information about their situation and provided with opportunities that empower them to adapt and thrive
- listened to and understood so that their individual experiences are reflected in the support provided to them.

Eight separate work streams, broadly linking to the themes identified in *Living in Our Shoes*, were established to deliver the strategy. These were:

1. Family Life
2. Service Life⁷⁶
3. Family Home
4. Children's Education
5. Childcare
6. Non-UK Families
7. Supporting Partners
8. Health and Wellbeing

Each work stream leader was expected to:

- shape their element of the overall delivery plan so that it reflects the outcomes described in the Strategy
- ensure timely delivery of supporting actions
- establish and maintain effective collaboration to deliver these actions with stakeholders across central government, in the devolved administrations and in the charitable sector, as appropriate
- establish an effective framework for measuring success in achieving the outcome ascribed to the work stream
- ensure that work stream initiatives are communicated effectively to families.

Each work stream leader was encouraged to develop their own Theory of Change and to produce a set of supporting actions with clear and achievable objectives linking directly to the end states described in

74 Ibid p5

75 Ibid p5

76 Work streams 1 and 2 were amalgamated in 2023, leaving seven work streams



the strategy. Progress has been monitored since 2022 by a thrice yearly steering group⁷⁷ chaired by the strategy lead.⁷⁸

Evaluation of Strategy Implementation

The vision, purpose and principles of the Strategy provided a clear remit for the work stream leaders, together with a set of responsibilities for delivery. The evaluation of progress within each work stream has used documentary evidence provided by the MOD, supplemented by open source material, and by in-depth conversations with officials in the MOD, other government departments and the devolved administrations, members of each of the three single Services, the three Families Federations, and other military charities and stakeholders.

In the course of the review five key questions were asked in respect of each work stream, and explored in discussion with the work stream lead:

- (i) Has a clear plan of activity been articulated for the work stream and if so how well is this aligned to the end states?
- (ii) What did the government say it would do in response to the *Living in Our Shoes* report and what has it achieved through each work streams since the Strategy was launched?
- (iii) What mechanisms have been put in place to assess empirically and objectively the progress being made towards achieving the end states?
- (iv) Have effective links been made with policy owners and other partners across government where these are needed to generate broad based and sustainable delivery?
- (v) Does the work stream and its end states still have relevance in the current Defence context, and is the scale of ambition appropriate?

The evidence provided in answer to these questions enabled an assessment of the extent to which the strategy has been effective in delivering change in each work stream area. Overall, the evidence indicates that the strategy provided welcome clarity of purpose both within the MOD and for the three single Services, as well as a helpful focus for activity, and that work stream leaders have pursued their task with a shared ambition and a clear commitment to make life better for Armed Forces families. Nevertheless, a number of challenges have served to undermine the focus of some work streams. These challenges are discussed in turn.

1. Resource Challenges

There has been considerable change to the work stream model in the three years since it was established. Some work streams were combined under the leadership of one member of the MOD team, in addition to other changes in work stream leadership. Although some change is inevitable as staff rotate in and out of jobs and especially in a period where MOD have managed headcount through tight controls on recruitment, the changes led to the lack of a consistent approach making it more challenging for work stream leaders to maintain a clear and focused sense of direction, despite their commitment. The merging of the Family Life and Service Life work streams produced a work stream with a very broad agenda that led to some disconnection between the MOD's Service welfare policy team, who were previously responsible for the stand alone Service Life work stream, and Families Strategy implementation.

77 Two of the authors of *Living in Our Shoes* (Walker and Misca) were appointed as Independent Advisers to the implementation of the Armed Forces Family Strategy to advise the strategy lead and the team on priorities; and to report on progress biannually to the Secretary of State for Defence and annually to the UK Parliament through the annual Armed Forces Covenant Report. The request for reporting was terminated in 2024.

78 Peter Davis was Head of the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team and the Strategy lead 2021 to 2023. He was also consultant to the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* study during Phase One. In this role he undertook policy analysis and gathered evidence on the effectiveness of the Armed Forces Families Strategy.



2. Uneven Progress

Despite a strong ambition, commitment and willingness to effect change, the complexity of the agenda, a reduction in staffing and merged work streams resulted in uneven progress. Unsurprisingly, the main achievements have been in already well-established programmes relating to Service children's education and childcare, where the focus has been greater.

One of the main challenges has been to ensure coherence of effort and unity of purpose within and across related Defence people policies, projects and programmes. In general there is limited evidence that the work streams were able to maintain a disciplined approach to this, despite early attempts to do so through the Armed Forces Families Plan,⁷⁹ which was published in 2022. This contained various sub-objectives aligned to each of the end states⁸⁰ for each of the work streams.

By early 2023, many of the work streams had developed specific Theories of Change to give their plans structure. However, in some instances, the alignment between these and the published plan was less robust. References to the theories of change disappeared from internal reporting during 2023.

Exceptionally, an Action Tracker has been maintained by the Non-UK Families work stream. The Family Home work stream reporting also retains references to the 2022 sub-objectives and shows how these link to specific *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations, but it is questionable how relevant these objectives remain given the significant developments in the accommodation sphere in the intervening three years.

3. Uneven Stakeholder Engagement

Many of the recommendations in *Living in Our Shoes* required the commitment of a number of government departments. It is clear that the nature and maturity of the linkages with other government organisations has differed markedly across the various lines of development within the Strategy. In respect of Non-UK Families, Family Home, and the WAC element of Childcare places, for example, the linkages appear well developed and effective. In other work streams, including Health and Wellbeing and Family and Service Life, the linkages are less evident. In the Supporting Partners work stream the degree of engagement appears to have lessened since the Strategy was launched. Efforts have been made to establish effective networks in relation to the educational aspects of the Childcare work stream, and these remain a work in progress. In Children's Education there is a pattern of substantial and long-standing engagement and activity, but it is not always possible to measure the outcomes and assess the impacts of these.

4. Performance Management

Measuring outcomes is always challenging, as is the attempt to measure effectiveness. The 2022/23 Theory of Change work produced some putative indicators of progress, which were almost entirely focussed on tracking trends in the responses to the annual AFCAS and FAMCAS surveys. These trends fail to give an in-depth picture of progress, and other outcome measures are needed. Without them, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the work streams have been able to deliver meaningful change. This is especially challenging in respect of the Family Home work stream since the internal MOD governance mechanisms relating to Defence accommodation are unconnected to Families Strategy governance.

The MOD's Approach to Families in Policy Development

Our assessment of progress via the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032 suggests that as a model it has proved difficult to lever the changes sought. There are a number of reasons for this.

1. Lack of Clarity

While resource issues in MOD have made it difficult to sustain a consistent level of activity across all Strategy work streams, the evidence suggests that another significant contributory factor in some areas has been a general lack of clarity within the MOD's personnel policy structures about how families-related policy issues should be managed. A central question seems to have been overlooked: namely, should family matters be treated as a distinct thematic field of policy on which the Armed Forces Families and

⁷⁹ [Armed Forces Families Plan 2022](#), GOV.UK

⁸⁰ Referred to as 'objectives' in the plan



Safeguarding team should take the lead, or should families be considered as an intrinsic aspect of core Defence people policy development and, therefore, be included in the work of the various topical people policy leads, for example, on welfare, remuneration, and accommodation?

This absence of clarity is evident in the early decision to transfer ownership of the Health and Wellbeing work stream away from the MOD's Armed Forces People Support team to the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team, while the same team retained ownership of the work stream covering non-UK family issues. As the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team did not have the level of experience as their colleagues on health and wellbeing matters, nor the advantage of established relationships with the key cross-government agencies, this decision critically weakened the ability of the Health and Wellbeing work stream to make progress.

2. Lack of Agency

With some exceptions, progress has been tempered primarily in areas where the MOD does not have agency. While the majority of the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations were directed at the MOD, a substantial number required action by and collaboration with other government departments, the devolved administrations and the single Services, plus Cyber & Specialist Operations Command in view of its administrative responsibilities for overseas bases. For example, issues relating to children's education, which received the most recommendations, are the responsibility of the Department for Education (DfE), the devolved administrations, and local government. Issues relating to continuity of healthcare are the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), while immigration issues are matters for the Home Office. The agency limitations became apparent when logging the changes that have been accomplished.

In these areas, the work streams were dependent on being able to lever change elsewhere in government. Hence the central importance of establishing collaborative networks. In some areas this required establishing a new network or repurposing or broadening the scope of an existing network. The MOD's ability to build new collaborative relationships has been limited by the apparent absence of meaningful and regular cross-government engagement at senior level on Armed Forces families issues.

3. The Viability of the Delivery Model

Staff resource constraints, a lack of a consistent approach to performance measurement, and confusion over the most effective means of incorporating families concerns into wider people policy development, have contributed to a gradual and observable deterioration in work stream discipline over time. Moreover, in the case of the Family Home work stream, the existence of a separate governance arrangement meant all meaningful decisions were taken separately from Strategy forums. In mid-2025 the MOD took the decision to 'retire' the Armed Forces Families Strategy Steering Group. It had ceased to be an effective forum for reviewing progress across all work stream areas and holding work stream leaders to account, and had become a mechanism primarily for communicating the latest developments in the children's education and childcare agendas. Instead, the Strategy team continues to meet with the Families Federations on a regular basis and with us as we undertake the *Living in Our Shoes – Revisited* review. The single services, however, have expressed regret to us that regular oversight and transparency of progress as a whole is on hold while the future of the Strategy is considered.

Families Policy in a Changing Era for Defence

The review of the development of Armed Forces families policy indicates that this is a highly complex area that straddles various elements of central, devolved and local government, and has to take account of the varying cultures and long-held traditions of the three single Services. How governments have responded to the challenge of effective policy making in this context and the extent to which they have lived up to their own public commitments in this regard is a central consideration of this '*Living in Our Shoes – Revisited*' study at a time of increased geo-political uncertainty.

Since the beginning of this century, the importance of considering the needs of Armed Forces families has lodged itself into both the political and Defence consciousness. Since 2008, successive Governments have committed to doing more to meet these needs. Over time, many explicit recommendations have



been made to encourage changes in policy, practice and culture which would offer some remedies to the challenges identified by families. Partly in response to these, a considerable number of changes have been introduced.⁸¹ The real impact of these changes on the lives of Armed Forces families is hard to assess and feedback from Armed Forces personnel and their families via the annual continuous attitude surveys⁸² has continued to indicate that more work is needed to fully understand the nature of the existing challenges and how best to target resources.

The evidence from the Phase One review about the ways in which the 2022–2032 strategy has been implemented suggests that the original delivery model has proved to be extremely challenging despite an undoubted commitment by the officials responsible for its delivery to improving the lives of Service families. As Defence Reform 2025 is taken forward it is timely to consider whether the delivery model of the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032 still has relevance and should be revised as opportunities for better integration of polices across the whole Armed Forces community are presented.

In the following three chapters the progress made since 2020 to meet the needs of Armed Forces families is reviewed, focusing on the themes raised in *Living in Our Shoes* and subsequently incorporated into the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032. Chapter 3 focuses on children, Chapter 4 focuses on the needs of non-serving partners and the importance of childcare, and in Chapter 5 attention is drawn to issues concerning housing, health and well-being, and those relating to non-UK families.

This review also highlights the family-related challenges that continue to influence decisions taken by Serving personnel to leave or to remain in the military. These challenges need to be addressed within Defence Reform if the concerns of Armed Forces families are to be mitigated and issues regarding recruitment and retention are to be resolved.

81 See Davis, et al op.cit.

82 AFCAS and FamCAS



Chapter 3

Growing Up in the Armed Forces

6 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 well-being'.⁸³ 9

Many of the issues raised in *Living in Our Shoes* were fundamentally underpinned by two main aspects of military life: deployments and mobility. The *Living in Our Shoes* review reported numerous lived experiences from families facing considerable disadvantage as a result of moves between nations of the UK and overseas, and the consequences of separation due to often lengthy deployments. Both mobility and deployment will continue to be central features of military life, however, so the focus of effective support strategies must be on addressing those factors which create disadvantage and mitigating the potential detrimental impacts on family life and relationships. The responsibility for achieving this rests not only with MOD, but involves the collaboration of other government departments, the devolved administrations, local authorities/local government, and the three single Services, plus Cyber & Specialist Operations Command, supported by the third sector and society as a whole. It is everybody's responsibility to ensure that families are not disadvantaged by Service life. Defence and the Armed Forces Covenant alone cannot resolve all the challenges experienced by military families as they strive to balance Service life with family life, so their efforts must be supported by the entire society.⁸⁴

In this chapter the focus is on the concerns raised in *Living in Our Shoes* relating to children.⁸⁵

Challenges and Opportunities for Children Growing Up in the Military

The impact of Service life on children growing up in a military household featured prominently in *Living in Our Shoes*. Having a parent in the military creates unique risk factors for children's development and adjustment, which some parents felt were not always recognised by the military or addressed in schools and in wider society. These risk factors include: high mobility; long periods of parental separation; the revolving shift in two-parent households from there being one or two parents at home; the absence of a parent in a single-Serving parent household; and ensuing disruptions in education, friendship networks, and extra-curricula activities. Parents referred to deployments as a catalyst for difficulties for their children, with the Royal Navy experiencing the longest deployments. The longer the deployment the greater the perceived negative impact.⁸⁶

Children's education proved to be one of the most sensitive issues which led to the largest number of recommendations for change. The majority of concerns were about the frequency and timing of school moves, the potentially negative consequences of disruptions to education, and the variable nature of the support provided, particularly the use of the Service Pupil Premium (SPP). The review team found that the support available to Service children differed considerably between schools: those with a high percentage of Service children were far more likely to understand their needs and challenges. Moves between the devolved nations of the UK triggered additional concerns given the variations between education systems and the support on offer.

There is no single definitive number of children in UK Armed Forces families due to a lack of a universal declaration requirement for children, and potential variations between different countries and contexts. However, for the UK, recent estimates suggest there are approximately 124,500 to 180,000 Service children, although estimates vary by source and region. The majority of children in Armed Forces families are

83 McConnell, N., Thomas, E., Boshier, A. and Cotmore, T. (2019) Early Support for Military-Connected Families: Evaluation of Services at NSPCC Military Sites, NSPCC

84 Hence the contract between the nation and the Armed Forces in the Armed Forces Covenant.

85 It is generally accepted that any child with a parent who has served in the military in the first 25 years of the child's life is categorised as a service child. The primary focus in *Living in Our Shoes* was on children still in education and living with a parent serving in the military.

86 See Chapter 4: *Living in Our Shoes*, op.cit.



educated in schools with fewer than 30 children from Armed Forces families.⁸⁷ The majority of schools have no military children, but a significant minority – about 1 in 4 schools – are serving small military populations, while about 1 in 20 schools have significantly more military children.⁸⁸ Schools with a high number of Service children are predominantly clustered around military regional hubs. These include Army garrisons such as Tidworth in Wiltshire and Catterick in North Yorkshire, RAF stations in Lincolnshire, and the naval bases in Portsmouth, Devonport and Clyde.

Parents of children with special educational or additional needs or disabilities (SEND) described a number of additional challenges exacerbated by military life.⁸⁹ Many parents felt that the Armed Forces did not understand the pressures on parents with additional needs children and that these were not taken sufficiently into account by career managers and the chain of command. These children were considered to be especially vulnerable, particularly if their family had to move between different countries of the UK.

Although there is no robust research indicating that, overall, Armed Forces children do less well at school than their peers, there is no doubt that moving between schools and education systems is challenging, especially when curricula are not aligned. Overall, children of military families are three times more likely to experience two or more school moves during primary school. Moreover, these moves are more likely to involve different education systems.⁹⁰ Some of the children and young people who contributed to the *Living in Our Shoes* review had attended eight different schools. Nevertheless, they were keen to express their pride in having a parent in the military and did not want to be treated as disadvantaged. They stressed the importance of people, especially teachers, understanding the additional emotional stresses they experience when a parent is on deployment, and the disruptions to their education and friendships as a result of mobility. Children told the review team that they wanted to receive appropriate support and targeted help to address any additional needs.

Progress Since 2020

Of the 30 recommendations relating to children and young people just four were targeted uniquely at the MOD. Seventeen recommendations were for actions that involved the DfE, and seven were directed at the single Services. Other recommendations were targeted at the devolved administrations and government as a whole.⁹¹ On its own, therefore, the MOD was not in a position to take forward many of the recommendations. To achieve these the leader of the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding children's work stream needed the commitment of others to improve the experience for children. While collaboration is in place at a working level, the evidence suggests that there needs to be a senior level cross-government forum where issues affecting Service children in education can be discussed, matters requiring resolution can be resolved, and progress monitored.

In its formal response to *Living in Our Shoes*, the government agreed among other things that that 'getting it right for children should be a national priority', and that it would:

- consider how to track military children through education with a marker
- endeavour to better support children's education and wellbeing through the Service Pupil Premium (SPP)
- develop evidence-based resources for education professionals through the Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance
- consider how data could be better shared across national boundaries, while stopping short of agreeing to explore how education management information systems across the UK could be better aligned
- prioritise robust research into children's education progression
- consider the best way to update the SEND Code of Practice to support military families

87 Children's Commissioner (2022) Family Review Part II: Celebrating Military Families Annex

88 Ibid

89 See *Living in Our Shoes*, ch4.

90 Ibid p 6

91 Walker, J., Misca, G. and Davis, P. (2025) *Living in Our Shoes Revisited*. Available: [Briefing 2: Key Themes: a place to call home; growing up in the military; partner employment; and health and wellbeing](#), FIMT



- ensure a more consistent interpretation of the Schools Admission Code.
- provide information to children to help them understand emotions and cope with deployments
- increase guidance for military children in higher education.

The children's work stream set a general aim in response:

6 The opportunities available to children from armed forces families are maximised through robust research, effective collaboration and dissemination of best practice. This informs the wider policies and practice that underpins how the governments of the UK and external partners support these children.' 9

The statement of intent does not indicate how outcomes and impact would be measured, although it does mention the importance of effective collaboration and robust research. Collaboration is critical since education in England is a matter for the DfE and a devolved responsibility in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the MOD is uniquely placed to advocate strongly for the interests of Service children in education, and this is precisely what it had been doing for many years, resulting in incremental improvements in the approach taken by various government bodies to include Service children more explicitly in their policies and practices, as well as to improve the quality and breadth of guidance available to educational professionals on the unique needs of this relatively small but significant cohort.

In assessing progress, we became aware that the children's education space is extremely crowded with many players within and beyond government attempting to make a positive difference for Service children. Not only collaboration but also coordination should be key factors in delivering change. There have been important achievements in some areas, as we indicate below, as well as disappointingly slow progress in others, and much of the work to support children is ongoing.

1. Guidance for Schools

The MOD has been working with the DfE for some years to develop joint guidance for schools and local authorities in England in relation to Service children. This guidance was finally published in April 2025⁹² and describes 'the support schools and local authorities should provide to Service pupils to assist with their education and wellbeing'. Its content addresses school admissions, SEND support, effective use of the SPP, and supporting school transition using the 'Common Transfer File'. It refers directly to local authorities' legal duty to pay due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant and contains a section which encourages local authorities to appoint a Service children's champion, with a suggested role description developed by the MOD Local Authority Partnership (MODLAP). It also includes examples of good practice in the support of Service pupils from schools around the country and provides details on how families can get in touch with a local military establishment.

The MOD has also worked with the National Governance Association to develop guidance for trustees/governors to support them in identifying ways in which schools in England should best support Service children, published in November 2023.⁹³ Work is currently underway between the MOD and the education departments of each of the UK nations, to develop a best practice guide and a common set of resources to support Service children's transitions between education systems. The MOD informed us that these resources would be published in August 2025. However, publication has been delayed following a decision to adopt a more robust approach to evidence gathering in support of the requirements capture process. MOD advised us that questionnaires have been sent to educators across the UK, responses are being collated, and focus groups will follow in each country. The aim is to develop resources that are simple, accessible, consistent and straightforward, coproduced by a range of stakeholders. The launch is scheduled for April 2026.

2. Improving Transitions: The Schools Admission Code

The MOD has been working with the DfE to develop an explanatory note in the Schools Admissions Code, with the aim of bringing greater clarity for both parents and admissions authorities to the provisions in the Code for Armed Forces Children. We were advised that this would be published in time for the start

92 [Service Pupils in Schools: Non-statutory guidance](#), GOV.UK

93 [Supporting Service children](#), NGA



of the 2025/26 academic year. The first iteration of this note was to focus on the provision of resources for education professionals in schools and local authorities, and to contain a section on enabling positive transitions between systems for children with SEND. Later iterations were to focus on guidance for parents and children. However, MOD has advised that the DfE will shortly be starting work on a complete review of the code and wants to develop the required clarity for Armed Forces families through this mechanism rather than through an additional note to the current code.

The MODLAP⁹⁴ admissions teams are developing an advisory note on school admissions to be released in 2025, which offers suggestions to local authorities on how to remain compliant with the admission code, relevant legislation, and with their Armed Forces Covenant duty of due regard.

3. Service Pupil Premium (SPP)

The SPP was introduced in 2011 by the DfE in England as part of the government's commitment to the Armed Forces community through the Armed Forces Covenant. It was designed to address the unique challenges faced by children from Service families. Initially, the funding was set at £200 per eligible pupil and currently stands at £340 – a real terms increase of over 15%. In recent years the policy has been extended to cover children whose parents are employed by a foreign nation's military organisation and are stationed in England.

Since the publication of *Living in Our Shoes*, expenditure on the SPP is included in schools' annual reports to the DfE. Schools have the option to explain how the SPP is spent. The MOD would like to see this become mandatory and the DfE suggested to us that this is an issue that they are considering putting to their ministers. The DfE are keen to use the data that schools are providing to draw conclusions about the approaches to the use of the SPP which appear to be working well, in addition to developing a series of SPP case studies for schools to illustrate the activities that the funding can support. SPP guidance is also included in the recently issued joint guidance to schools and local authorities. The revised policy is available on GOV.UK and is therefore accessible to families.

4. Support for Professionals: The Thriving Lives Toolkit

The Thriving Lives Toolkit was launched by the Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance in October 2020 as a self-reflection tool designed to help schools support children from Armed Forces families. The toolkit provides a framework of seven principles for schools to use to reflect on their practice and develop effective support, and training materials. The toolkit was developed in collaboration with the MOD, and publicising the Toolkit remains a work in progress. By early 2025 over 400 schools (approximately 1 in 6 of settings with at least one Service child) had engaged with the toolkit. The SCiP Alliance has employed a part time engagement manager to help boost take-up and all successful schools receiving Armed Forces Families Fund grants are encouraged to adopt the toolkit. The toolkit is also referenced in the DfE/MOD joint guidance.

Research undertaken by the University of Derby⁹⁵ reported that the Thriving Lives Toolkit had been perceived by schools as a positive and useful resource. Findings provided:

“tentative evidence for the efficacy of the Thriving Lives Toolkit in relation to improving provision and outcomes for Service children, at least in the short term.”⁹⁶

The researchers acknowledged that a more rigorous longitudinal evaluation is needed, drawing on multiple data sources and objective measures of progress and outcomes, to evidence the impacts for schools, Service families and Service children. The SCiP Alliance recently received funding from Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) to establish an Impact Centre, which aims to enable outcomes from its work to be assessed. The centre aims to:

“provide training, evaluation, and policy support to practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders. This includes highlighting instances of good practice in identifying what works for Service children. This work will be underpinned by co-production with Service children and their families to ensure that it is accessible by those the work supports.”⁹⁷

94 MOD Local Authority Partnership

95 The International Centre for Guidance Studies (2022), SCiP Alliance Thriving Lives Toolkit: Implementation and Impact Evaluation. University of Derby.

96 Ibid p12

97 *New funding awarded to help transform understanding and support of Service children*, FiMT



Measuring impact is critical and without robust outcome data it is difficult to understand or assess the long-term impact the work has on children's education.

In 2023 the SCiP Alliance, in conjunction with the Naval Children's Charity, were successful in gaining funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust⁹⁸ for a three year project to enable the expansion of the toolkit to cover early childhood and post-16 through to higher education, thereby including Service children and young people up to age 25. It is intended that the suite will set a new standard for evidence-based support for Service children, transforming the capacity of providers to understand Service children's complex lives, identify their unique (and greatest) needs and develop and enhance targeted support. According to the SCiP Alliance, the design of the frameworks will be underpinned by research and tested so that support can be tailored by educational providers to accommodate the diverse range of educational contexts. The MOD remains closely involved with this work.

The SCiP Alliance listed a number of activities for the future to take its work forward, including:⁹⁹

- working with the DfE to enhance the evaluation of the use of SPP and the SPP programme as a whole
- supporting schools to use SPP effectively through the deployment of the Thriving Lives Toolkit
- establishing the Early Years Thriving Lives Toolkit as the go-to, evidence-based, continuous improvement tool for providers supporting Service children from birth to five years old.

5. Moving into Higher Education

A number of changes have sought to benefit Armed Forces children moving into higher education:

- i. The Office for Students (OfS) distributes funding to higher education providers in line with guidance they receive from the DfE on their annual priorities. This funding enables universities to deliver the widening access and participation schemes that target under-represented groups. A collaboration between the MOD and the OfS resulted in Service children being added as a 'student characteristic' in January 2024. Following this change, the Chief of Defence People wrote to all higher education establishments in England, asking them to give due regard to this development as they design their new access and participation plans.
- ii. The MOD has worked with the Single services and Families Federations to review the common UK-wide arrangements that determine ordinary residence for young people of serving personnel in relation to higher education funding. The aim of this was to ensure these arrangements reflect typical aspects of Armed Forces family life, such as mobility, and remove areas of evident disadvantage. Each of the four nations' funding agencies were asked to clarify current funding eligibility arrangements. This resulted in the identification of inconsistencies in practice and some divergence from the original Higher Education funding regulations.

Prior to 2024, the Scottish government policy required 16-18 year old pupils from military families to prove their residency to access funding for their studies at a Scottish further education college. In many instances, students were unable to satisfy ordinary residence indicators because of the focus on the location in which Service parents lived immediately prior to the Service person enlisting in the Armed Forces. This placed a constraint on the number of students from Armed Forces families who were eligible for student finance in Scotland. This has been amended to positively affect around 200 students annually. Guidance now formally recognises that further education funding is not portable between nations. Eligibility for funding for further education for young people aged between 16 and 18 from military families is based upon where they usually live.

- iii. In 2022 the Universities, Colleges and Admissions Service (UCAS) amended their application form to include an identification flag for Service children and a second for Veterans. These flags are helping higher education establishments identify and offer suitable support to these groups. As a useful by-product, this identifier is enabling the development of a richer data set on the passage of Service young people through the higher education system.
- iv. The MOD is helping the Student Loans Company to review its internal and external guidance. The aim is to ensure that it reflects the unique Armed Forces circumstances when considering

⁹⁸ *Annual Report and Accounts 2022/23*, The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust

⁹⁹ Submission from the SCiP Alliance to *Living in Our Shoes-Revisited*, June, 2025



applications. Children of serving non-UK armed forces personnel have been refused student finance because eligibility is only based on being a UK national. Similarly, some students have had finance rejected if they were born in Cyprus or Germany, despite their Service circumstances being covered by provisions within higher education finance regulations.

- v. A new collaboration between the MOD and several partners from the charity and university sectors is developing a Service child's guide to qualifications and progression to university. This will be available across platforms and outlets accessed by Service children later in 2025. The MOD has been exploring ideas to ensure that young people in Armed Forces families are making informed decisions before they decide on their post-18 options.

Research by Brunel University¹⁰⁰ found that their students from military families had experienced, and some continued to experience, high levels of unpredictability in their lives that may impact on their studies at university, such as the loss of a parent, separated families, moving schools, and moving house. The study recommended that:

- 6 Schools should continue to be supported in developing the awareness of all staff in identifying and recognising the challenges for children who are part of an armed forces family, including the issues that come with high levels of mobility, and how this presents both unique opportunities and challenges. This is particularly important for schools that have a small number of children from the armed forces families' community.¹⁰¹

6. Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Supporting children with SEND is a challenge experienced by civilian families as well as by military families. There has been an upward trend in the number of pupils in England diagnosed with SEND since 2016. In June 2025 over 1.7 million pupils in England were recorded as having special educational needs – an increase of 5.6% since 2024. The number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) had also increased, as had those with SEND support. Difficulties and delays in accessing appropriate diagnosis and support are well evidenced.

The most common issue for those with EHCPs is autism spectrum disorder and, for those without a Plan but receiving SEND support, the most common needs relate to speech, language and communication.¹⁰² Armed Forces families continue to experience challenges in relation to accessing support, including delays in receiving an initial diagnosis and finding themselves at the bottom of the list for support in new locations due to mobility. The MOD has been working for some time with the DfE to raise awareness of the particular issues facing Service families, including contributing to a DfE SEND Green Paper in 2022.

The MOD has collaborated with the DfE in developing non-statutory guidance to local authorities related to the maintenance of EHCPs when children temporarily leave England. The guidance, issued in 2024, clarifies local authority powers and flexibilities to maintain EHCPs when children are temporarily absent from England. The MOD and the DfE are now working to ensure the this guidance is consistent with the SEND Code of Practice as it relates to Service children – in particular in relation to the early transfer of EHCPs when a family is returning from overseas to a new local authority, and the importance of the receiving authority taking prompt action to prepare for the child's arrival.

The MOD is also working through MODLAP local authorities to develop a SEND advisory note designed to help local authorities comply with the DfE guidance as it relates to the transfer of EHCPs and the maintenance of these plans during accompanied assignments outside of England. The DfE and Welsh Government officials are also developing cross-border guidance relating to the management of EHCPs/IDPs of children transitioning between the two systems.

The DfE's SEND Code of Practice¹⁰³ includes a section on the children of Service personnel which explains the unique difficulties that Service children may experience and describes relevant actions for education providers

100 Ince, C., Chappell, A. and McHugh, E. (2021) *University Students from Military Families: The Same but Different*

101 *ibid*, submission from the report authors

102 *Special Educational Needs Statistics Team*, (2025) DfE

103 DfE. SEND Code of Practice, January 2015.



and local authorities.¹⁰⁴ At the time of preparing this Phase One report, 27 local authorities in England had signed up to the SEND principles for Service children, which were developed from the Code of Practice.

In Scotland, the 'Additional Support for Learning Act 2009' provides an additional legislative duty on Scottish local authorities to support the education of children and young people from Armed Forces families, including those who require additional support. Local authorities will take cognisance of this when considering placement requests and enrolment.

7. Month of the Military Child

Much of the MOD's work has the incidental impact of raising awareness within professional circles of the particular challenges that Service children face in education. The Month of the Military Child (MotMC) initiative was launched in 2022 with the aim of drawing these challenges to the attention of a wider audience, while also celebrating the qualities and strengths that Service children possess. MotMC has now become an established part of the calendar and strong partnerships have been developed with 'Never Such Innocence', who run an art and poetry competition, NAAFI, and the three Families Federations. The MotMC events have included wheelchair rugby, school assemblies, arts events and inclusion in the annual Celebrating Forces Family Awards. In 2025, children wrote insightful and moving poems about their lives.

This initiative has considerable potential to enhance the awareness of military families in local communities and to increase positive media attention about the impact of military life on children and young people, their pride and their resilience.

8. Funders Forum

The MOD has worked with the Naval Children's Charity and SCiP Alliance to create a 'Funders' Forum'¹⁰⁵ to bring together funding organisations from across the UK. The Forum was launched in June 2023 with an action plan describing the present funding landscape for research focussing on Service children.¹⁰⁶ The aim of this initiative is to reduce duplication through improved sector-wide collaboration between funding organisations, encourage an evidence-based approach to supporting Service children, and promote the development of agreed common research priorities consistent with the objectives of the Armed Forces Families Strategy. This initiative is in its infancy but the number of organisations involved has increased since its launch and the MOD believes the initiative is now self-sustaining.

9. Cobseo Children's Cluster

In 2025 Cobseo established a Children's Cluster. Members have been setting priorities, including development of a sub-cluster focusing on children with SEND. Cobseo's Children's Cluster's theory of change is seeking to achieve the following impact:

- 6 Service children with special or additional needs or disabilities progress and thrive wherever they live, experiencing learning and developmental journeys that recognise their strengths and mitigate the unique challenges of Armed Forces life.¹⁰⁷ 9

The Theory of Change is designed to provide a framework for understanding how meaningful change can be achieved through collaborative working. It is too early to determine the extent to which the Cobseo Children's Cluster will be able to drive much-needed change to improve support for military children, but members are committed to making a difference and to partnership working across the four nations of the UK. In such a busy field, coordination of effort and activities across the third sector, particularly to lever change in key government departments and devolved administrations with responsibility for the education agenda, is essential.

104 The references to MOD organisations and policies in the 2015 Code of Practice, published 10 years ago, are now out of date.

105 *Funders' Forum*, Service Children's Progression Alliance

106 *SCiP Alliance Funders' Forum Action Plan 2022*, Service Children's Progression Alliance

107 Cobseo Children's Cluster (2025) Narrative – Special or Additional Education Needs or Disabilities Theory of Change (draft)



10. Young Carers

Living in Our Shoes drew attention to the somewhat hidden population of children and young people in UK military families under 18 who provide care for a family member. Welfare Officers were aware that some children in military families were caring for a family member, often a parent, but that Service personnel do not readily disclose the extent of these factors in the family as they are concerned about potential negative career consequences. The Army Families Federation featured some young carers in 2019,¹⁰⁸ describing them as a vulnerable and hard to reach group. *Living in Our Shoes* noted a lack of reliable evidence about the numbers of young carers in Armed Forces families, and the MOD has indicated that there are likely to be some 10,000.¹⁰⁹

In 2024 the MOD issued a Carer's Passport to help Serving personnel with caring responsibilities to balance care responsibilities with work needs, and to create a consistent approach across the Armed Forces. While this is a helpful innovation relating to the Serving person with caring responsibilities, the 2020 *Living in Our Shoes* recommendation, accepted by government, was to improve the identification of young carers, ensure they have appropriate support and that the needs of families with a young carer are taken into consideration when the Serving person is relocated. This does not appear to have been acted on.

The Children's Society, with funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, has prepared information and a toolkit for professionals working with Armed Forces families with a young carer. Free training courses are also available, which are expected to result in the provision of greater support for young carers.¹¹⁰

11. Defence Children Services (DCS)

As we noted in Chapter Two, DCS is responsible for running MOD schools in overseas locations and supporting families whose children are transitioning into and out of these schools. It also endeavours to support Service children who are being educated in local overseas educational systems where there is no MOD school.

These responsibilities are highly relevant to the aims of the Armed Forces Strategy, yet throughout our review of Strategy implementation we have observed an apparent absence of involvement of DCS both in action planning¹¹¹ and across the principal lines of activity within the Children's Education work stream. We are aware that there has been internal debate within Defence over the division of responsibilities between DCS and the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team, and that the future positioning of DCS within Defence is being discussed between the Army and Cyber and Special Operations Command. We are not in a position to judge the extent to which these factors have influenced the level of engagement with the Strategy within DCS, but we are aware of how disruptive and potentially corrosive to individual morale these uncertainties can be.

12. The Armed Forces Families Fund

One of the key initiatives associated with the Armed Forces Families Strategy has been the establishment of the Armed Forces Families Fund, referred to by the MOD as AF3. In 2022 two predecessor funding programmes were amalgamated to provide a single source of grant funding to support the implementation of the Armed Forces Families Strategy. The predecessor programmes were the Education Support Fund, created during the coalition government at the request of the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the Early Learning Support Fund, created subsequently by the Army's Commander Home Command. Since its inception, the AF3 has been administered on behalf of the MOD by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT).

The Grant Funding Agreement between the MOD and the AFCFT explains that the purpose of the Fund is to make financial awards to projects in support of the delivery of the objectives of the Armed Forces Families Strategy. The priorities for the Fund are set annually by the MOD and decisions on individual awards are made by a panel consisting of AFCFT trustees and a senior representative from MOD. Under this agreement, AFCFT officials are responsible for managing the fund in accordance with appropriate Cabinet Office standards, including monitoring organisations in receipt of awards to ensure their compliance with award terms. The MOD has a right to commission work to monitor and evaluate the delivery of the projects

108 AFF (Summer 2019) *The Voice of Youth, Army and You*; NFF (2019)

109 [Supporting young carers within armed forces families](#), (2025) The Children's Society

110 *ibid*

111 DCS was not included in the Theory of Change documents developed by the work stream in 2022.



funded through the AF3. The AFCFT is expected to provide an annual report which would describe the projects completed under AF3 and the results achieved.

The fund has increased from around £4million to around £6million annually for projects to enhance the lives of Service children. In 2023/24 the MOD experimented with using the AF3 to commission research relevant to the objectives of the Armed Forces Families Strategy. An evaluation project has been initiated by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, focussing on the SPSP within AF3, the report of which we consider below.

Since 2022 the AFCFT has dispensed over £13.1 million¹¹² to 280 individual projects through the AF3, ranging in value from £800 to £150,000. A further £2 million is expected to be dispensed during 2025.¹¹³ Although the purpose of the AF3 is to support the achievement of objectives across the Armed Forces Families Strategy, funding has been divided almost entirely across three separate grant programmes: the Service Pupil Support Programme (SPSP), the Early Years Programme, and the Supporting Partners Programme. The only exception was in 2023, when three grants were awarded to individual research projects. Expenditure to date is shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 AF3 Expenditure by Programme

Programme	Projects	Value £M
Service Pupil Support ¹¹⁴	155	£7.73
Early Years	82	£3.19
Supporting Partners	40	£2.08
Research Grants	3	£0.17
Total	280	£13.17

The 280 projects have been allocated across the four nations of the United Kingdom as indicated in Table 3.2. A small number of projects supported families accompanying Service personnel based overseas. The average amount of award has been around £0.048 million.

Table 3.2 Allocation of AF3 Funding by country

Country	Projects	%	Value £M	%
England	179	66%	£8.45	64%
Scotland	32	12%	£1.97	15%
Wales	22	8%	£0.98	7%
Northern Ireland	18	7%	£0.75	6%
UK-Wide	17	6%	£0.77	6%
Overseas	2	1%	£0.26	2%
Total	280	-	£13.17	-

In this chapter we report on the Service Pupil Support Programme. We review the other two programmes relating to Partner Support and Early Years funding in Chapter 4.

Service Pupil Support Programme (SPSP)

The SPSP has been running for three years and aims to encourage projects aimed at one or more of the following themes:

- closing the gap in attainment between Service and non-Service pupils, using data-led evidence
- addressing the needs of Service pupils with additional needs through early identification and intervention using a collaborative and coordinated approach

¹¹² All data on the AF3 has been sourced from the AFCFT website and submissions from the AFCFT.

¹¹³ Grants for the 2025 Early Years and Supporting Partners Programmes had not been awarded at the time of writing

¹¹⁴ The 2022 education related programme was named the Education Support Fund



- identifying and addressing the needs of small cohorts of Service pupils within educational settings.

The AFCFT reported that the first round of the SPSP awarded almost £1.8 million to 46 projects in July 2023, with two deferred awards of £106,648 made in October 2023. The second round supported a further 21 projects in July 2024 to the value of just over £1.3 million.¹¹⁵ The original Education Support Fund (the final round was run by the AFCFT in 2022) was aimed at providing ‘funding to schools to help mitigate the effects of exceptional mobility and/or separation faced by Service children’. More recently the MOD has adjusted the design of its SPSP to encourage applications with a more specific focus, including supporting children with special educational needs and addressing issues around academic attainment.

As Table 3.3 shows, this had some effect in the funding awarded to projects relating to supporting Service children with special educational needs, which represented 22% of the total value awarded in 2025. However, the majority of funding continues to be awarded to general pupil support projects, typically aimed at supporting pupils’ mental health and general wellbeing, and often involving paying for additional staff time and/or an element of staff development/formal training. Since 2022 a significant majority (just under two thirds by value) of the successful applications under this programme have been from primary schools.^{116,117} (Table 3.4)

Table 3.3 Service Pupil Support Programme Funding

	2022 (ESF)		2023		2024		2025	
	£M	%	£M	%	£M	%	£M	%
General Pupil Support	£1.23	70%	£0.87	57%	£0.74	57%	£1.74	69%
Educational Attainment	£0.22	13%	£0.34	22%	£0.24	19%	£0.23	9%
SEN Support Projects	£0.02	1%	£0.20	13%	£0.20	15%	£0.55	22%
Mobility/Transition Support	£0.11	6%	£0.08	5%	£0.12	9%	£0.01	0%
Indoor Facilities Improvement	£0.08	4%	£0.03	2%	-	0%	-	0%
Outdoor Facilities Improvement	£0.10	6%	£0.02	1%	-	0%	-	0%

Table 3.4. Schools funded

Receiving Organisation	Value £M	%
Primary Schools	£4.61	65%
Secondary Schools	£1.14	16%
Local Authorities	£1.11	16%
FE/HE Establishments	£0.16	2%
Nursery Schools	£0.09	1%
Total	£7.10	

Within this programme, grants awarded to organisations supporting Service children in Scotland have been higher on average than grants awarded in the other nations of the UK (an average of £0.069m per award

115 [The Trust commissions an evaluation to look at the impact of the Service Pupil Support Programme](#), The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust

116 Details on Northern Ireland projects are not made public other than their overall value.

117 Where grants have been awarded to multi academy trusts spanning any combination of secondary, primary and nursery school settings, an even distribution of funding has been assumed.



compared with £0.048m). Of the £1.525m allocated to projects in Scotland since 2022, £0.855K has been allocated to the local authority and schools in Moray, where the Lossiemouth and Kinloss bases are located. A full breakdown of successful grant applications by country is shown in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5 Grants by Country

Country	Projects	%	Value £M	%
England	100	65%	£4.76	62%
Scotland	22	14%	£1.53	20%
Wales	18	12%	£0.82	11%
Northern Ireland	15	10%	£0.63	8%
Total	155	-	£7.73	-

In September 2024 the AFCFT commissioned Alma Economics to assess how effectively the SPSP had achieved its objectives and whether it provides value for money in supporting the educational needs of service children. In October 2025, Alma Economics released its second bi-annual report.¹¹⁸ The report illustrates the challenges of robustly measuring outcomes and impact after AF3 funded programmes have concluded, without any baseline data or pre-programme outcome measures. Although the research team employed a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, such as interviews and surveys with schools and parents, and statistical comparisons of attainment and other indicators between funded schools and non-funded schools, the absence of a stronger research design means it is not possible to attribute any behavioural changes in individual Armed Forces children or in military children as a group, directly to SPSP funding.

Moreover, the researchers had to make a number of assumptions about which children had experienced the programmes being funded. At best the evaluation can only suggest that there may be an association between the funding and positive outcomes for children. Alma Economics appropriately express caution about the findings at several points in the report, and indicate that the findings should be viewed as indicative of perceptions rather than as evidence of effectiveness.¹¹⁹

There is nevertheless, useful learning from the report:

- to measure impact, robust outcome measures must be used to assess changes which can be attributed to the intervention
- if parents and children are to be asked for their assessment/perceptions of impact, they need to know about the intervention/programme being delivered
- the importance of having a dedicated and skilled individual to support service children
- the time needed to engage appropriate staff and to engage with parents
- engaging with families and pupils on a personal level was found to be effective in encouraging participation in SPSP-related activities
- concerns about sustainability of programmes funded in this way.

It is to be hoped that a condition of any future funding from the AF3 and the AFCFT is that the recipients should embed evaluation into the delivery of the programme from the start so as to collect the necessary data to be able to measure outcomes and effectiveness of the programmes.

13. Educational Policy Review

The MOD completed a comprehensive review of Joint Service Publication 342 which contains policy on the education of service children.¹²⁰ The changes include focusing the policy on the education of children overseas, where the MOD has explicit responsibilities, and updating the policy to reflect internal organisational and responsibility changes. The revised policy is available on GOV.UK and is therefore accessible to families. Such policy reviews are cyclical and the MOD have indicated that the next revision will involve a more fundamental review involving wide external engagement.

118 Alma Economics (2025) Service Pupil Support Programme Evaluation – second bi-annual report (updated).

119 Ibid p7

120 [The education of service children overseas \(JSP 342\)](#), GOV.UK



Progress in Wales

In Wales, the Armed Forces Expert Group¹²¹ brings together people with detailed knowledge of issues which affect the Armed Forces Community to advise how public services can meet the needs of current and former members of the Armed Forces. The Group is chaired by a Welsh Government Minister and attended by various stakeholders including the MOD Defence People Team. In 2022 the Group identified as a priority area for action support for Service families posted to, or living in, Wales so that the potential for disadvantage, particularly in relation to accessing health and education services is minimised.

In its Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2021,¹²² the Welsh Government recorded its commitment to provide long term funding of circa £270K annually for the Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru programme. The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2024¹²³ describes SSCE Cymru's role as helping to guide local authorities and schools in meeting any potential disadvantage using a range of mechanisms, from information and advice to a new grant funding stream for small scale projects.

The SSCE website acts as a 'resource hub for schools, local authorities and others with an interest in identifying and supporting Service children.' In early 2024, SSCE launched online training modules to help a wide range of education practitioners and others understand how they can support Service children in the Welsh education system and through the curriculum for Wales. The successful Armed Forces Friendly Schools Cymru award continues and at the start of 2024, 30 schools had achieved accreditation: 9 achieving bronze, 7 reaching silver and 4 awarded gold status.'

The activities being undertaken included:

- improving data relating to the number of Service children in Wales: this identified 2,677 service children in 589 schools
- the launch of a Welsh Government project to explore existing sources of data and mechanisms for collecting information for service children: the latest data collated indicates that the number of Service children in Wales for the academic year 2024/25 was 2,017
- delivering training to school staff to increase knowledge around service children and families.

In relation to the issue raised in *Living in Our Shoes* about the teaching of the Welsh language to Service children in schools (Recommendation 31), the Welsh Government told us that the curriculum applies to all learners in Wales and that there are very limited circumstances in which the mandatory learning of Welsh can be temporarily dis-applied. The Welsh Government informed us that SSCE Cymru continues to support Service children and families by providing information and resources relating to the Welsh language.

In relation to Service children with additional needs, Cymru School Liaison Officers have been offering support to local authorities through regular drop-in sessions to help them with their action planning.

Progress in Scotland

In 2021 the Scottish Service Children Strategy Group was reconstituted and renamed the Scottish Armed Forces Education Support Group (SAFESG)¹²⁴ to take a more strategic approach to improving the support to children and young people. This included:

- developing ideas on best practice
- developing strategies to support dispersed families
- considering approaches to support families moving into Scotland and their engagement with the school and the Scottish education system
- working with local authorities to understand and support local data gathering.

In its Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community 2024 report,¹²⁵ the Scottish Government recorded its commitment to working with SAFESG to ensure that Armed Forces Families are reflected in its 'Additional Support for Learning Review Action Plan'.

121 Expert Group on the Needs of the Armed Forces Community in Wales, GOV.WALES

122 [Armed Forces Covenant annual reports](#), GOV.WALES

123 *ibid*

124 [Scottish Armed Forces Education Support Group](#), GOV.SCOT

125 [Veterans and Armed Forces community 2024: Scottish Government support](#), GOV.SCOT



In its 2023 report on the Armed Forces Covenant,¹²⁶ the Scottish Government reported that the Higher Education - Further Education Veterans Champions Network had been rebranded ADVANCE. The network continues to deliver briefing sessions promoting higher and further education as a viable option to the Armed Forces community.

Every local authority in Scotland is required to have a nominated lead officer for Armed Forces families, children and young people. There is also a national network of Head teachers with representation from schools with significant numbers of Armed Forces pupils, as well as schools/settings with as few as one Service child. The Forces Children's Education website hosts an online professional learning activity, 'Supporting Armed Forces Families', which schools and settings are encouraged to use in conjunction with their yearly 'Getting It Right for Every Child' training/refresh. Forces Children Scotland has published a 'Forces Children's Rights Charter which lays out ten essential rights for children from Armed Forces families.

An updated version of the 'Welcome to Scotland' guide was published in April 2024 following extensive consultation with the Armed Forces, third sector, and public sector organisations to ensure that the guide is both up to date and contains the most important information for military personnel and their families ahead of relocation to Scotland.

Assessing the Impact of the Initiatives since 2020

The evidence indicates that progress has been made in a number of areas to support children in Armed Forces families, with many different activities and initiatives having been launched. However, assessing their impact and sustainability has proved challenging with little robust outcome evidence readily available. Without a formal action plan or way of coordinating the range of activities, and little impact data available on which to assess progress, the MOD's means of judging success is to count the number and variety of outputs and to monitor high level trends in the annual FamCAS survey.

Despite the large number of individual activities and additional funding made available via AF3 there remain significant questions and concerns about the extent to which children and young people in Armed Forces families continue to be disadvantaged. Better information is needed to understand which children are disadvantaged and the specific factors which drive this. To obtain a wider view about the progress made since 2020, we invited schools to share their experiences.

Evidence from Schools

(i) School Profiles

Twelve schools responded to our request: 7 from England and 5 from Scotland; 9 primary and 3 secondary. While they are not representative, their responses provide informed views within the education sector. Four schools had under 15 pupils from Armed Forces families; three had between 35 and 77, two had 110–120, and one had 250 Service children. The majority of schools (9 out of 12) were able to identify Armed Forces children who have caring responsibilities. Schools were asked how many Armed Forces children have special educational needs or disabilities: two schools reported none; three schools reported between one and two children; four schools had 16–24 pupils; and two schools had 38–50 pupils. Only a small proportion in each school had EHCPs, up to maximum of a third.

(ii) School moves

The majority of schools reported a combination of moves at normal entry points (n=8) and during term time (n=10), with the majority of children moving individually (n=9). Two schools had children moving as a unit. Five schools had experienced a funding gap as a result of the mobility of Armed Forces children. One way to address this gap has been to apply for charitable funding.

¹²⁶ [Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community 2023](#), GOV.SCOT



(iii) Improvements in support for children

Eight schools were in local authorities with a Service Pupil Champion, and one school had employed a Service Pupil Manager:

“*Employment of a Service Pupil Manager to build and maintain links with the local garrison community. The Service Pupil Manager and the school's Service Pupil Advocate seek to improve parental engagement. The aim of improved parental engagement is to increase the uptake of students. The Service Pupil team maintains links with schools that have service pupils due to return to the Garrison, for example, from Cyprus.*”

This approach had enabled the school to improve

“*... the collation and sharing of crucial safeguarding information during transfers, ensuring a safer and more informed transition. Service pupils are identified and their attendance, attainment, and behaviour are tracked to identify and monitor their specific needs from the outset.*”

Schools believe that their efforts to support children had:

- improved academic outcomes
- improved the schools' relationship with the families
- improved support to meet pupils with additional needs in a timely manner
- enabled bespoke support for Service pupils and their families
- enhanced collaborative working with support agencies and community engagement
- enabled a greater focus on transition and attainment.

Four schools reported that *Living in Our Shoes* had influenced their support for Armed Forces children and noted the following changes since 2020:

- appointment of a Service Pupil Champion
- celebrating the Month of the Military Child
- enhanced systems for identifying and tracking Service pupils
- improved transition procedures
- implementation of the SCiP Alliance Thriving Lives Toolkit
- increased awareness and profile of Service pupils
- targeted support and engagement, such as:
 - providing pupil drop-in sessions
 - collaborating with external organizations (e.g., Reading Force)
 - sharing information (improved website and signposting for Service pupils and families to relevant agencies and support)
 - improving access to higher education and providing targeted support specifically for Service pupils
 - developing relationships with the wider military community
 - taking part in wider projects to share best practice
 - strengthening governance and ensuring a more strategic focus.

Schools had introduced a range of initiatives and programmes to support Armed Forces pupils, improve educational attainment, and build resilience and independence as critical life skills. Schools had introduced clubs for Service pupils, after-school support, mentoring, and deployment groups for pupils with a deployed parent. The aim is to enable parents to feel confident that their children are being supported.



Four schools had received funding to support their activities from the AF3 and from the AFCFT. Among the activities that had been funded were: home/school activity packs; a military liaison team; deployment groups; and military groups - these were set up to help new Armed Forces pupils to build friendships.

However, schools told us that maintaining these activities when the short-term funding ran out had been difficult: for example, one school had to release support staff who were on a temporary contract. This raises concerns about the sustainability of support which depends on short-term funding, and the potentially negative impact when support services are withdrawn.

(iv) Use of the SPP

Schools were asked how they used the Service Pupil Premium (Figure 3.1). Most of the funding had been used to provide psychological and counselling support. In the 'other' category, funding had been used to:

- support with payment for a school bus as most Service children are out of the catchment area
- meet a pupil's specific need
- employ a Service Learner Mentor who provides emotional and academic support in school.

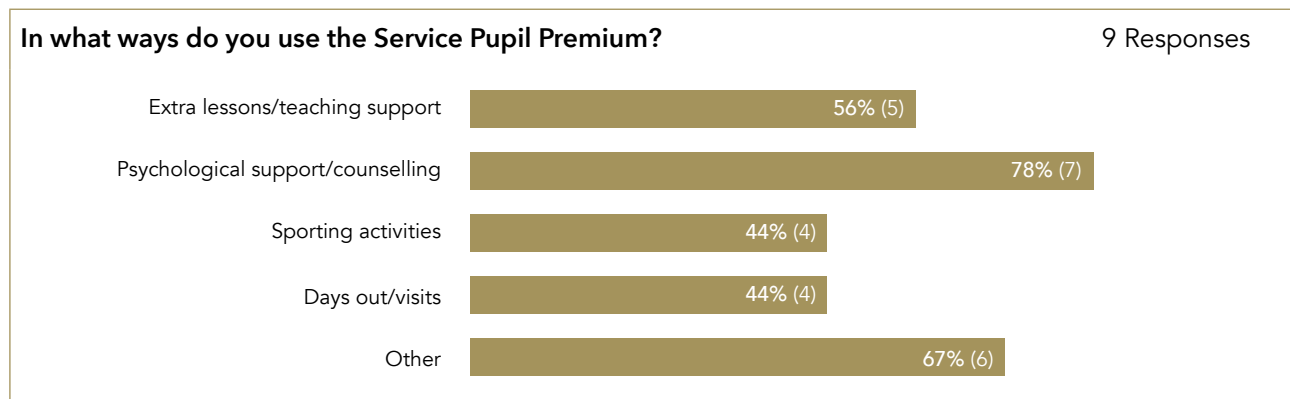


Figure 3.1 Use of the Service Pupil premium

Half of the schools reported that they did not have sufficient, appropriate, high quality tools and resources for meeting the needs of Armed Forces children, and would like a higher level of funding in line with the Pupil Premium. Five schools had engaged with the SCiP Alliance Thriving Lives Toolkit while another five schools said that they did not know what the SCiP Alliance does, and the other two schools knew about it but had not engaged with the SCiP Alliance. Those who used the Thriving Lives Toolkit had used it to inform and improve best practice and to signpost parents to the resources. The majority of schools (11 out of 12) reported that they share good practice relating to Armed Forces children with other schools.

Information provided by the schools indicates that a great deal of activity had taken place in some schools in the past five years to support Service children with both academic and emotional support. Schools with large numbers of Service pupils had made it a priority to manage the challenges of mobility and deployment. However, challenges continue, and we were told that 'some schools are miles ahead of others'.

Continuing Challenges for Children in Armed Forces Families

Despite much progress, many of the concerns raised in *Living in Our Shoes* about the impact of Service life on children remain. While guidance has increased and many initiatives are ongoing to provide better support for Service children, we found:

- continuing in-year school admissions as a result of mobility during term time, which disrupt children's education
- the different education systems in the four nations continuing to cause disruption and create disadvantage
- inconsistencies in addressing the needs of children with SEND, long waiting times for a diagnosis and an EHCP, and inadequate support
- little evidence of the voices of children and young people being considered in policy development.

1. Evidence from Schools: Key Challenges

Schools shared their view of the key challenges, which fall into three themes:

- Schools with very small number of service children:

“It is quite difficult when working with a very small number of service children to be able to provide a wider offer, currently our offer is tailored to specific child needs.”

- Support for SEND children:

“It is often those children with SEND who suffer the most from the transient nature of their schooling. Any change in school is difficult for a child, and for those that move every two years, this can be worse. The waiting lists for support and diagnosis for those with SEND meant that we have had children join our school who are still awaiting diagnosis and suitable support.”

“I still feel we are some way off supporting children with SEND, particularly around getting a diagnosis and the lengthy wait times.”

“The ‘Living in Our Shoes’ report has been influential in raising national awareness of the needs of service pupils and their families. Research has directly informed the initiatives to improve the educational experiences of Service Pupils. However, there remains a need for improvement in the provision for service pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.”

- Navigating information and lack of responsibility/accountability:

“I find that although there seems to be lots of research and lots of resources available, there is almost too much choice and trying to navigate around these is quite difficult. I have found that trying to deal with the army resources directly is the same; and families tell me the same. e.g trying to access one person responsible for the welfare of our families here seems to be very difficult.”

2. Evidence from Schools: Priorities for the Future

Schools suggested the following priorities to address the needs of Armed Forces children in future:

- supporting the service child’s social, emotional and academic wellbeing, by gaining greater in-depth insight to the challenges they may face
- supporting service children with SEND, and especially to access medical/educational psychologist support as quickly as possible when they move
- supporting the transition between schools
- continuing support for schools and training staff to understand the needs of military families and to share practical evidence-based ways in which to give support
- addressing inconsistency of provision and problems passing information between schools overseas and in the UK
- securing a higher level of funding for service children and removing the funding gap to ensure that they achieve the best possible outcomes
- ensuring children’s voices are heard
- helping children to feel included and valued as part of the community
- providing more financial support to schools for additional staffing to support pupils
- establishing a universal, streamlined approach in all nations and local authorities to record-keeping relating to Armed Forces children.



3. Evidence from Schools: Changes Needed

Schools would like to see the following changes in the way in which government, the Armed Forces and schools work together for the benefit of Armed Forces children. They asked for:

- a more joined-up approach
- better access into child and adolescent mental health services in a more urgent way
- more consistent funding rather than short-term funding for specific initiatives
- better communication between local authorities, schools and the MOD
- more resources for children with SEND.

Individual discussions with head teachers in schools with high numbers of children in Service families indicated the ongoing frustrations about the lack of appropriate support for children with SEND and the 'massive disadvantages' these children face. Head teachers described 'a perfect storm' since the COVID-19 pandemic in respect of service children and education: the needs of the children have increased at the same time as a breakdown in parents' contact with schools.

Head teachers referred to Armed Forces parents being very stressed about:

- the lack of consistency and continuity between the four nations of the UK and between local authorities in England
- delays in the system
- complexity and long waiting lists, which can result in children being out of school for long periods
- a reliance on guidance and the lack of any mandated policies
- the lack of resources for their children
- schools 'drowning in red ink'.

Head teachers listed six key problems that need to be fixed:

- (i) Health care and social care are not sufficiently joined up so the needs of service children are not well understood.
- (ii) Inconsistencies in support in MOD schools (overseas) and in non-MOD schools (in the UK) which create unrealisable expectations and exacerbate transitions.
- (iii) Long waiting lists in different locations for children with SEND and ADHD mean that children have to re-join waiting lists when they move areas. For example, the waiting time for an autism assessment in North Yorkshire, home to a very large garrison, is three years.
- (iv) The lack of a Common Transfer Form or SEND passport is particularly problematic for children with SEND, resulting in a child missing time in school.
- (v) General complexity at every point in the system when a child changes schools.
- (vi) Variable output from MODLAP and a lack of mandation: schools and local authorities need to be mandated to address the disadvantages experienced by Service children.

While schools are proud of the work they do with Armed Forces children they want the problems to be resolved as a matter of urgency.

4. Evidence from Military Charities

The responses from charities echoed the evidence from other sources that more work is needed to remove the disadvantages affecting Service children of school age as a result of frequent moves around the UK and to and from overseas locations, in particular for those diagnosed with SEND or awaiting diagnosis:

“Not enough has been done to support service children in ALL nations. Movement between devolved nations can be particularly difficult.”



“Tracking [the movements of Service children between schools] does not seem to work especially between devolved nations.”

“[the] common transfer file doesn't seem to have worked.”

“Generally the school falls between local authority and MOD/DfE saying it's not their problem.”

“Currently families often have to make the hard choice to remain in county when the serving parent is moved, so that they do not lose their place on the waiting list for [SEND] assessment/diagnosis or give up support that has already been put in place at the current school.”

5. Armed Forces Family Fund (AF3)

The AF3 has funded a significant number of projects which are related to addressing children's educational needs in the broadest sense. By the end of 2025, over £15 million will have been distributed to around 300 individual projects in the four years since the Armed Forces Families Strategy was launched. A large number of organizations applying for funding are repeat bidders, in particular in relation to schools/educational establishments. The AF3 funding should have been able to provide continuing evidence about how the investment has improved the lives of children in military families and influenced the implementation of the Armed Forces Families Strategy, but it has been difficult to measure outcomes and impact. We look in more detail at the overall use of the AF3 in Chapter 4.

6. Evidence from Continuous Attitude Surveys

The prime source of data in relation to Service families' experiences in respect of children's education is the Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FAMCAS). Unfortunately the response rates have declined over the years (Figure 3.2) but it is the only published data which tracks trends.

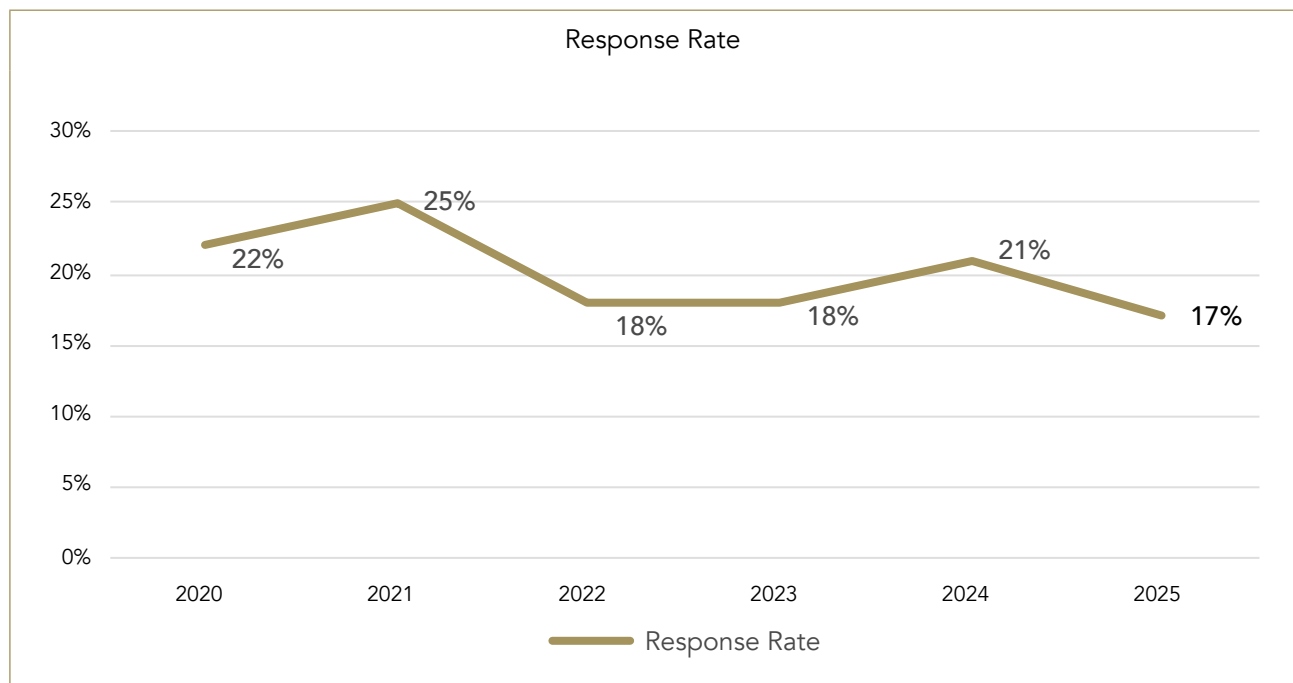


Figure 3.2 FamCAS Response Rates

Responses to FamCAS questions on the theme of children's education have remained largely static over the last five or so years, although families' experiences in obtaining support for their children with SEND have deteriorated. FamCAS 2025¹²⁷ indicated that 'education' was fourth on the list of factors that families feel most disadvantaged about, in comparison to the general public, at 25%. This was behind family life (44%),

127 UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2025



childcare (36%) and healthcare (31%). In 2021 it was the third highest factor at 17%, after housing (18%) and health care (33%).

The survey indicates that over half of Service families (54%) have at least one child of school age. This is just 1% less than reported in the 2021 Survey. FamCAS 2025 reported that the majority (78%) of families with school age children have at least one child at a state school – slightly down on the 82% reported in 2021. The 2025 survey recorded that 15% of families with school age children had changed schools for Service reasons in the last 12 months, the same percentage as in 2021.

Nearly one in ten families (9%) with school age children experienced difficulties with obtaining support for children with SEND. This remains at its highest reported level since this question was first asked in 2017. The second most common difficulty for parents was getting a place at the school of their choice. This was reported by 7% of families, and remains unchanged since the question was first asked in 2017.

Figure 3.3 indicates the trend relating to difficulties with children's schooling. The data show a slight decline, but in-depth analysis will be needed to understand the nature of these difficulties, and their prevalence within the three single Services.

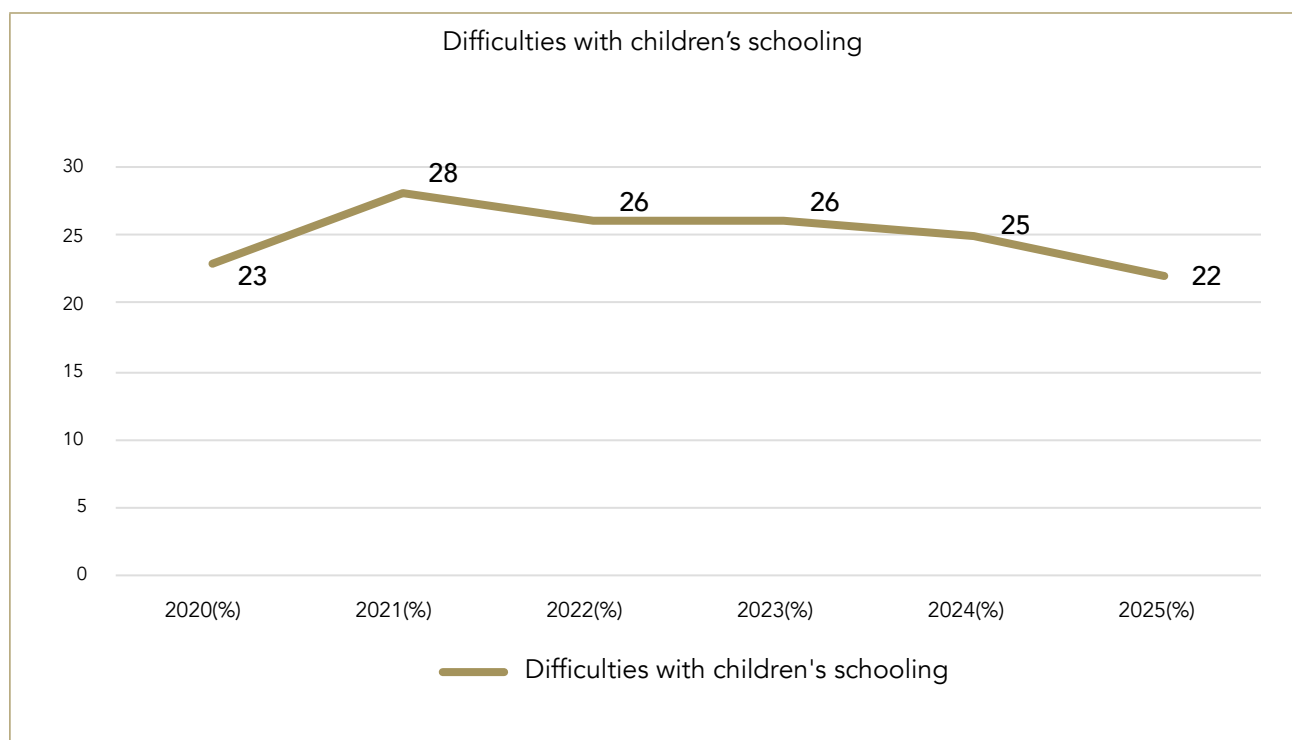


Figure 3.3 FamCAS Data about Children's Schooling

While the relationship between the needs of the Service and potential disadvantage to children's education is high on the list of concerns for Armed Forces families, there is a dearth of hard data on how significant this disadvantage is, how it manifests itself and the precise location of the major friction points. We have noted that the issues relating to support for children with SEND are the same for civilian as for military families. The issues are more for stark for families required to move location who need to ensure that their place on waiting lists is not compromised, and in this regard the Armed Forces Covenant has an important role to play. It is critically important that there is a better understanding of where disadvantage is occurring for military families and to determine the levers to mitigate this.

7. The Need for Rigorous Data Capture

Living in Our Shoes highlighted the inability to track educational outcomes and the lack of available data relating to children in military families. Since 2022 the DfE has been sharing data at a local authority level by each Key Stage, subject area and gender. This has enabled the MOD to work with local authority partners to develop interventions which target areas where there is discrepancy between outcomes achieved by Armed Forces children and their peers.

Research undertaken by the National Centre for Social Research, sponsored by MOD, aimed to determine the utility of existing sources of data for assessing the impact of mobility on the educational outcomes of Service children.¹²⁸ The research found that:

- Service children are identified in different ways within each of the home nations
- data about Service children are collected and stored differently between nations and
- to link these data, data controllers would need to release a cross-national unique identifier to enable probabilistic data matching
- the Service child identifier in some nations is not made available to researchers.

Living in Our Shoes urged the different education systems of the UK to collaborate to ensure they collected and shared compatible data. Following several years of discussions with the MOD the Scottish government agreed that Service pupil data will be reported centrally, and the first reportable data set is expected to be published in the spring of 2026. Students from Service families have been identified in the Higher Education Statistics Agency student return since 2023. The Scottish Government is also exploring the collection of data as part of their annual pupil census data collection exercise.

In Wales, Service children are being considered by the Welsh Government for specific identification on the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC). Currently, the numbers and locations of Service children in Wales can be obtained through Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru, working with the local authorities.

Priorities Going Forward

Many of the recommendations in *Living in Our Shoes* were a call to the government and devolved administrations to coordinate their policies and practices with respect to children's education and address the challenges Armed Forces families face, primarily as a result of their mobility. While there have been many attempts to mitigate the disadvantages the children experience, and a considerable amount of public money given to various initiatives, without greater coordination of effort and drawing together and sharing the learning from the activities, including a more concerted effort to measure outcomes and sustainability, it is difficult to assess the level of progress since 2020 and determine the actions needed to achieve the end state as defined in the Armed Forces Families Strategy. The FamCAS surveys give no indication that the challenges have been dealt with effectively, but the data are limited.

The need for greater coordination is especially apparent in the ways in which different administrations support children with SEND. The categorisation of additional needs and thresholds for support vary considerably across the UK and overseas. Statutory plans also vary in entitlement and scope. Variations in nomenclature illustrate the complexity for families seeking support for their children as they move location.¹²⁹

There is clear acknowledgement that the issues relating to the impact of military life on children's education are not new and that resolving them is extremely challenging, as one military charity pointed out in its evidence:

“Many challenges facing Armed Forces families, such as the provision of quality accommodation or securing support for children with special educational or additional needs or disability, are deep-rooted. Evidence shows us that such issues have existed for many years, profoundly impacting on the quality of life for Armed Forces families. A sustained uplift of ring-fenced funding from the Government is likely to be required to address some of these issues, particularly in areas such as meeting educational needs, and defence accommodation.”

¹²⁸ NATCEN (2024), [Social Mobility](#), NFER

¹²⁹ Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in England; Individual Development Plan (IDPO in Wales; Coordinated Support Plan (CSP) in Scotland; Statement of Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland; and Service Children's Assessment of Need (SCAN) overseas.



While financial investment might be necessary, other changes would also contribute to progress:

“...better collaboration across the devolved nations to support mobile service children – development of a method to share information between schools, wherever they are and perhaps allowing some ownership of this data and process by parents. – Inclusion of training about supporting service children in all teacher training – Funding for schools who receive children after the census date – and more support for Non-UK families who do not understand the UK education system.”

The evidence from the Phase One review demonstrates that the over-arching recommendation (number 15) in *Living in Our Shoes* has yet to be accomplished:

6 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.¹³⁰

Meeting the needs of children growing up in the military is still work in progress despite the problems having been known for very many years. Within Defence the positioning of DCS within the MOD organisational structure needs to be settled with a mandate that offers a sound basis for it to collaborate effectively with the Front Line Commands and the MOD Department of State.

Ultimately, governments must collectively decide whether continuing on the current path is the best approach to meet the needs of children and young people given available resources, or whether better outcomes could be achieved by developing a more evidence-based approach founded on shared and mutually supportive endeavour with explicit targets, goals and timelines, including the projects funded by the AF3. We consider the opportunities for change and the steps that could be taken to address the continuing challenges in the light of Defence Reform in Chapter 6.

130 Walker, Selous and Misca, (2020) op.cit. p88



Chapter 4

Not Just a Partner: Employment and Childcare

“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”¹³¹ ”

Developing and maintaining a career, together with balancing paid employment and bringing up children while navigating a military lifestyle, presented a number of additional challenges for non-serving partners who contributed to the *Living in Our Shoes* review. In this chapter we focus on the progress made since 2020, first, in supporting the employment of non-serving partners and, second, in the provision of childcare, and point to the continuing challenges.

Supporting Partners in Their Careers

Living in Our Shoes found that non-serving partners were often restricted in their choice of employment and frequently took jobs that did not make use of their education and/or academic qualifications or technical skills. The review found a general perception amongst Serving and non-serving personnel that employers discriminated in various ways when military partners applied for jobs because employers knew that they would be moving on in a few years. Non-Serving partners described how they had to make a choice between moving with their partner and keeping the family together or having a stable base and pursuing and maintaining their career, and they could rarely have both. Overseas assignments presented the most serious challenges.

Decisions relating to childcare, preserving the relationship with the Serving partner, and whether and how to obtain employment were hugely important decisions which often involved significant compromises. The difficulties faced by some partners in securing a satisfying and worthwhile career while frequently moving location were clearly drivers in their partner’s decision to leave the military. Partner employment emerged as a significant factor in a Serving person’s retention, readiness for service, and well-being. Moreover, studies show that being in employment is associated with lower levels of distress, better well-being and better quality of life. The loss of confidence and self-esteem and the loss in earnings reported by some partners clearly had a negative impact on their couple relationship, often resulting in high levels of stress within the family.

Although there were many new initiatives taking place at the time of the *Living in Our Shoes* review, limited awareness of support opportunities among non-serving partners pointed to an urgent need for better and more coordinated information. The review concluded that a culture change and more holistic approach to career planning and mobility in the military must take account of the needs of the whole family and not simply prioritise the Serving person. Given the changing expectations of partners, societal norms for both partners to be in paid employment, support for their wellbeing should include measures to protect and enhance their employability.

Living in Our Shoes made 12 recommendations about partner employment. In the main they encouraged government to raise awareness, especially among employers, of the significant skills and expertise offered by military partners, and about the commitment in the Armed Forces Covenant to ensure Armed Forces families are not disadvantaged. The report underlined the importance of the MOD:

- engaging with private sector employers, including encouraging them to apply the Armed Forces Covenant more effectively through the Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS), to highlight and champion the skills and expertise of military partners
- undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of its revised ‘spousal’ support programme to improve further understanding of the drivers for participation, the outcomes in respect of employment uptake, sustainability and satisfaction, and the impacts on retention

¹³¹ Royal Navy non-Serving partner, *Living in Our Shoes*, op.cit. p95



- encouraging improved collaboration across the third Sector through the Partner Employment Steering Group (PESG) and the importance of support programmes being both evidence-based and subject to robust evaluation
- supporting the development of the Forces Families Jobs website as a source of high quality information, advice, guidance, training and job opportunities, and general partner employment support.

The report challenged employers to meet the commitment of the Armed Forces Covenant and ensure there is no disadvantage for non-serving partners in respect of employment and career progression, and the single service assignment authorities to take account of the nature of a partner's employment and career aspirations, and to consider whether the career model could allow families to stay longer in one location or commutable area without compromising operational effectiveness.

Progress Since 2020

The Government accepted all the recommendations in full and agreed to:

- encourage employers to do more for Service partners through Armed Forces Covenant mechanisms, strengthen the ERS and raise awareness of the skills partners can offer
- work alongside partners in the Third Sector, build mutually coherent and individually effective support services, consider and evaluate initiatives to support partners into employment, upskill partners, undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the Spousal Support Programme, and develop a more joined up approach
- support the Forces Families Jobs platform and provide a link to the Civil Service Jobs platform
- commission work to consider a more flexible approach to career management of serving personnel which takes due account of partners' employment and career aspirations.

There has been considerable activity to address the recommendations since 2020 by government, the single Services and the third sector.

1. The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032

Supporting Partners was one of the designated work streams within the 2022 Armed Forces Families Strategy, with an end state as being:

- 6 The skills and experiences of partners and spouses are widely understood, valued and sought after. They can navigate extensive cross-sector provision to access timely support that meets their needs and helps them to develop and pursue their own career path. 9

In 2022 the MOD described the primary focus of this work stream as 'working with third sector providers to help Service partners navigate existing sources of support'.¹³² Six objectives were included in The Armed Forces Families Plan, published in April 2023:¹³³

- (i) Raise awareness in the private sector of instances of disadvantage caused by military service to partners. Promote the skills and experiences of partners through active stakeholder engagement and effective communications.
- (ii) Measure the impact of existing cross-sector support, identify possible gaps and ensure easy access to support to partners and spouses.
- (iii) Improve public sector support by working collaboratively with cross government stakeholders.
- (iv) Improve access to training for partners and spouses and help them further their own development/ career.
- (v) Assist families by developing more flexible, supportive MOD career management policies.
- (vi) Achieve and maintain effective communication of existing partner/spousal support.

¹³² The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2022 ISBN 978-1-5286-3656-8

¹³³ [Armed Forces Families Plan 2022](#), Version 1.0 January 2022, GOV.UK



The objectives were reflected in an outline Theory of Change (TOC) document in 2023. The original work stream leader subsequently departed for another role and from 2024, the ambit of the work stream was broadened to embrace areas beyond employment support where an apparent need had been identified, such as improving mental health and confidence building. While there have been improvements in employment levels for military partners, and there have been some successes, significant challenges remain. The degree to which partners have agency in their choice of employment and the development of careers is now a more pressing challenge in the UK and, while employment overseas will always be more challenging, there is scope to make further progress.

2. The Partner Career Support Programme Pilot (PCSP)

The PCSP pilot was launched in November 2020 and continued until May 2021. It provided bespoke online advice and support to partners, preparing them to re-enter the workplace. The evaluation of the pilot was carried out by the Chief of Defence People Research and Evidence (CDPRE) team, and while we have not had access to their results, we understand that the scheme had mixed reviews from Service partners. In light of this and the absence of specific funding for an enduring partner career support programme, the MOD decided not to bring the pilot into scope for the re-let of the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) contract. The MOD decided that a contractual framework focussed on transition to civilian life was not the most appropriate vehicle to deliver structured employment support to non-serving partners throughout their partner's period of service.

3. Employment Overseas

Our evidence has indicated that the single Services have continued to struggle to attract people to volunteer for accompanied overseas assignments. Since Brexit there have been greater constraints on the ability of partners to work overseas, a concern consistently cited by the Families Federations as a significant disincentive to move within Europe. In 2023 the work stream leader commissioned an Overseas Families Survey,¹³⁴ to improve understanding of the experiences of Armed Forces families living overseas, and to build an evidence base to inform policy development. The survey received 757 responses from 50 locations, including 234 from non-serving partners. The MOD acknowledged limitations with the survey methodology, but the results were nevertheless indicative of the anecdotal evidence of partners' experiences on accompanied assignments overseas. Whereas 86% of partners were working prior to their current overseas assignment, only 40% were employed overseas, and 37% were seeking employment. Partners felt that information about working overseas was lacking. We understand that a second survey was being planned for late 2025.

In 2022 the MOD commissioned the development of a [European Overseas Employment Guide](#) via the Armed Forces Families Fund. The guide was produced by the British Chambers of Commerce in partnership with the Partner Employment Working Group (PEWG) and published on the PEWG website in November 2023. The guide aims to provide information to Service partners who wish to find new employment or continue with their existing employment while accompanying their partners during a tour in Belgium, the Netherlands, Cyprus or Italy.

The MOD was working on a Frequently Asked Questions document on overseas employment, taking account of locations beyond those covered by the British Chambers of Commerce guidance, in collaboration with the Families Federations, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), and the Cabinet Office, but we understand that the work has been paused because of a lack of capacity in MOD.

4. Military Co-Working Hubs

The Military Co-Working Network (MCN) was developed from 2017 to transform redundant buildings on military sites into work spaces for non-serving partners. Following the establishment of the first hub at Leuchars, more hubs were being established when *Living in Our Shoes* suggested evaluation of this initiative. The aim of the MCN is to enable all military spouses and partners to create independent, professional lives alongside military life through a network of co-working hubs and an online community.

134 [Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding Overseas Survey 2023](#), Ministry of Defence, GOV.UK



The RAF Families Federation (as part of RAFA) on behalf of all three Families Federations, manage the funding and the project on behalf of the MCN.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way in which many people work and delayed some of the hubs opening. The legacy of the pandemic continues, but in 2024 MOD sponsored an additional two years of funding for the initiative through the AF3 Supporting Partners programme. This aims to offer Service partners access to professional office spaces on military bases across the UK and in Cyprus for remote working and/or training. Originally funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT), this additional funding enabled the continued operation of the existing Hubs and an independent evaluation of their effectiveness, to inform a decision on future MOD support.

The evaluation¹³⁵ provided evidence of the positive impact of the Military Coworking Hubs on hub users' professional life and career. Hub users were more than twice as positive about the effect that military life has on their career than the general military partner population indicated in FamCAS reports. Working from the hubs made users' feel less lonely, improved their confidence, their mental health and their wellbeing and helped them to regain their personal identity. Moreover, the support for the hubs from the MOD seems to have had a significant positive impact on the extent to which military partners with a career focus feel valued by the military. The evidence also found that having a partner furthering their career via the Coworking Hubs, had enabled some serving partners to focus fully on their military career, feeling less guilty about the negative impact of military life on their partners. Overall, the evaluation shows that the Co-working Hubs have a positive impact on the wellbeing of military partners and create a more stable home life which in turn has a positive influence on the morale of serving personnel. One of the challenges has been ensuring that the opportunities are known, and promotion on some military bases has been described as being inadequate.¹³⁶

Despite the positive evaluation findings, some hubs have closed due to a lack of uptake. In February 2025 there were nine hubs open, some of which were flourishing while others were somewhat less successful, often associated with key personnel being posted. A further evaluation funded by the MOD was being undertaken during our Phase One review with a final report due in 2026.

5. Charitable Support

A number of charities have actively supported partners. For example, Ripple Pond has developed one-to-one mentoring, buddy support, peer support, information, and an employment pathway in partnership with The Poppy Factory, for adult family members of physically or psychologically injured British Armed Forces personnel and veterans. Funders of these kinds of support initiatives include AFCFT, the National Lottery, RNRMC, and Lloyds Patriotic Fund. Partners participating in effective employment support and pathways have reported feeling more confident in their ability to seek and secure employment and a sense of independence and financial stability. Increased engagement in job readiness workshops and career support activities have enabled partners to enter the workforce or pursue further education.

6. Armed Forces Families Fund (AF3): Supporting Partners Programme

The AFCFT have run three Supporting Partners Programmes under the AF3, with a combined value of £2.1 million. The programme aims to improve the support available for Service partners, including promoting their skills and experiences in the workplace, enhancing wellbeing, improving access to support services, and addressing the challenges that partners face. Applications for a fourth programme closed in 2025.

For the 2022 programme, applications were invited to meet one of the following aims, to:

- encourage new ways of enabling peer to peer support
- enable better access to employment, education and training, or wider support
- reduce duplication and make it easier for partners to access knowledge and information that is relevant to their lives.

135 Social Value Lab (2023) *Evaluation of the Military Coworking Hubs Pilot Project*

136 Ibid p35



In 2022/23 the AFCFT awarded £483,144 on behalf of the MOD. The projects supported can be grouped into three key themes:

1. Empowerment, Connection, and Community Support – focusing on empowering and connecting military partners through community initiatives, peer support, and targeted engagement, enhancing social well-being by building local networks and improving access to resources for military families.
2. Digital Innovation and Centralisation of Resources – focusing on digital innovation and resource centralisation, creating user-friendly platforms to streamline access to support, career, and educational resources for military families, especially during overseas postings.
3. Strategic Enhancement and Employment Support – enhancing employment support for military partners by reviewing resources, addressing gaps, and fostering collaboration to ensure accessible and sustainable opportunities across locations.

Latterly the design of the SPP was adjusted to encourage applications to achieve one or more of the following outcomes:

- improved mental health and wellbeing of non-serving partners, with consideration to modern family dynamics
- service providers and employers have greater awareness and understanding of the unique challenges faced by partners of serving personnel
- partners of serving personnel, including non-UK nationals, can access the support they need more easily
- partners feel they have increased their skills and confidence through additional opportunities to explore new ways of working and/or to change careers.

Over the three years to 2024 the projects successful in attaining grants have tended to offer general support to partners, such as reducing isolation, building self-confidence, addressing poor mental health and increasing wellbeing, or offer support to improve their employability. The main outputs included: equipping partners with the tools and support needed to thrive through community networks, digital platforms, and improved employment opportunities, with all projects aiming to enhance the well-being and resilience of Armed Forces families.

A breakdown of successful applications by category is shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Supporting Partners Programme: projects funded

	2022		2023		2024		Total	
	£M	%	£M	%	£M	%	£M	%
Return to Education	£0.03	5%	£0.14	18%	-	-	£0.17	8%
General Employability	£0.18	36%	£0.48	60%	£0.17	21%	£0.82	40%
Specialist Sector Training	£0.03	6%	£0.11	13%	-	-	£0.14	6%
General Support	£0.26	53%	£0.07	9%	£0.63	79%	£0.95	46%



The majority of projects have either supported partners throughout the UK or in England specifically, as shown in Table 4.2

Table 4.2 Distribution of projects by country

Country	Projects	%	Value £M	%
England	20		£1.056M	51%
Scotland	1		£0.055M	3%
Wales	3		£0.114M	5%
Northern Ireland	-		-	-
UK-Wide	14		£0.77	37%
Overseas	2		£0.09	4%
Total	40	-	£12.81	-

The MOD indicated that supporting partners is expected to continue as an AF3 programme in future years.

7. Forces Families Jobs

Living in Our Shoes welcomed the Forces Families Jobs as the platform for high quality information, advice, guidance, training and job opportunities, and partner employment support. The website was described as being a success, with 9,500 jobs being advertised early in 2025.

8. Families Hub Information Portal

In March 2025 the MOD Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team launched a new online Families Hub which offers signposting to Regular and Reserve personnel and their families from when they join the Forces to when they leave. The hub offers information, support and guidance relating to various aspects of Service life, and information about partner employment; childcare; health and wellbeing; education; housing; non-UK family issues; additional needs and disability; life skills and finance; transition from the military; the Armed Forces Covenant; and relationships.

The initiative has been welcomed by the Families Federations and military charities. It would be helpful to assess the use and usefulness of this hub and the extent to which it is regularly updated and expanded as appropriate.

Continuing Challenges

1. Finding employment

Evidence continues to suggest that improving support for Service partners, in particular in the field of employment, has the potential to generate a significant positive impact on Armed Forces retention. The 2025 FamCAS Survey suggests that 81% of Service spouses are employed,¹³⁷ compared with a national average of 75%. In 2014 the percentage employed was 68%, compared to a national average of 77%. Although this paints a positive picture of spousal employment trends, FamCAS 2025 shows 'effect on my career' as the most negative aspect of service family life according to partners (55% negative, 10% positive).

The AFCAS survey results have also consistently shown over many years the spouse/partner's career to be within the top three or four most impactful factors influencing intentions to leave.¹³⁸ This suggests that

¹³⁷ The Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2025 indicates that 85% of spouse and partners are employed.

¹³⁸ The Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2025 rated it third behind impact of service life on family/personal life and opportunities outside the service.



the increasingly positive headline employment figure may mask the continuing challenges that partners of Serving personnel experience in respect of the quality of employment options available and the ability to sustain fulfilling careers.

FamCAS 2025 indicates that of those spouses who looked for a job in the past year, 68% experienced difficulties finding suitable employment, compared to 62% in 2024. Of those who experienced difficulties, the top reasons given for the difficulty were:

- the location where I live (43%)
- having a spouse who is often away (43%)
- partner unable to assist with childcare responsibilities (42%)
- extended family living too far away to assist with childcare (39%)

While there have been some small changes in the indicators relating to difficulties in finding employment (up 3% to a period high of 68%) and satisfaction that qualifications match their job (up 2% to a period high of 78%), these numbers are not statistically significant. There is a continued downward trend in employment rates for 'deployed' partners and for those able to access information while accompanying their partner overseas. (Figure 4.1)

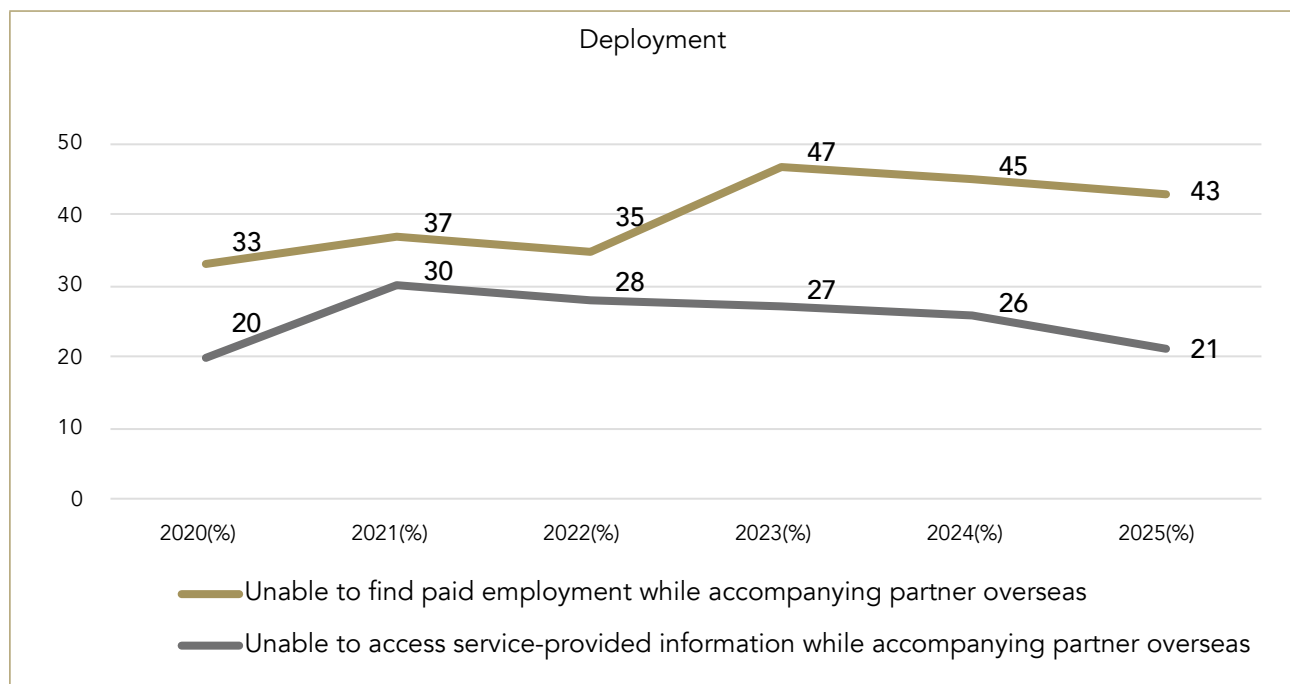


Figure 4.1 Partners Seeking Work While Living Overseas

2. Coordination with the Third Sector

The *Living in Our Shoes* report encouraged government to work with the third Sector to build mutually coherent and individually effective support services. The government has:

- engaged with employers on their Covenant obligations through Defence Relationship Management
- been visible at Cobseo partner employment meetings and meetings of the PEWG
- provided a boost to third Sector contributions through the AF3 Supporting Partners programme.

Partner employment issues are well-understood with significant third Sector interest and activity. In 2020 the MOD was already well placed to encourage improved co-ordination of third Sector efforts in respect of partner employment through the PESG, which MOD chaired, and the subordinate PEWG.

The MOD dissolved the PESG and the PEWG became a Community Interest Company so that it could access funding in its own right, primarily to enable it to establish and run the successful Celebrating Forces Families annual event. The Cobseo partner employment sub-cluster, therefore, is the one existing forum that provides an opportunity for third Sector organisations to exchange information on their activities and

priorities. The MOD advised that they remain engaged with key stakeholders in a supporting role through the Cobseo group and the PEWG. However, within the MOD there is no specific appointment to coordinate and underpin actions to deliver the end state for the supporting partners work stream within the Armed Forces Families Strategy, and no obvious engagement between the work stream and other interested MOD policy teams, Defence Relationship Management or the single Services.

The absence of a group to bring the single Services and MOD policy staff together around a formalised, agreed and measurable programme of work to support partners means that there is a risk of partners' concerns being overlooked, and an opportunity to support or challenge MOD or single Services is lost. Such a group could focus minds on what can be achieved by government.

The attention given by the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team to considering employment issues for partners in overseas locations seems entirely appropriate, but this is an area where the single Services and Cyber and Special Operations Command are also engaged. Collective consideration of the issues and solutions would be beneficial. However, the majority of activity on this issue appears to be aimed at improving guidance for partners seeking to work overseas. There is less evidence of concerted action towards improving the conditions for employment – including working with employers to encourage more tolerance of remote working for Service partners and exploring the scope to remove the legal constraints within government-to-government agreements that prevent partners from working.

Childcare

Decisions taken by non-serving partners about whether to work and the kind of job to pursue are often associated with the availability and affordability of good quality childcare. This factor was very prevalent in the evidence given to the *Living in Our Shoes* review. The 2019 FamCAS survey¹³⁹ found that some 34% of military families with children required early years (0–4) childcare, and that 90% of these had been able to access suitable childcare. Of the families with at least one child of school age, 48% needed to find childcare before and after school and in school holidays, and many parents were concerned about the cost even if they could find appropriate provision. Apart from the pressures of managing childcare and employment, especially when a partner is on deployment, *Living in Our Shoes* found that there was a lack of affordable childcare in many of the areas where families were relocated. This was often cited as a barrier to obtaining employment or maintaining a career.

Since the availability of appropriate childcare is closely associated with partner employment, and decisions about whether to leave the Armed Forces is influenced by partners' ability to pursue a career and meaningful employment, childcare was an area where the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations challenged government to increase its efforts. This included improving their understanding of early years' needs and the availability of provision, by encouraging the development and, by implication, the protection of on-base early years settings where these are required, and by working to address the impact of disparities in childcare support offered by the separate governments of the UK.

Living in Our Shoes made five recommendations relating to a range of actions which should be taken to address the childcare challenges. These included:

- assessing the demand for childcare on or near military bases
- encouraging the establishment of nursery and childcare facilities at every military base where there was demand to enable non-serving partners to stay in employment
- working with schools to offer before- and after-school clubs
- addressing disadvantage as a result of variations in childcare costs around the UK
- ensuring childcare professionals are provided with information and training about the specific challenges of the military lifestyle
- encouraging partners to train in childcare or child minding, supported by the Defence Childcare Strategy, although it is clear that this is not an attractive option for partners who wish to pursue their chosen career rather than retrain in childcare
- encouraging research into the needs of early years childcare and sharing good practice in provision.



The government accepted all the recommendations and committed to:

- address the challenges of childcare by creating a Childcare Support Team, rolling out wraparound childcare and addressing the variations in childcare provision and costs across the UK and elsewhere
- ensure childcare professionals understand the needs of Service children
- facilitate childminding and childcare training for partners supported by the Defence Childcare Strategy.

Progress Since 2020

The FamCAS surveys show that the proportion of Service families with children remained roughly static at around 78% between 2020 and 2025. The proportion of families with school age children who require formal childcare had increased slightly since 2019¹⁴⁰ to around 54%, as have levels of satisfaction with the quality, availability, opening hours and cost of school age childcare. The proportion of Service families with at least one child under the age of five who require early years childcare increased from 70% to 74% between 2020 and 2024. At the same time the proportion of families using free informal childcare at least monthly (from extended family, for example) rose from 34% to 74% in 2025; and the proportion of families using only formal childcare fell from 32% to 3% in 2025.

1. Wraparound Childcare (WAC)

In 2022 the government launched its wraparound childcare policy (WAC). Wraparound childcare is known as 'Out of School Care' in Wales, and 'School Age Childcare' in Scotland. The aim of WAC is to help meet the cost of before and after school childcare for Service children aged 4–11, or up to 16 for children with certain disabilities, living in the UK by funding 20 hours childcare a week for 39 weeks of the year. The project arose from a Conservative Party Manifesto commitment in 2019 and rapid progress with implementation followed the link between available and affordable childcare and partner employment highlighted in *Living in Our Shoes*.

Pilots were established at bases in England in September 2020 and WAC was subsequently approved in June 2022 and launched in September 2022. Nevertheless, take up at launch was below expected levels. This remains the case, despite incremental improvements introduced to the administration of the scheme, most notably to make the registration and claims processes more user-friendly. In the first full month of the scheme's operation 2,500 requests to register individual Service children had been received. As at February 2025 there were 8,000 Service children actively enrolled on the scheme.

The main eligibility criteria for WAC was shaped by the Government's Tax Free Childcare Scheme, with certain additional discretionary elements to fit the Defence context. Eligibility was extended at the start of the 2023 autumn term to include Full Time Reserve Service (FTRS) personnel who are on Home or Limited Commitment, and personnel serving overseas unaccompanied on Voluntary Separation terms.

In late 2024 a decision was taken to extend the scheme to all overseas areas where the conditions exist to enable the WAC scheme to operate without substantial redesign.¹⁴¹ The scheme went live in various locations in January 2025. By mid-April 2025, the MOD reported a total of 45 overseas WAC registrations, the majority of which were in Cyprus. The MOD continues to examine design options for a scheme that could be extended to other locations, for example, the USA and Saudi Arabia, and hopes to have this in place by the end of 2025.

A condition of the WAC Business Case approval was a detailed evaluation at the three-year point. This is being led by the Defence Analysis team and is taking place throughout 2025 with a view to the final report being presented by April 2026. This is expected to highlight take-up levels as well as the impact on retention.¹⁴²

Since childcare providers set their own fees, prices vary. In March 2025, average costs were £4 per session for breakfast clubs and £10–12 per session for after school clubs.¹⁴³ The government's ambition is that by 2026 all parents and carers, both civilian and military, of primary school-aged children will be able to access term-time childcare from 8am to 6pm. This popular scheme has been much appreciated by Serving families, despite being described by the Families Federations as somewhat 'clunky' to operate, primarily because

140 The 2020 results were artificially depressed by COVID 19 related factors

141 Essentially this is wherever childcare can be paid for using the UK Government's tax free childcare scheme (this means UK Sovereign Base Areas or countries within the European Economic Area). The availability of good quality childcare facilities is another important consideration.

142 The MOD reports that survey evidence from scheme users suggests that it is having a positive impact on retention.

143 [Training and resources in safeguarding and child protection](#), NSPCC



the Serving partner has to manage all the paperwork and this can be problematic when on deployment. Nevertheless, Figure 4.2 shows that satisfaction with school aged childcare increased on all indicators between 2020 and 2025.

In September 2024 the MOD adjusted its policies in relation to childcare costs in overseas locations to bring entitlement in line with the expansion of funded childcare places in England. This increased funded childcare provision in Defence Children Services settings, or, where such settings do not exist or are otherwise inaccessible, increased the childcare hours claimable through the existing Overseas Nursery Authority policy.

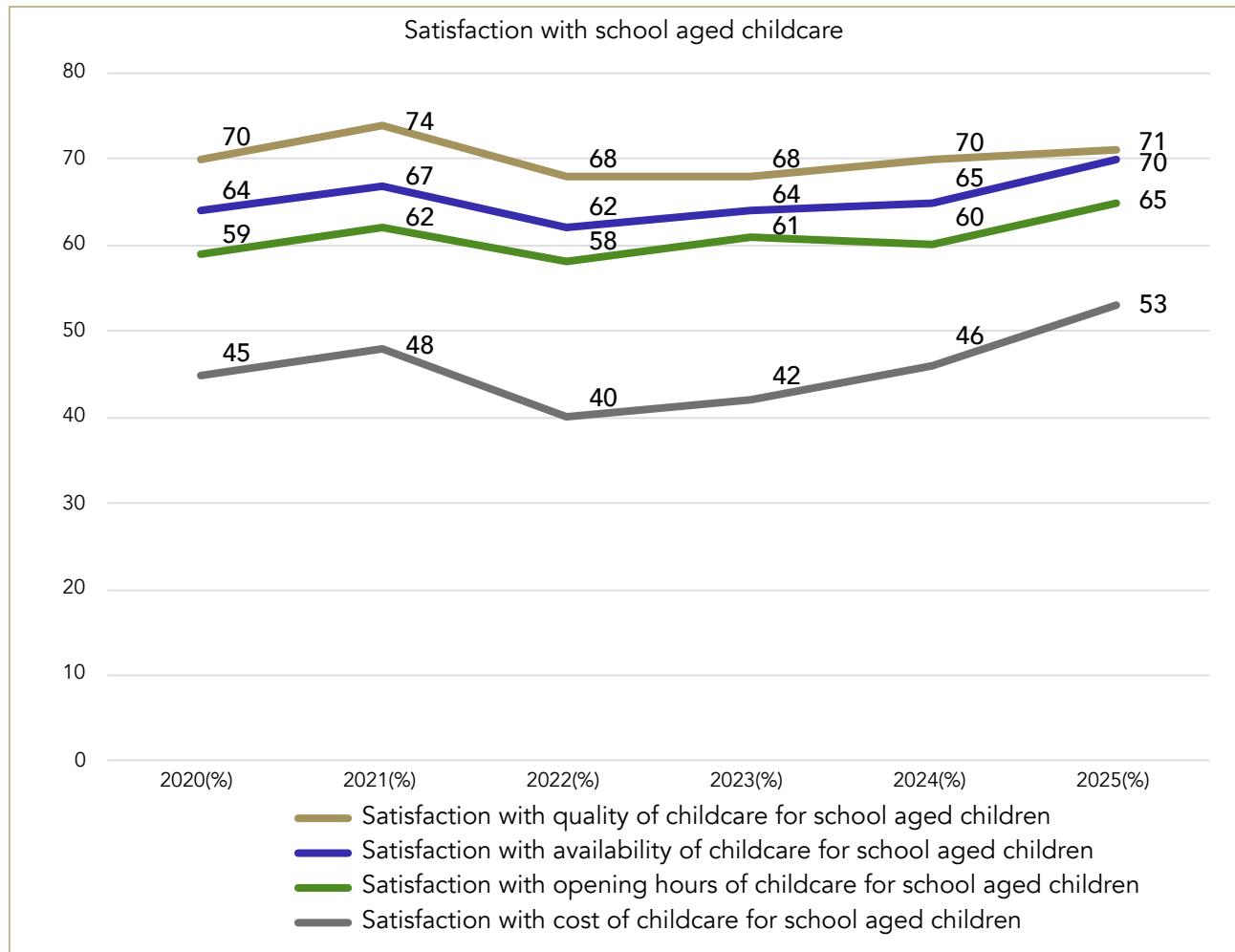


Figure 4.2 Satisfaction with School Age Childcare

2. Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032

The 2022 Armed Forces Families Strategy encompasses the need to increase both the quality and availability of childcare for Service families wherever they are located, at home and overseas. A dedicated work stream was set up with responsibility for childcare, with the following end state:

- 6 Families have access to good quality, enriching and safe childcare that meets their needs. This allows Service personnel to fully engage with their duties, and the greater flexibility gives the family more opportunities, improving general wellbeing. 9

The end state constitutes a strong statement of ambition and would be strengthened if it emphasised that access to childcare not only enables Service personnel 'to engage fully' with their duties but also unlocks employment opportunities for non-serving partners, thereby reducing family tensions. The supporting Armed Forces Families Plan published in 2022 set out the following seven sub-objectives to deliver the end state:

- (i) Manage WAC pilots in order to gather evidence to support a Full Business Case for Full UK Rollout.
- (ii) Meet the manifesto commitment of funding toward WAC full UK rollout for Sept 2022.



- (iii) Deliver the Early Learning & Childcare fund (ELCF)¹⁴⁴ in order to assist Early Years settings to meet the specific needs of the Armed Forces families that they serve; particularly in looking at actions that will encourage greater availability of or accessibility to provision.
- (iv) Create and maintain a service children's Early Years Provider Network (EYPN) that will share best practice, communicate, collaborate, and celebrate to the betterment of service children in the early years sector.
- (v) Establish, maintain, and potentially grow the MOD Local Authority Partnership – Early Years (MODLAP-EY) in order that Defence is able to encourage and hold local authorities to account for their performance to their Armed Forces communities.
- (vi) Investigate the specific issues faced in obtaining childcare during periods of deployment/separation and develop options for mitigation.
- (vii) Act as the Defence voice on policy matters relating to childcare on Department and Devolved Administration policy development committees.

3. Focus on Early Years Childcare

A Theory of Change was developed for the childcare work stream which focussed exclusively on early years childcare, and therefore excluded WAC which was managed separately. It focused on the following concerns:¹⁴⁵

- a lack of robust understanding of the needs and requirements of Service families with young children in local authorities early childhood education and childcare provision
- insufficient use of available research by the MOD
- variations in access to good quality, accessible and available early years provision
- a disparity in the issuing of and adherence to appropriate licences which allow early years providers to occupy the Defence estate
- a lack of empirical evidence and research into the early education and childcare needs of Service families in the UK and overseas.

The actions identified to address these concerns were to:

- generate and disseminate guidance to, and raise awareness within, the early years sector of the needs of Service families
- develop a support network for early years providers operating on the Defence estate to enable clear lines of communication, collaboration and sharing of best practice
- work with MOD stakeholders to address governance issues relating to providers operating on the Defence estate
- conduct visits to providers operating on the Defence estate, to hold them to account for meeting the needs of Service families
- target the AF3 early years programme on areas of greatest need.
- gather evidence on the needs of Armed Forces early years children, the affordability and availability of provision and the extent to which this meets those needs – through research, surveys and focus groups.

The focus on early years highlights an area of inconsistency in relation to the childcare work stream since the end state makes no distinction between early years and school aged childcare, which is reflected in the Armed Forces Families Plan objectives. Since 2023 the two areas have been run by different teams within the MOD's Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team, and responsibility for policy development and stakeholder engagement on childcare matters is therefore divided. This has created confusion as to where the responsibility for managing change and improving access and provision to early years childcare lies. We found no evidence that the theory of change modelling has influenced the activities to manage change.

¹⁴⁴ This subsequently became an element of the Armed Force Families Fund

¹⁴⁵ Abridged for convenience and readability.



In 2024 new government support was introduced for working parents in England. From April 2024, eligible working parents of two-year-olds could access 15 hours of funded childcare per week and from September 2024 the funding was extended to eligible working parents of children from nine months old. From September 2025, the support was extended to 30 hours of funded childcare per week for eligible working parents of children from the age of nine months to school age.

A survey by Coram in 2025¹⁴⁶ found that with the new funded hours for eligible working parents, a part-time nursery place for a child under two costs an average of £70.51 per week in England, down by 56% on 2024. Childcare funding levels in the devolved administrations have not matched those in England: a part-time nursery place for a child under two costs an average of £122.38 per week in Scotland, an increase of 7% on 2024, and an average of £155.04 per week in Wales, a 10% increase on 2024. The levels of childcare support in the UK for three-to-four-year-olds have not changed with costs increasing by almost 5% in 2024. Coram also found continued gaps in availability of childcare places for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

The proportion of military families with at least one child under the age of five who require childcare has increased since 2020 from 70% to 74%. Contrary to the satisfaction with school-age childcare provision, satisfaction rates with early years childcare fell between 2020 and 2025 (Figure 4.3).

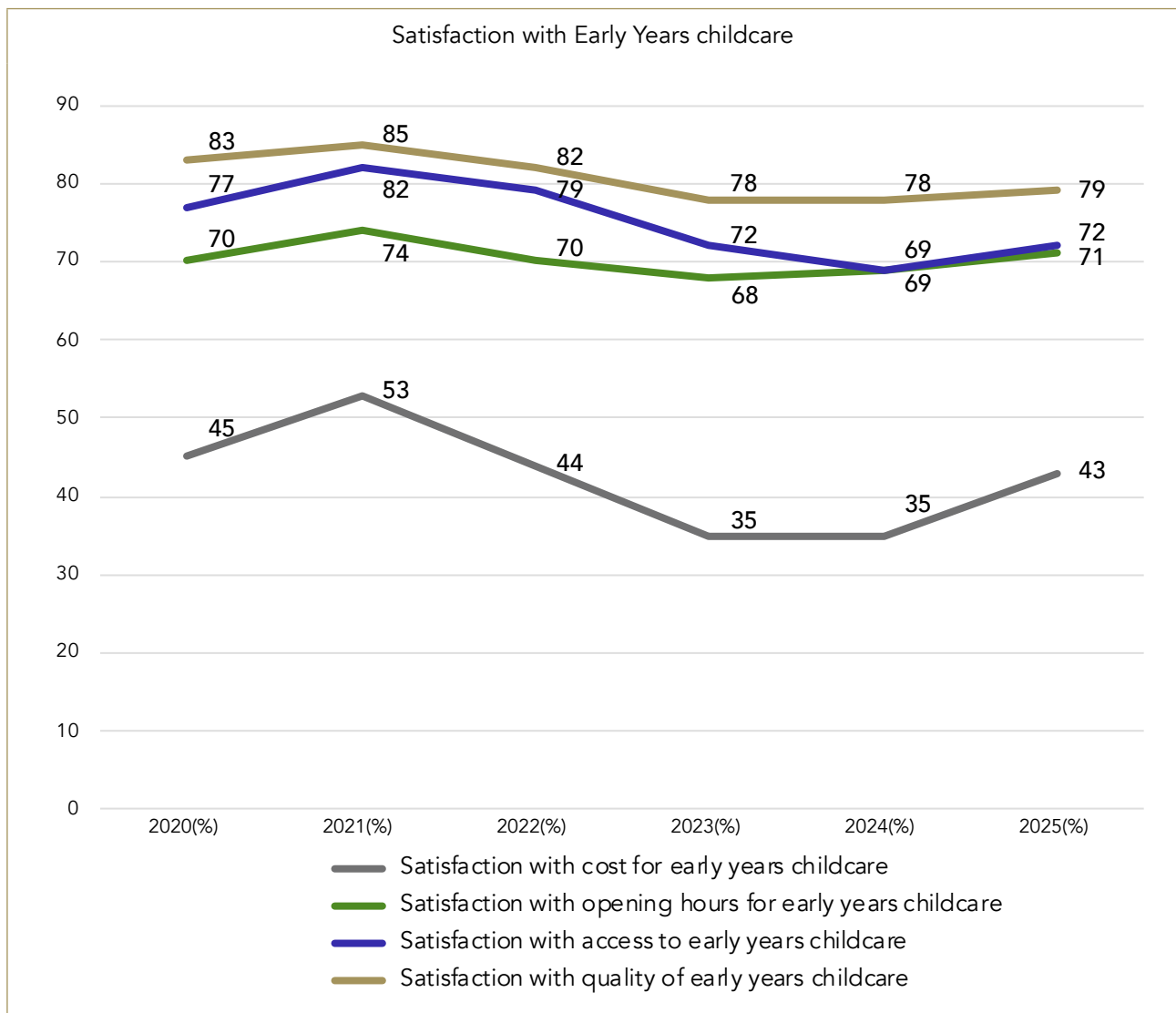


Figure 4.3 Satisfaction with Early Years Childcare

As Figure 4.3 shows, satisfaction with quality reduced from 83% to 79%; satisfaction with access reduced from 77% to 72%; and satisfaction with cost decreased from 45% to 43%, having dropped to 35% in the 2024 FamCAS survey.

146 *Childcare entitlement expansion sees childcare costs for under-threes in England more than halve, whilst prices in Scotland and Wales continue to rise*, Coram Family and Childcare (2025)



As we noted earlier, the proportion of families using free informal childcare at least monthly, from extended family, for example, rose from 34% to 74% in 2025; and the proportion of families using only formal childcare fell from 32% to 3% in 2025.

4. Early Years Providers Network

In 2022 the MOD established an early years providers network to promote high standards of childcare and share best practice. This was focused on childcare providers operating on the Defence estate in the UK, where feedback from Service families, childcare policy leads, the chain of command and other stakeholders indicated variable quality of provision. An additional aim of the network was to encourage providers to strengthen their links with the local unit/garrison command to better communicate and address the needs of Service families and facilitate the resolution of issues affecting the setting. However, the network fell into disuse following poor engagement from providers.

The MOD is encouraging providers to nominate their own Armed Forces Champions to act as a point of contact between Service families and the setting. In March 2025 the MOD launched a network to provide peer support for these champions – the Armed Forces Champion Early Years Professional Network. By early April 2025 the network had attracted 39 members including childminders, nursery staff and primary school teachers. The champions are expected to:

- be the point of contact between Service families and the early years setting
- support parents when their partner is deployed
- liaise with local authorities to facilitate SEND support for Service children
- work with settings to support effective transitions.

The RAF has established a Childcare Procurement Strategy within HQ Air and rolled out a standardised contract and lease arrangements across the RAF.¹⁴⁷ Fifteen nursery and childcare contracts have been awarded via the procurement strategy. The RAF believe that this offers a valuable model and best practice for wider roll out across Defence.

5. Improving Guidance

In 2022 the MOD worked with local authorities in England to establish an early years group within the MODLAP framework. The aims of the group are to foster collaboration among local authorities, and to identify and support best practice in meeting the needs of Service children in early years settings, schools and with child minders. The MODLAP-Early Years group supports early childhood settings by providing guidance, hosting conferences and providing training for providers. In February 2025 17 local authorities were represented.

A best practice guide was created by the group, offering '10 Top-tips to help things run smoothly', including the importance of treating each child as an individual, the need to ensure transitions to and from locations and settings are handled smoothly, and the importance of staff understanding the needs of young Service children. The guide has been shared widely within the local authorities who are represented on MODLAP and within the now defunct early years practitioner network. Holding training workshops and conferences remains an aspiration for the group.

6. Cross-Government Working Group on Childcare

The MOD is part of the cross-government working group on childcare headed up by the DfE and including the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and HM Treasury. The MOD indicated that their contact with the devolved administrations on childcare issues has been minimal, however. The MOD had convened a Defence Childcare Working Group to develop the Defence Childcare Strategy and Action Plan, which then fell into abeyance when work on the strategy was put on hold. By contrast, the MOD WAC team appears to have good connections across government, including with HM Treasury and HMRC.

¹⁴⁷ Presentation by Naomi Skelton, SO1 Early Years Specialist Advisor to *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* in March 2025



7. Kings Camps

The Kings Camps Foundation has provided much appreciated fun activities in school holidays for military children on various bases. While the aim is to help children and young people enjoy games and develop their social skills, a recent evaluation of their impact has revealed just how important these activities are in providing much needed childcare during school holidays.¹⁴⁸ Parents commented that they would find it difficult to balance their work commitments with looking after their children if this kind of provision was not available in school holidays.

Continuing Challenges

Considerable progress has been made to address the issues raised in *Living in Our Shoes* about supporting partners and the provision of childcare. Nevertheless, the MOD and the single Services are cognisant of the continuing challenges and the importance of resolving them given the current retention concerns:

1. Variations in Childcare Provision and Cost

The extension of funded childcare places in England created both the opportunity to bring childcare within affordable reach of more parents and presented a challenge to the sector to absorb the additional demand created while remaining financially viable. It also exacerbated the disparity in childcare support available between the nations of the UK, giving rise to perceptions of comparative disadvantage between different geographical assignments. Against this increasingly complex and fragile background the importance of the MOD providing a firm policy lead on childcare and engaging effectively with central, devolved and local government agencies to make the case for Service families remains crucial.

The decision was taken to separate the elements relating to WAC and other policy issues, mainly relating to overseas allowances, from the activities aimed more explicitly at supporting early years providers. Since then, the MOD's approach to childcare within the Armed Forces Families Strategy has suffered from a lack of definition and clear ownership, and the need for an agreed and identifiable plan.

While childcare is not a core Defence output and the provision of childcare is not a requirement, the single Services have each made it a priority to understand the needs for childcare and address the problem of availability. Defence has recognised that the lack of appropriate provision creates a retention issue which can then negatively impact operational effectiveness. The differences in availability and the cost of childcare across the devolved administrations continue to cause concern, therefore. We were told about a lack of provision in Scotland, specifically in HMNB Clyde with a huge waiting list. Providing early years childcare on the Defence estate is also riddled with challenges because of fiscal rules and concerns about encroachment.

We understand that the MOD is developing policy options to address the imbalance of funding support for childcare places in the various nations of the UK following the UK Government's announcement on increases in entitlement to funded childcare in England.

2. Early Years Childcare

The picture painted by the satisfaction statistics is of Service families increasingly dissatisfied with early years childcare provision and relying increasingly on extended family to meet their childcare needs. For these families the impact of mobility due to military service, where this entails separation from wider family support networks, is likely to be more severe, causing additional strain on family life.

The statistical trends echo structural problems in the early years sector in society as a whole. In July 2023 the Education Committee of the UK Parliament issued a report¹⁴⁹ describing the childcare market in England as 'struggling, with unprecedented numbers of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals leaving the sector and parents struggling to find appropriate care across the country'.

The 2023 Defence Command Paper included a commitment to publish a Defence Early Years Strategy by March 2024 to 'increase capacity in childcare provision serving Defence locations across the UK'. This was retitled the Defence Childcare Strategy and Action Plan and drafting began in early 2024. The strategy element was completed in draft in spring 2024, with publication delayed until September 2024.

148 Walker, J., and Misca, G., (2025) *Strengthening Families: By Your Side Programme Research Evaluation*, RNRMC

149 *House of Commons Education Committee Enquiry into childcare and the early years 26 July 2023 para 37*, UK Parliament



A subsequent decision was taken to include this within the wider work to review and update the Armed Forces Families Strategy, a firm timeframe for which has not been published.

3. *Childcare on the Defence Estate*

The presence of early years childcare settings on Armed Forces bases enables critically important access to childcare provision for pre-school age children in military families, including those living with a single-serving parent. The availability of childcare is particularly important in isolated locations where alternatives are few or non-existent. The childcare providers operate separate businesses, not owned by Defence, and the terms of their occupation of Defence land and buildings are an important element of their business model. There is no standard contract to govern such arrangements and providers work to different contracts, which adds to complexity. Many, but not all, enjoy an unofficial but favourable arrangement where relevant fees or charges, such as rent and utilities, are either waived or significantly abated.

For some years, these arrangements have been under scrutiny on the basis that some or all of them may need to be regularised. Regularisation has the potential to increase the operating costs for many settings, which could either threaten the financial viability of service providers' operations, or lead to an increase in the cost of childcare. This represents a strategic risk to the availability of childcare to Service families, particularly in locations where there is limited or no alternative childcare provision. Reports on this issue indicate that progress has been uneven.

In 2023 MOD began work on a standard form of service-level agreement, with the aim of agreeing to a set of terms which would satisfy MOD estate governance requirements and enable early years settings to continue to operate. While work on this has been completed, we understand that it has yet to be formalised in policy.

In 2023 MOD re-allocated £3million of surplus funding from the WAC project to the single Services to pump prime infrastructure investment in early years settings on the Defence estate. This was distributed over two years and was intended to support capacity growth to meet the expected rise in demand for childcare places following the increases in funded childcare in England. Year One funding was used by the single Services to conduct assessment studies and other enabling work. Year Two funding was subsequently withdrawn and assigned to other Defence priorities by MOD central finance.

4. *Armed Forces Families Fund: Early Years Programme*

The Early Years Programme is managed by the education policy team in the MOD and the childcare policy team has no involvement in setting the programme's scope. Initially the Early Years Programme sought applications from settings on or close to bases specifically for projects which helped 'enhance Early Years learning environments to meet specific needs of children from Forces families'. Latterly the MOD has adjusted the design of the programme to encourage applications that enhance 'early childhood education and childcare settings to meet specific needs of young children from Armed Forces families,' in any setting where at least 50% of the children are from Service families.

This refinement in programme design has resulted in a modest shift in the type of project funded by the programme, principally towards projects which involve training staff to better recognise and respond to the needs of Service children and to projects aimed at improving the quality of provision. Nevertheless, projects aimed at improving outdoor¹⁵⁰ and indoor facilities continue to make up over half the projects funded by value and, over the four years to 2025, had attracted £3.191 million of grant funding.

Overall, the programme aims to

- increase capacity to enable more children to access early years' provision
- support staff training and development to provide high-quality care for Service children
- provide better learning environments and ensure access to child care.

¹⁵⁰ Typically forest schools and sensory gardens



The vision for this programme is to:

- 6 ensure military families have access to high quality, enriching, and safe childcare that meets their unique needs. This support can help service personnel to fully engage in their duties while offering families greater flexibility and more opportunities, contributing to improved overall wellbeing.¹⁵¹ 9

Looking specifically at the projects funded between February 2023 and August 2025, the programme encouraged bids relating to one or more of the following three key themes:

- (i) Enhancing outdoor learning and play: through sensory spaces, forest schools and equipment.
- (ii) Strengthening inclusion and SEN support: through staff training, individualised learning plans, and tailored interventions.
- (iii) Supporting Service Families through flexible, community-based provision; access to early education and wrap-around childcare; responding to employment pressures, mobility and the need for constant, high quality childcare.

In 2025 these criteria were refined to include:

- increased capacity at the setting to allow more Service children to attend
- better learning environments for Service children
- training and development for staff to support Service children
- establishing collaborative networks and shared resources through clusters to address the needs of Service children.

Of the £3.2million allocated through this programme to date:

- over half (£1.8M) was spent on improving outdoor facilities – typically forest schools and sensory gardens, although this proportion reduced significantly from financial year 22/23 (80%+) to financial year 25/26 (45%+)
- around 13% (£0.41M) of the funding was spent on improving indoor facilities
- around 12% (£0.38M) has been spent on staff training
- 10% (£0.28) was allocated to projects specifically aimed at improving quality of provision, including one project devoted explicitly to supporting children with additional needs
- two projects were focused on expanding capacity.

Looking across the projects supported between 2022 and 2025 (Table 4.3) in England, Scotland and Wales, improving outdoor facilities attracted the highest percentage of funding (58%), with SEND projects attracting the lowest (1%). This is surprising given the widespread concern across the three Services, the Families Federations, and schools about the serious problems relating to the support for children with special needs in Armed Forces families. The majority of spend in the latest 2025 round is also allocated to improving outdoor spaces, with the least spend on training (1%).



Table 4.3 Early Years Fund Projects

	2022		2023		2024		2025		Total	
	£M	%	£M	%	£M	%	£M	%	£M	%
Improving Outdoor Facilities	£0.73	81%	£0.65	59%	£0.24	35%	£0.17	45%	£1.79	58%
Staff Training	£0.04	5%	£0.15	14%	£0.18	26%	£0.01	1%	£0.41	12%
Improving Quality and Capability	£0.05	5%	£0.15	14%	£0.13	18%	-	-	£0.32	11%
Improving Indoor Facilities	£0.05	5%	£0.15	14%	£0.09	12%	£0.12	33%	£0.29	13%
SEND Support Projects	£0.03	4%	-	-	£0.01	1%	-	-	£0.04	1%
Expanding Capacity	-	-	-	-	£0.06	8%	£0.07	20%	£0.13	4%

A relatively high proportion (82%) of projects awarded are located in England (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 Grants by Country

Country	Projects	%	Value £M	%
England	69	84%	£2.638M	83%
Scotland	9	11%	£0.385M	12%
Wales	1	1%	£0.044M	1%
Northern Ireland	3	4%	£0.124M	4%
Total	82	-	£3.191M	-

The significant proportion of funding allocated to creating forest schools and sensory gardens (58% - £1.788million) raises questions about which aspect of the Strategy is being addressed, and whether this funding should be from Defence budgets, not least because some projects have been awarded to schools and education settings which include civilian children as well as those from Armed Forces families.

Phase One evidence indicates that an opportunity to consider how grant funding could best be deployed to inform policy and practice has not been fully grasped. Nor has it been used to inform the way in which the Armed Forces Families Strategy is pursued to lever change and improve the lives of Service children. The AF3 is a powerful adjunct to the Armed Forces Families Strategy, enabling government to empower external organisations to pursue objectives under the strategy which government cannot, or is less well placed to deliver. The evidence suggests that the continued focus on a high number of low value, piecemeal and, in some instances, unsustainable projects, means that an opportunity is being lost to employ this valuable resource to best effect. Moreover, a striking number of organizations applying for funding are repeat bidders, in particular in relation to educational establishments. This, coupled with the general nature of many of the projects being pursued by schools, gives rise to the suspicion that in some cases the AF3 has been used to compensate for perceived shortfalls in government education funding streams.

Although the Grant Funding Agreement allows for the MOD to evaluate the AFCFT's performance in managing the fund and to conduct evaluations of the projects themselves, the MOD has only recently begun to assess the impact of its three enduring programmes under the AF3 fund. During Phase One there was an absence of hard data to assess the contribution the AF3 is making to Strategy delivery. While each successful application will have merit in its own right, without robust evidence in relation to both the collective

and cumulative impact of these projects, the MOD cannot determine the value it is obtaining from its investment relative to its purpose. Attempts to measure impact post-hoc are unlikely to provide the evidence which can guide policy development or establish exactly where funding could make a sustained difference.

There are also questions about the design of the three enduring programmes, all of which seem to encourage the development of generic support projects rather than projects designed to target known issues affecting Armed Forces families. In particular we note the concerns expressed across the Armed Forces that families with a child with SEND are not served well and that not enough has been done to address the problem in the last five years.

The extent to which the projects funded have had a sustainable impact on improving the lives of or reducing disadvantage for Armed Forces children is unclear. The ability to measure outcomes and impact remains a gap which should be addressed in any future bids. Identifying the priorities for action could inform the kinds of projects for future funding that can influence policy.

It is also unclear whether the MODLAP partnership has been able to reach its potential, especially as the attempt to create a network of providers was shelved due to lack of engagement, and an attempt to encourage volunteers to become early years champions for Service children is still in its infancy.

The absence of research concerning the early years childcare needs of Service children was highlighted in *Living in Our Shoes*. Most research into Service children's early years needs either originates from the US or focuses on older children: hence the works stream's reliance on high level data from FamCAS, supplemented by surveys commissioned by others, to provide evidence. However, the MOD has recently commissioned research led by Bath Spa University¹⁵² to examine deployment-related wellbeing of three-to-four-year-old Service children in their pre-school year. Meanwhile, important work to resolve complications arising from governance irregularities affecting providers on the Defence estate appears to have stalled, with concomitant risk to those settings which face a licence being imposed upon them by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), triggering a potentially unaffordable increase in operating costs. This is an issue that the MOD is uniquely placed to address and should treat as a priority.

Priorities Going Forward

Since partner employment and childcare provision for Armed Forces families is closely related to satisfaction with life in the Armed Forces, it is essential that the priorities identified in our Phase One evidence review are considered seriously in order to address retention issues and, in particular, in respect of single-serving parents who are often dependent on childcare being available.

There is no forum currently where MOD, the single Services and Cyber & Special Operations Command can develop a common understanding of the issues affecting either partner employment or families' access to appropriate childcare, and work collaboratively on solutions. This needs to be rectified. Furthermore, given the close relationship between the ability of Service partners to pursue their careers and access appropriate employment and the availability of good quality affordable childcare, there is a strong case for Defence to view these currently separate lines of development jointly.

It is imperative to develop a coherent and comprehensive plan of action. Establishing a group of officials with a focus on both partner employment and childcare would make this possible and generate a strong internal mandate for MOD officials to engage across government on those issues beyond Defence's agency to solve. It would also enable clearer signals to be sent to the third sector about what Defence is doing and where external organisations should focus their efforts. This approach would require MOD to resolve a lack of clarity around where work on early years sits – is it an aspect of the children's education agenda or does it form part of wider work in relation to childcare? The creation of an effective action plan demands the development of a more comprehensive evidence base, founded on relevant research and a robust approach to evaluation. Once a clearer, evidence-led set of priorities is established the AF3 funds could be invested in a more focused way as a supporting mechanism, thereby increasing its impact.

An agenda for such a group should include:

- exploring what more can be done to bring partner career and employment considerations nearer to the fore in career management decision-making

152 [Bath Spa University](#), The Armed Forces Covenant Trust



- working across government to ease tax and employment issues for partners accompanying Service personnel in overseas locations
- addressing issues related to the cost, availability and quality of childcare for families in overseas locations
- addressing variations in accessibility, availability, quality and cost of early years childcare across the nations of the UK
- resolving governance issues relating to childcare facilities on the Defence estate
- improving programme design, data collection and analysis relating to outcomes, impact, sustainability, and value for money of funding to support childcare and early years provision
- focusing funding on meeting the greatest needs of Armed Forces families
- working with the Families Federations and external organisations to improve knowledge about the childcare needs of Service families in different circumstances and locations
- improving the interplay between activities to support partners' employment and those focused on the provision of childcare, to increase consolidation and coordination, and refocusing effort accordingly.

The provision of early years childcare remains a challenge for all parents in the UK, including those in the Armed Forces. However, since childcare is an issue which has considerable impact on non-serving partner careers and employment, single-serving parents, and decisions about whether to remain in the military, it is essential to address the continuing challenges and priorities for action identified in Phase One.



Chapter 5

Looking after Military Families: Housing, Health and Wellbeing

6 Providing decent living standards and quality customer service is essential to maintaining the stability of family life and, therefore, morale on the front line. The MOD recognises that further work needs to be done to support Serving personnel and their families¹⁵³ 9

In this chapter we review the progress that has been made since 2020 in three key areas of family life which were consistent themes in the *Living in Our Shoes* review: the state of Defence family accommodation; the health needs of non-serving partners and children; and the wellbeing of military families, including those from outside the UK. We also consider the concerns raised regarding the career management of dual-serving families.

A Place to Call Home

Accommodation was one of the most frequently cited issues during the *Living in Our Shoes* review. Historically, military families lived in Service Families Accommodation (SFA), usually referred to as 'married quarters'. Fewer military families now choose to live in SFA. In 2020 the FamCAS survey¹⁵⁴ indicated that 60% of families owned their own home, and the demand for SFA was highest among Army families and lowest among Royal Navy families: 75% of Royal Navy families; 68% of RAF families; and 51% of Army families owned their own home. In 2025, 57% of those who responded to the FamCAS survey¹⁵⁵ owned their own home and demand for SFA remains highest among Army families and lowest among Royal Navy families. The statistics have remained fairly static over the five year period although the numbers owning their own home in the 2025 survey had dropped slightly. By 2025, 74% of Royal Navy families; 65% of RAF families; and 48% of Army families owned their own home.

The majority of concerns in 2020 related to the poor state of the accommodation and the challenges associated with repairs and maintenance being undertaken in a timely manner. Personnel in the chain of command at various military bases described accommodation problems as one of their biggest issues. While families acknowledged that SFA offered a relatively inexpensive way to live, in their view that was no excuse for houses being damp and mouldy and for repairs to take a long time. The review team noted the additional difficulties experienced by families with special needs, especially a non-serving partner or a child with long-term illness or SEND. Long delays in ensuring that houses were adapted to meet the family's needs could impact on the Serving person's ability to work effectively.

The evidence presented in *Living in Our Shoes* highlighted:

- the poor state of some SFA
- the length of time to undertake repairs
- the requirement to undo improvements made to the property when the family move to another assignment
- the lack of entitlement for couples in long-term relationships to apply for SFA despite being eligible. Senior staff and welfare officers in all three single Services highlighted the unfairness of the policy requiring proof that the relationship had been in existence for at least four years when no such requirement is placed on married couples or those in civil partnerships
- recognition that the current accommodation model was not sufficiently agile to meet changing demands and expectations.

153 Armed Forces Covenant (2018) The Armed Forces Annual Report, p69

154 UK Tri-Service FamCAS Survey 2020

155 UK Tri-Service FamCAS Survey 2025



The report made 15 recommendations containing 21 separate points in relation to SFA. Among other things, the recommendations related to the:

- need for immediate investment in improving poor-quality SFA, for swift repairs and regular maintenance, and for a more responsive and transparent complaints system
- removal of the distinction between eligibility and entitlement to SFA including the removal of the 4-year rule for couples in long-term partnerships
- need for greater information about and choice relating to the houses being offered
- offer of greater choice in accommodation options: promoting regional clusters to reduce the number of housing moves; and reviewing the need to move home when the Serving person is assigned to a different location
- need to ensure social housing assistance for non-serving partners when relationships end, and appropriate accommodation for separated parents to maintain shared parenting arrangements.

Progress Since 2020

In its response to the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations, the government accepted all the recommendations except one, and agreed the following actions:

- investing in accommodation as an urgent priority , announcing allocations of funding
- suppliers needing to provide comprehensive information about available SFA
- holding to account those responsible for the maintenance of SFA
- incentivising suppliers to shift from a fix-or-fail approach to a preventative maintenance philosophy
- promoting geographical clustering of SFA to minimise moves and support stability
- reviewing the rule about time-limited removal expenses
- allowing some improvements by families living in SFA to remain, recognising pride in improvements in the home environment
- improving the complaints system to be more responsive and transparent
- ensuring family accommodation and contact facilities would be available on every military base for parents who had separated
- refining the Cohabitation Policy and evidence requirements placed on Serving personnel in long term relationships to ensure it is as fair and inclusive as possible.

1. An Improved SFA Offer

A number of positive changes were already being made by the MOD and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) during the review, and plans progressed to pilot a new accommodation model which was designed to increase choice and encourage stability. The Future Accommodation Model (FAM), subsequently renamed the Modernised Accommodation Offer (MAO), extended the options to include a basic accommodation allowance, supplemented by additional payments, in order to open up access to private accommodation stock.

It was acknowledged that Defence accommodation must be of sufficient quality to be a place that families could be proud to call 'home', and that the poor state of the housing stock had negative impacts not only on military family life and relationships, but also on retention. The expressed aim of the DIO in 2020 was to deliver a more modern, fit for purpose and right-sized estate, and a more agile accommodation strategy that would meet the needs and aspirations of Service families in the twenty-first century. In 2020 the Government published new statutory guidance to improve access to social housing for Service personnel, veterans and their families. It was updated in 2024.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Improving access to social housing for members of the Armed Forces, GOV.UK. Updated 18 December 2024



One of the fundamental problems faced by DIO was that 80% of the SFA stock was built before the introduction of national building standards in 1965.¹⁵⁷ Many houses were designed to be temporary and many had inherent construction problems. The deal to sell Service accommodation stock to Annington Homes in 1996 had created perverse incentives to retain houses that were not required and disincentives to knock down poor quality stock and rebuild.

The DIO strategy to improve the FMA customer experience was centred on the design of the Future Defence Infrastructure Service (FDIS) to transform and modernise accommodation services, including the delivery of efficient maintenance and repair services and enhancing living conditions. The FDIS was launched in April 2022 with a range of new suppliers committing to introducing significant changes to modernise and improve the services provided, including:

- a target to fix at least 85% of repairs on the first visit
- an enhanced 'Move In' standard
- enhanced standards of planned and preventative maintenance.

A key focus of the new contracts was a change in delivery culture to a 'family first' approach.¹⁵⁸ However, the launch of the new service was beset by problems in its early months, prompting satisfaction with SFA to reach new lows in 2023.¹⁵⁹ The SFA maintenance regimes suffered serious deterioration on the introduction of FDIS, despite its supposed orientation towards family needs – a situation from which DIO and their prime contractors have had to recover.

The DIO assured us that while some areas of performance remain below standard, such as complex maintenance and repair tasks involving multi-trades, significant improvements have been made in service delivery in the last two years: the call centre is now working efficiently: suppliers have taken on more managers; and under-performing sub-contractors have been replaced. This has resulted in improved response times and fewer complaints and compensation claims. Work to improve access to good broadband speeds began in earnest in 2021, and, in 2024, MOD reported that 99% of SFA had been given access to the internet with speeds of 24Mbps or better.¹⁶⁰ The FamCAS 2025 survey results, nevertheless indicate very little change in satisfaction with SFA compared to 2020, and in some aspects they paint a less favourable picture (Figure 5.1).

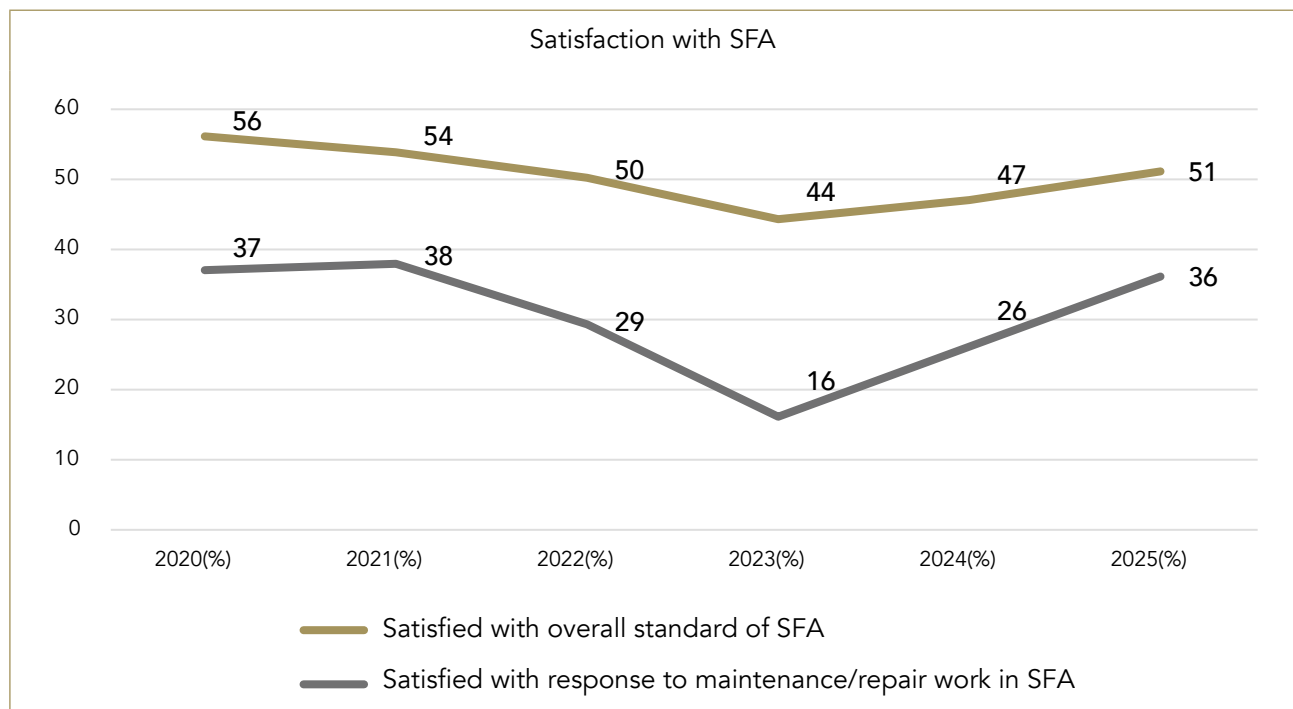


Figure 5.1 Satisfaction with SFA

¹⁵⁷ The 1965 planning regulations introduced the first set of national building standards, known as the Building Regulations 1965. One notable change was the introduction of limits on energy loss through the fabric of new houses.

¹⁵⁸ Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2022 page 43

¹⁵⁹ AFCAS 2023

¹⁶⁰ Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2024 page 45



Although satisfaction rates have recovered from the obvious dip in 2023, there are differences in satisfaction rates between the three Services with 53% of Army families being satisfied with the overall standard of SFA compared to 48% of RAF families and 43% of Royal Navy families. Satisfaction with the response to maintenance and repairs between the three Services reflect this pattern.

2. Changes to Accommodation Charges

In March 2024 the MOD announced that they would waive charges to all personnel living in Single Living Accommodation (SLA) during the week who have a privately-maintained property or retained SFA away from their duty station. The MOD believes that this arrangement creates a more flexible and affordable offer for those Service personnel who maintain a home more than 50 miles from their assigned location. The waiver, regardless of age, service or relationship status, was initially introduced for two years pending the development of a 'fair and sustainable' payment scheme.

In March 2024, the MOD launched the Hybrid Working Accommodation Trial (HWAT) which enables those assigned to London, Bristol and Glasgow working flexibly and commuting weekly to use hotels rather than service accommodation. This approach is believed to offer better value for money and has proved popular with those whose working patterns it is designed to support. In light of HMRC concerns that the scheme could be considered to be a taxable benefit, the MOD is planning an alternative scheme to replace HWAT from April 2026.

3. The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032: Family Home Work Stream

The Family Home was designated as a separate work stream in the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032. The aim was to:

- create a minimum Defence standard for SFA and define an aspirational standard underpinned by an investment plan
- invest in the SFA estate to improve energy efficiency, and thermal comfort in particular
- make improvements to the customer experience including better and more consistent move-in preparation, more flexible repair appointments, and incentives for suppliers to deliver 'first time fixes' and to go beyond the minimum service standards
- ensure all Service families have the ability to access good broadband in UK SFA.

The Strategy describes an end state for its Family Home work stream as:

👉 flexible accommodation policy that reflects modern family constructs, allowing families the choice and freedom needed to nurture a family home. 🐣

Within the Armed Forces Families Plan 2022,¹⁶¹ the Family Home work stream was expected to:

- improve the SFA offer
- support modern family constructs
- deliver a fairer and more flexible model through the Future Accommodation Model programme.

The work stream identified ten 'activities' required to deliver the supporting objectives. Work stream reports made explicit linkages between the activities and 11 of the 15 recommendations on accommodation in *Living in Our Shoes*. At first glance this represents an effective approach to connecting specific actions with the desired end state while maintaining a check on progress against the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations. It is noticeable, however, that the ten activities remain unchanged from when they first appeared in reporting in 2022 despite the dynamic policy and delivery environment which has existed in relation to Armed Forces accommodation during the last three years.

Phase One observations suggest that ways to measure progress against stated objectives has not been developed. A clear challenge for the work stream leader is that the DIO is not formally included in work stream governance, placing the key delivery organisation at arm's length from work stream considerations. Separate governance and holding to account mechanisms exist within the MOD to monitor the delivery of Defence accommodation strategy and programmes, and it is here that the substantive discussions about

¹⁶¹ Armed Forces Families Plan 2022, GOV.UK



the shape and direction of policy and FDIS performance levels occur. The more critical decisions around funding for SFA investment are made at high levels of the Department's budgetary process. We observe, therefore, a significant disconnect between the ambitions of the work stream within the Armed Forces Families Strategy and the work pursued by the DIO.

4. Widening Entitlement

Living in Our Shoes drew attention to the disconnect between modern family life and the policies relating to the allocation of SFA. The failure to significantly broaden accommodation policy to benefit couples in informal relationships was notable. In society generally, choice about couple relationships has greatly increased and, for most couples today, setting up home together marks an important step in the formation of a committed relationship.¹⁶² Moreover, long-term cohabitation has increased substantially, not just as a prelude to marriage but as a lifestyle choice. While the Armed Forces recognise marriage and civil partnerships within their policies, recognition of long-term cohabiting partnerships started only recently through eligibility to SFA and access to Wraparound Childcare (WAC). There have been scant data available about the number of Serving personnel in cohabiting relationships.

When *Living in Our Shoes* was published, changes had taken place in the Armed Forces to recognise long-term cohabiting partnerships if specific evidence could be produced, but there were significant issues in defining and proving what was meant by 'long-term'. So while those in long-term relationships were considered eligible to apply for surplus SFA, eligibility did not confer entitlement to SFA, thus creating a significant disparity between how couple relationships are recognised in civilian life and in the Armed Forces.

Widening entitlement to SFA for couples in long term relationships was to be achieved by:

- working with the SFA allocation contractor to maximise the availability of surplus Service Family Accommodation
- reviewing with the intent to increase the level of geographic flexibility routinely given to Service personnel to retain SFA and/or request SFA within a region.

The policy of allowing Service personnel in what the MOD terms 'Long Term Relationships' (LTR) to apply for surplus SFA remains in place. However, five years later, work continues to find an acceptable way to establish that a couple are in a LTR, a delay which causes continuing concern for the single Services and the Families Federations. The MOD have made adjustments to the evidence they will accept as proof of a long term relationship in an effort to make the policy less restrictive. However, this arrangement, by its nature, is dependent on a sufficient supply of surplus SFA in the right locations. As at April 2021, 2,216 Service personnel in established relationships occupied surplus SFA.¹⁶³ By June 2023 this had increased to 4,800. Couples in a LTR retain their allocated housing until they are assigned away from their current location. Furthermore, LTR couples in FAM pilot areas who were granted entitlement to SFA have retained this entitlement beyond the pilot scheme's closure – thus creating a disparity in entitlement policy.

5. Forces Help to Buy

The Forces Help to Buy scheme is intended to address historically lower levels of home ownership than the rest of the UK population. It was launched as a pilot in 2014 and made permanent in January 2023. It enables regular Service personnel to be advanced up to 50% of their gross annual salary, to a maximum of £25,000, interest free, to buy their first home or, in exceptional circumstances, extend an existing property. Since 2014 payment has been made to around 31,000 applicants, totalling over £482million.¹⁶⁴ However, the introduction of the scheme has not coincided with a significant shift in home ownership among Service personnel, and applications have been declining since reaching a peak in 2020/21.

Forces Help to Buy appears to have had limited success in broadening private home ownership and the policy remains under review. In March 2024 the MOD announced that it would refund legal expenses of up to £1,500 for first-time buyers to help them get on the housing ladder.

¹⁶² See: Abela, A, and Walker, J., (2014) *Global Changes in Marriage and Parenting and Family Life: An Overview*; and Noack, T., Bernhardt, E, and Wiik, K, A., (2014) *Cohabitation or Marriage? Contemporary Living Arrangements in the West*; both in A. Abela and J. Walker (eds) *Contemporary Issues in Family Studies: Global Perspectives on Partnerships, Parenting and Support in a Changing World* (2014) Wiley Blackwell

¹⁶³ The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2021, page 63

¹⁶⁴ Forces Help to Buy Quarterly Statistics – Quarter 1 2024/25, GOV.UK



Continuing Challenges in Ensuring a Place to Call Home

Defence accommodation continues to attract significant political attention. A report of a Parliamentary inquiry into Service accommodation published in December 2024,¹⁶⁵ contained 10 recommendations specifically relating to SFA. These covered a variety of topics, including management of the FDIS maintenance contracts. Data from the latest AFCAS survey¹⁶⁶ show that overall satisfaction among with the standard of SFA and with repairs and maintenance remain significantly below 2014 levels. A number of challenges need resolution.

1. Delivery of a Fairer and More Flexible Accommodation Offer

The Defence Accommodation Strategy 2022 committed the MOD to introduce changes to Defence's housing offer with a mix of Defence owned, Defence leased, and private rental sector support for home ownership, by moving away from the current rank-based entitlement, with a view to providing accommodation based primarily on the Service person's need. The Strategy explicitly signalled that Defence's accommodation offer would be updated to reflect 'modern family structures' including a broadening of entitlement to subsidised accommodation for couples in informal cohabiting relationships. The Strategy envisaged that the vehicle for achieving these changes would be the FAM/MAO programme.

The FAM was due to be implemented once the pilot schemes ceased at the end of March 2023, but was postponed for a year to allow for additional preparatory work. Some minor elements of what was then referred to as the MAO were introduced in March 2024, while key changes were placed on hold pending further review. The paused elements included the planned changes in entitlement to reflect modern family relationships.

Efforts have been focused on developing a fresh strategy following the recent buy-back of SFA from Annington Homes. This strategy will cover both raising the standard of SFA and creating sufficient stock to support the increased demand that widening entitlement is expected to create. This offers a significant opportunity to address the long standing issues with SFA. The Defence Housing Strategy¹⁶⁷ was published in November 2025. It is a ten year plan to modernise military housing and unlock surplus MOD land for new civilian homes. It involves upgrading or rebuilding over 40,000 SFA, establishing a new Defence Housing Service with a service ethos, and releasing land for over 100,000 new homes. The strategy introduces a Consumer Charter for Forces Families to improve services and new home ownership opportunities for Serving personnel and veterans. The ambition is to ensure that Service personnel and their families are provided with high quality housing that meets military operational requirements. The timetable for change has yet to be published, but it is essential that changes are introduced speedily to indicate that current concerns are being addressed as a matter of urgency.

As a temporary and partial measure the MOD considered broadening the current eligibility to surplus SFA for couples who can evidence a long term partnership. Under this scheme couples would be eligible to apply for a rental payment to enable them to access the private rental sector, should no surplus SFA be available. Separately, a pilot programme to extend SFA entitlement to those in informal relationships serving overseas has been running since January 2024. This was initially limited to British Forces Cyprus, but has now been extended to include the British Army Training Unit Suffield (Canada), British Forces South Atlantic Islands (Falklands) and selected Global Defence Network¹⁶⁸ locations. This pilot is due to run until the end of March 2027. By February 2024, 74 personnel in Cyprus were benefiting from this scheme and a further 19 applications had been received.

The Families Federations and single Services reported continued frustration among Service personnel and their families that implementation of much of the Defence Accommodation Strategy has been delayed, leaving in place a mixed landscape of entitlement and eligibility which has created confusion and a lack of clarity. With the publication of the Defence Housing Strategy the need to resolve this situation should be high priority.

165 Defence Select Committee Report on Service Accommodation Dec 24

166 UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2025, GOV.UK

167 The Defence Housing Strategy 2025: Fixing Defence family housing and delivering for the nation, GOV.UK

168 The Global Defence Network consists of Defence staff in the UK's diplomatic missions around the world.



2. Widening Entitlement

The Armed Forces Families Strategy explicitly recognises that Armed Forces families reflect the diverse nature of the societies from which they are drawn, including those in long term relationships,¹⁶⁹ and that this diversity should be reflected in policy. The clearest reflection of this position is in MOD's commitment to widen entitlement through the Defence Accommodation Strategy as noted above. But, apart from WAC, there are few signs of the MOD following through on this ambition more broadly. While this is a substantial challenge for policy makers in terms of cost, scope and complexity, this is nevertheless disappointing.

Following the launch of the Armed Forces Families Strategy a working group was established across the Defence People Team and single Services to drive this work forward. A mandate from senior leadership and approval for an outline project plan was achieved in early 2022 and work began on highlighting areas of disadvantage and discrimination faced by modern families in accessing Defence support and the range of benefits linked to relationships status. The MOD 'sought to actively listen to the experiences of a range of Service families to understand their difficulties'.¹⁷⁰ Initial proposals relating to the definition of informal relationships were approved in 2022, and focus groups with families took place to shape this work further.

In 2023 revised arrangements were proposed for providing proof that a Service person was in an established informal relationship, along with an application process. These arrangements were intended to address some of the more restrictive aspects of the policy and make it easier for dual-serving couples to provide evidence. The intention was for this to become policy in the autumn of 2023. Following engagement with Ministers and senior officials this was deferred until late 2024 but is now operating to assess eligibility for surplus SFA. Work continues in MOD to identify areas of policy to which this revised process could be applied.

In 2022, internal MOD reporting indicated that a 'fundamental review' of the Personal Status Categories had been instigated. These categories are the basis for determining eligibility and entitlement in the allowances system and have remained essentially unchanged for at least 30 years according to MOD. The review intended to examine the implications of bringing those in established informal relationships into the scope of Personal Status Category 1, which covers those who are married or are in a civil partnership. Other changes being considered related to separated parents with shared parental agreements, non-UK personnel whose children are not yet in the UK, and single adopters who have not yet been given adoption approval. Work on this review was initially paused while the MOD considered associated recommendations from the Haythornthwaite Review (HRAFI).¹⁷¹ This review is now the responsibility of the Armed Forces Remuneration team.

Work has begun in MOD on a document that would contain the definitions of a Service family in current policy, with a view to exploring the potential for both rationalising and updating them to reflect modern family constructs. Addressing the continuing disadvantages experienced by Armed Forces couples who are not married or in a civil partnership remains a serious gap which needs urgent attention.

Priorities for Change

1. A Place to Call Home

Providing families with a decent and affordable standard of accommodation remains centrally important to retention. The evidence highlights the importance of a good quality SFA offer to personnel and their families and the scale of the task to improve overall standards, maintenance and repairs. In 2023 the Haythornthwaite Review¹⁷² made seven recommendations directly around Armed Forces accommodation and referred to the 'chronic underinvestment ... over many years'. The Kerslake Commission on Armed Forces Housing,¹⁷³ which reported in April 2024, provided a deeper analysis of why the provision of decent and affordable accommodation matters to the Armed Forces, identifying the current failings and offering recommendations for improvement, including on levels of investment, improving maintenance and the complaints system. Issues including the breadth of choice available to families, the information provided before taking up accommodation, improved maintenance, and a more responsive complaints system

169 Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032 page 6

170 Armed Forces Families Strategy – One Year On, GOV.UK

171 Haythornthwaite Review (2023) Agency and agility: Incentivising people in a new era for Defence

172 *ibid*

173 Homes Unfit for Heroes April 2024 para 5.18



have remained largely unresolved and continuous attitude surveys show that satisfaction with Service accommodation has not improved since 2020.

However, the deal to buy back the housing stock from Annington Homes has presented the MOD with what the DIO describe as a 'once in a generation' opportunity to address the long standing problems relating to the accommodation offer. This opportunity was referenced in the Chancellor's Spring Statement to Parliament in 2025 in the context of the £2.2Bn uplift in the MOD budget for 2025–26:

6 Capitalising on the opportunity presented by the buy-back of the MOD Service Families housing stock, [the Government will invest] to refurbish the defence estate and provide our military families with the homes they deserve.¹⁷⁴ 9

The Defence Secretary gave further political weight to the efforts to improve the SFA offer in a public statement weeks later and subsequently in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review. For this important opportunity to be realised DIO needs a sufficient and stable financial settlement with the MOD allowing it to retain and reinvest over the long term the £7Bn annual cost savings that DIO estimates will accrue from the buy-back. It was heartening in Phase One to hear the level of consultation the DIO have been engaged in, including with the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, Homes England and the Families Federations. Only a fully funded and effective SFA strategy will provide housing of sufficient quality where it is needed and enable the policy ambitions around broadening entitlement to be achieved. We echo the Haythornthwaite recommendation that:

6 levels of ambition [on Service accommodation] should be stated more explicitly and publicly confirmed [and a] properly resourced monitoring programme should [put in place] to ensure personnel see meaningful change'.¹⁷⁵ 9

In the meantime we encourage the MOD to be innovative in its approach to policy and to test new ideas, including in overseas locations. By the beginning of 2026, a new Consumer Charter¹⁷⁶ will be introduced for families living in military accommodation to include higher move-in standards, more reliable repairs, renovation of the worst properties, a named housing officer for every family, greater freedom for families to make improvements, and an improved complaints process.

Launching the publication of the new Consumer Charter, the Defence Secretary promised to 'stop the rot' in military housing'.¹⁷⁷ In his Foreword to the Defence Housing Strategy the Defence Secretary commented:

6 Home is at the heart of all our lives, the foundation for everything we do. For our military personnel who embody the best of Britain, they deserve a safe and decent home... .We cannot fix deep long-run failures overnight, but this decade of investment will drive a programme of renewal across all homes, and finally deliver upon the promise to widen access to family housing from old-style married quarters' to homes that meet the needs of modern defence families, as well as reflecting the increase in personnel set out in the Strategic Defence Review.¹⁷⁸ 9

2. Forces Help to Buy

While this scheme has been widely welcomed, the maximum loan of £25k has not increased to reflect the increase in house prices and changes in the property market since its inception in 2014. The scheme is therefore less attractive now than when it was introduced and has not resulted in an increase in home ownership. A review is considering an increase in the amount of the loan, an extension of the payback period, scope for a second purchase during an individual's period of service, and removal of the obligation to repay the loan immediately when personnel transfer from regular to reserve service. This review is urgent if families are to be encouraged to buy their own home.

174 HM Treasury Spring Statement 2025

175 Haythornthwaite, op.cit. p29

176 Homes fit for heroes: Raft of news measures to improve military family housing, GOV.UK

177 Houses fit for heroes: Raft of new measures to improve military family housing. Press release. 18 April 2025

178 The Defence Housing Strategy 2025 op.cit, p4 and 5



3. The Armed Forces Covenant

Serving families feature prominently in the Armed Forces Covenant agenda and have been highlighted in two successive strategic reviews of Defence. Over the years, the MOD has produced two Armed Forces Families Strategies, created a discrete families policy capability within its Defence People Team, and its current Defence People Strategy recognises explicitly the connection between families' concerns, the challenge of balancing family life with the demands of service life and the mantra of 'duty first', and retention. The Covenant will offer an important lever for change going forward. Decisions to de-couple the governance of families policy from the Armed Forces Covenant resulted in a loss of traction outside Defence which should be resolved with changes in the Covenant Duty and the introduction of an Armed Forces Commissioner.

Health and Wellbeing

The primary healthcare of Serving personnel is provided by Defence Medical Services (DMS) who provide a comprehensive package of health services, including community mental health and dentistry. While this extends to family members in accompanied overseas postings, with the exception of a few locations, in the UK families are dependent on the national health services provided by the four nations. Serving personnel who contributed to *Living in Our Shoes* were extremely positive about the healthcare they receive but expressed serious concerns about that received by families, including:

- difficulties accessing GPs and dentists
- transfers between waiting lists, particularly for mental health services, resulting in discontinuity in healthcare
- repeated assessments for special educational needs and disability
- slow transfer of patient records
- lack of understanding among civilian GPs and dentists about the health needs of military families
- long waiting lists and lack of mental health support, especially for children
- variations in healthcare provision in different localities and in the devolved administrations
- stigma in disclosing mental health needs which might negatively impact the Serving person's career prospects.

Many families reported disruptions to treatment when they moved to another area, with family members sometimes undergoing repeated transitions to new healthcare practices. Furthermore, DMS staff indicated that it was difficult to ensure that families received the necessary support from the chain of command if civilian GPs felt unable to share concerns with DMS staff and vice versa. Evidence suggests that the decision to leave the Armed Forces is taken by some because of the inability to ensure the healthcare needs of their families are met. The *Living in Our Shoes* review noted that it was not the quality of care provided for military families that was an issue, but the difficulties in accessing it when a family moves frequently. Many families considered a more integrated system of medical care would enable doctors to be aware of the health of each member of the family.

Living in Our Shoes made 13 recommendations about health and wellbeing containing 15 separate points, including:

- providing information, guidance and top tips for delivering healthcare to Service families to all GPs in the UK, implementing Serving military family-friendly GP practices, and requiring GPs to transfer records speedily when families are relocated
- ensuring that an Armed Forces Family Code articulates what is required to deliver appropriate continuity of care for families as they move around the UK, and to ensure that information is available to advise families about maintaining continuity of care
- ensuring that family members 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 in line with the commitments in the Armed Forces Covenant



- ensuring timely access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (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
- ensuring 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
- evaluating new models of integrated care being established in some military bases and considering how to extend effective models to other military bases
- ensuring that future mental health and wellbeing plans include mental health awareness activities and communication strategies aimed specifically at families of Serving personnel
- exploring ways in which a range of mental health services could be better integrated to provide holistic care for Serving personnel and their family members.

Progress Since 2020

In its response to *Living in Our Shoes*, the government accepted nine of the recommendations in full, three in part, and rejected one. The government response incorporated the views of the health services in the four nations of the UK, explaining the systems in place to deliver healthcare services to the Armed Forces community, including families, and describing various initiatives that were in train to improve families' experiences. The response acknowledged the need for greater interoperability between DMS and NHS systems in the treatment of Armed Forces personnel and their families, highlighting the benefit that Programme CORTISONE would bring in enabling the digital transfer of records between DPCU and NHS IT systems in 2021. The government made a number of commitments to:

- continue to improve guidance to GPs on delivering healthcare to Armed Forces families
- work collaboratively with the MOD to ensure the Armed Force Families Code articulates what is needed to deliver continuity of care to Service families
- consider how to extend integrated primary care models to other military bases through its Defence Healthcare Delivery Optimisation (DHDO) programme, while acknowledging the potentially significant associated unfunded infrastructure costs
- explore whether resources available to Serving personnel and Defence Civil Servants under the HeadFIT programme could be extended to Armed Forces families
- consider a mental health and wellbeing plan for families as part of a forthcoming review of the Defence Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

The progress made since 2020 is summarised below.

1. Defence Medical Services (DMS): Integrated Care

Living in Our Shoes highlighted the Catterick Integrated Care Centre (CICC) project as having the potential to provide a model for physical integration of MOD and NHS services, delivering safe and effective primary care to Service personnel, their families, veterans, reservists, and the wider local civilian community. It represented an opportunity for the NHS in England and the MOD to work collaboratively to deliver a unique model of healthcare that met the needs of both the military and civilian populations, offering high-quality healthcare and value for money. The scheme was expected to be operational in 2022/23.

The project continued to progress in the years since 2020, and in September 2024 NHS and MOD staff attended the topping out ceremony of the new centre, ahead of the planned opening in mid-2026. Although the MOD response to *Living in Our Shoes* included a commitment 'to consider how to extend integrated primary care models to other military bases' DMS confirmed that there is no current plan to replicate the CICC model more widely, explaining that the circumstances and conditions at Catterick are unique to this location. These include: ageing primary healthcare infrastructure that required replacing; proximity and close connections between the Service and local civilian communities; and the need to address specific healthcare needs within the local community.



The CICC programme was originally part of the wider programme DHDO programme, focusing on procuring a range of digital services to enhance healthcare delivery, increase patient involvement, and improve resource optimisation. Changes introduced under DHDO include combining practices so that they could operate more efficiently as a single virtual practice and adopting a total triage¹⁷⁹ approach at each combined practice. DMS advised us that DHDO has now concluded and been superseded by the Healthcare Improvement Programme.

In responding to *Living in Our Shoes*, the MOD highlighted the role that programme CORTISONE would play in ensuring better virtual integration between the Defence Primary Healthcare (DPHC) system and the public healthcare systems in the nations of the UK. CORTISONE¹⁸⁰ was due to be fully operational by 2021. However, DMS advised that the central element relating to the transfer of electronic healthcare records between DPHC and the NHS is not expected to be contracted for until late 2025. CORTISONE services are due to cover all fixed Armed Forces locations at home and overseas as well as enable the provision of healthcare services to personnel deployed on operations.

2. NHS England

The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2022 reported on the NHS(E) widespread consultation with Service families in 2020 to better understand how to improve care and support for them, backed up by specific research on mobile families in 2021. This consultation led to the publication of the NHS(E) report 'Improving health and wellbeing support for Armed Forces families'¹⁸¹ in August 2021. The evidence showed a high degree of correlation with the *Living in Our Shoes* findings, indicating that:

- the NHS needed to have a better understanding of military life and culture
- the NHS should ensure that there are appropriate services to meet the needs of the Armed Forces community and families
- communications with Armed Forces families needed to be better
- the management of records needed to be improved.

The report made 27 separate commitments to act on these findings, including to:

- progress work to ensure NHS staff and organisations across England ask patients whether they, or a member of their family, have served, or are serving, in the UK Armed Forces so that this can be recorded in NHS medical records
- promote patient choice so Armed Forces families are aware of their right to continued support when moving between locations, ensuring, for example, that commissioners of dental services (currently regions) are aware of and understand the issues in supporting access to these services
- establish an Armed Forces families support network that is Integrated Care Systems (ICS) aligned, providing an ICS focused single point of access to the Armed Forces community, along with information about and direct support to access health and wellbeing services
- engage Armed Forces families and personnel from different Services, ranks and family situations to ensure communications consider the entire Armed Forces community
- work with primary, secondary, and tertiary care providers to ensure full medical records are released swiftly when families begin the process of moving between assignments, and to promote the use of codes within records to identify military personnel and their families.

The Covenant Annual Report explained that these commitments would be taken forward by NHS services across England, and shared by the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) with the three other health systems of the UK through its 'UK Health of our Service Families Working Group'.

179 Total triage is a system used in healthcare, particularly in GP practices, to manage patient requests before booking appointments. Instead of the traditional first-come, first-served approach, total triage ensures that patients provide information upfront, allowing medical staff to assess urgency and direct them to the most appropriate healthcare professional. DMS say this approach has reduced waiting times by 26%.

180 CORTISONE is a MOD initiative to manage and exploit healthcare information generated by DMS to support the delivery of evidence-based medical and dental health and healthcare and provide connectivity between the MOD and NHS

181 Improving health and wellbeing support for Armed Forces families - August 2021, NHS England



The impetus behind this initially promising initiative appears to have dissipated with DHSC's decision to disband the UK Health of our Service Families Working Group. DHSC told us that they took this decision because they did not want to duplicate groups being created by the MOD to implement the Armed Forces Families Strategy. However, NHS(E) told us about two specific projects which have clear relevance to the findings of their original report:

- (i) An 18-month pilot was introduced in April 2022 to create an accessible and named point of contact to provide advice, guidance, and support on a range of health and social care related issues for all members of the Armed Forces community (including veterans and their families and the families of serving personnel) to help families to navigate within and between the various healthcare systems when moving around the UK. Eventually this was expanded to cover eight Integrated Care System (ICS) areas in England. Initially delivered as the Single Point of Contact for Armed Forces Families, the pilot was rebranded and renamed as Op COMMUNITY in June 2023.

An evaluation of the Op COMMUNITY pilots showed that mental health, housing and hospital appointments were the most prevalent needs among those who were referred into the pilot service. The evaluation produced recommendations on job descriptions, the supervision of Op COMMUNITY staff, awareness raising and the need for a consistent approach to service delivery across ICSs.

The Op COMMUNITY Pathfinder programme ended in March 2025, and the learning is being taken forward as part of the response to the 2024 Darzi recommendations into health and social care.¹⁸² The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Report 2024¹⁸³ states that 'NHS England and the University of Northumbria will develop a framework and guidance to assist ICSs in their delivery of Armed Forces community support locally, as the programme ends.' This is likely to lead to bespoke arrangements being implemented across the ICSs, depending on factors such as the size of the local Armed Forces community and assessments of need.

- (ii) The National Digital Armed Forces Community Connected Care Record Project is an initiative to improve the sharing of healthcare information relating to members of the Armed Forces community across health and social care organisations. The project is part of the national Connecting Care Records programme, which aims to move from a position where each health and care organisation holds separate records for the individuals in their care, to one where a single record is shared, enabling health and care professionals to use information safely and securely as individuals move between different parts of the NHS and social care. This project is currently in its pilot phase.

3. Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032: Health and Wellbeing

The 2022 Armed Forces Families Strategy established a Health and Wellbeing work stream. The end state for this work stream is described as:

- 6 Families are able to access timely integrated, mental and physical health and wellbeing services. Continuity of support is provided by professionals cognisant of the military context, sharing information, to ease relocation between nations and regions, especially for the most vulnerable. 9

Initially this work stream was led by the MOD team responsible for leading the review of the Defence Health and Wellbeing Strategy. This ensured that the work stream leader had control of at least one of the main themes and was already well connected with the DHSC and the national health services. However, for capacity reasons, leadership of this work stream transferred to the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team at the end of 2021. Unfortunately, without relevant policy or delivery responsibilities the work stream leader was not well-placed to draw up an effective plan to achieve the end state or exert strong influence over outcomes, although some connections were made with DHSC and DMS when the Strategy was launched in early 2022, most notably through the subsequently disbanded UK Health of our Service Families Working Group. As a consequence, the work stream had rather generic objectives in the Armed Forces Families Plan published on GOV.UK in 2022.¹⁸⁴ These were to:

- establish, maintain, and improve the MOD's involvement in supporting the delivery of partnership products and services to Armed Forces Families

182 Darzi, A., (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England. DHSC, GOV.UK

183 Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2024 ISBN 978-1-5286-5264-3

184 Armed Forces Families Plan 2022 op.cit.



- maintain and improve current partnership arrangements with key stakeholders in other government departments and the devolved administrations
- exploit current programmes of work provided by stakeholders, maintaining strong links where appropriate
- drive coherence across the nations of the UK and encourage the sharing of best practice.

Achieving these objectives, however, would not on its own deliver the end state ascribed to this work stream or deliver the priorities identified as:

- being responsive to families' needs
- promoting awareness of Covenant commitments such as family members retaining their position on waiting lists following relocation
- encouraging Service personnel to record information about family circumstances on JPA.

In 2022 the work stream Theory of Change focused on the limited objective of developing various guidance products for practitioners and family members, suggesting that measurement of effect would be through the annual FamCAS surveys. The work stream leader changed again at the end of 2022 and active collaboration with the DHSC and health services on policy initiatives appears to have lessened by the end of 2023. In November 2024, however, the work stream leader and his team were working with NHS colleagues on casework relating to Service families returning from overseas assignments who were having difficulty accessing continuity of health care.

The apparent lack of greater progress in this work stream is disappointing, especially as a basis for collaboration with the health sector to implement a considered and practical set of objectives was initially available through the UK Health of Armed Forces Families Working Group. With the demise of this group and with no equivalent mechanism established by the MOD, the opportunity to create a consistent and comprehensive approach to improving the experience of Armed Forces families across and within the various healthcare systems in the UK was lost.

Phase One evidence suggests that influencing the direction and pace of Armed Forces families-related policy work within DMS, across the governments of the UK and in the various national health services has ceased, and progress made by others to deliver the health and wellbeing objectives defined in the Strategy has not been tracked. Unfortunately, therefore, the Families Strategy has not been able to achieve the change in the delivery of health care to families that was expected in the government response to *Living in Our Shoes*.

Nevertheless, relevant and useful activity has taken place within NHS(E) and within the devolved administrations, focused primarily on the needs of veterans. For example, considerable progress has been achieved by NHS(E) to encourage all integrated trusts to sign up to the Veteran Covenant Healthcare Alliance, increase the number of Veteran Aware GP surgeries, and provide support via OP COURAGE, and OP RESTORE.

It is encouraging that the National Training and Education Plan was due to launch in 2025 to specifically educate health professionals on the needs of the Armed Forces population, and their health and wellbeing concerns. Specifically, it will be important to ensure GP surgeries and dental practitioners are aware of families' needs in the same way as they have embraced understanding of the needs of veterans, thereby addressing the current imbalance.

4. Domestic Abuse

Living in Our Shoes highlighted that awareness of domestic abuse and inter-partner violence in military communities had increased and, consequently, the need for support had increased. Given the sensitivity of these topics it was not surprising that only a few families talked about them. Those who did gave highly moving testimonies of the abuse and violence they had experienced and the difficulties they faced in seeking help, not least because of the perceived potentially negative career consequences for the (abusive) Serving partner, and the fear of relationship breakdown which could result in the loss of SFA. The incidence of abuse in Commonwealth Serving families carries the additional vulnerability of a partner in the UK on a spousal visa. This adds to the challenge of reporting domestic abuse and a potential relationship breakdown where a non-serving partner and children risk being deported. Moreover, non-UK partners on spousal visas have no recourse to public funds.



Welfare staff in the three Services acknowledged the seriousness and complexity of the issues and the challenges in addressing them, and indicated that they were making efforts to ensure greater awareness of the behaviours and the support available. The MOD Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018–2023¹⁸⁵ promoted a culture of support that ensures access to high-quality services and places of safety. In November 2019, the MOD launched a Domestic Abuse Awareness campaign, and engaged with the Five Eyes community to draw on policy and lessons learned elsewhere.

Living in Our Shoes made one recommendation in two parts about domestic abuse, to:

- ensure that Serving personnel and their partners are aware of the confidential support available for those experiencing domestic abuse, intimate-partner violence and how to access it
- undertake research to better understand the incidence and nature of these behaviours in military families.

Since the publication of *Living in Our Shoes*, the MOD has appointed a Domestic Abuse Awareness Champion supported by Awareness Champions in each of the single Services. It has also formed a Defence Domestic Abuse Survivor Community and Awareness Network (DDASCAN) to give prominence to the voices of survivors in working groups and in policy reviews.

In September 2022 the MOD published a revised policy on Domestic Abuse (JSP 913), introducing in a Whole Force approach (i.e. including Civil Servants), and updates to reflect the statutory responsibilities. It improved clarity on roles and responsibilities and provided revised guidance on information sharing and confidentiality. The policy is due for a routine review, which provides an opportunity to provide more information on the management of perpetrators.

In 2024 the MOD published a revised 5-year action plan¹⁸⁶ to tackle domestic abuse in the Defence community. This updates an earlier plan published in 2018 and focuses on three areas: prevention, intervention and partnering. The revised plan lists 23 actions, progress on the implementation of which is monitored by the MOD Domestic Abuse Working Group. Actions implemented include:

- a domestic abuse data and research working group to deepen understanding of the prevalence and nature of domestic abuse in Defence to ensure that it ‘systematically tracks and considers research recommendations’
- an awareness campaign in March 2024 led by the MOD Domestic Abuse Awareness Champion and Awareness Champions in the single Services, supported by the DDASCAN
- the launch in November 2024 of the Domestic Abuse Practice Community aimed at those most likely to support or signpost someone affected by domestic abuse
- the roll out of Domestic Abuse Matters training to over 700 Service Police in 2024, as part of the Defence Serious Crime Command (DSCC) commitment to training on domestic abuse. This led to over 40 Service police offers being trained as domestic abuse champions. DSCC aims to embed the course in routine training.

The MOD strategies and policies on domestic abuse have been informed by the findings of various research projects including two by King’s College London (KCL) – one on prevalence¹⁸⁷ and another on experiences,¹⁸⁸ and one by Anglia Ruskin University on barriers to seeking help through an evaluation of SSAFA’s Stepping Stone Home (SSH), a facility for women in the Armed Forces community who need a safe and welcoming place to stay.¹⁸⁹

The KCL prevalence study was based on data collected from a military sample between October 2014 and December 2016; and the experiences study comprised 25 participants participating in semi-structured telephone interviews conducted between January and August 2018. The SSAFA study drew on interviews

185 MOD, No Defence for Abuse, Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018–2023.

186 MOD No Defence for Abuse, 2024

187 MacManus, D., Short, R., Lane, R., Jones, M., Hull, L., Howard, L. M., & Fear, N. T. (2022). *Intimate partner violence and abuse experience and perpetration in UK military personnel compared to a general population cohort: A cross-sectional study*, The Lancet regional health. Europe, 20, 100448

188 *Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse among Civilian Partners of UK Military Personnel: Perceptions of the Impact of Military Life and Experiences of Help-seeking and Support*, King’s College London

189 *Barriers to help-seeking for domestic abuse within the British Armed Forces: Experiences of female civilians accessing support from a military refuge*, SSAFA



with 14 female civilians who had moved away from male military personnel, who were interviewed between October 2021 and April 2022.

While the commitment to evidence-based policymaking is commendable, it is necessary to critically assess the extent to which the existing research underpinning these studies remains sufficiently rigorous and representative of the current population characteristics and complexities surrounding domestic abuse in UK Armed Forces families in 2026. To fully inform future policy development, there is a pressing need for updated empirical research including large scale studies with representative samples of Armed Forces families to assess current prevalence, risk factors, and access to appropriate support; methodologically robust and longitudinal studies to track changes over time in incidence and outcomes; and mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative data with qualitative insights that capture the evolving nature of these issues and the lived experiences of affected families.

With greater awareness and reporting of abuse it would be timely to undertake further research with larger samples of those involved in domestic abuse and inter-partner violence, especially as the MOD has made considerable efforts to improve understanding of and support for those experiencing domestic abuse in recent years.

In 2023 the Service Police undertook 78 investigations relating to potential cases of domestic abuse, an increase of over 100% from 2022. The MOD acknowledges that the reasons for this are not clear. Increased reporting could be a positive outcome of greater awareness, but there is the added complication when compiling data around domestic abuse in the Armed Forces that much of the Defence population reaches into civilian support services and the civil justice system. Reliable measurement is a government-wide conundrum and the MOD is hoping that a plan to increase its focus on data will help, along with the expected publication of the government's domestic abuse and violence against women Theory of Change in 2025.

Progress in Wales

Every NHS health board in Wales has an Armed Forces champion whose role is to ensure that the needs of the Armed Forces community are met locally and to improve the links between health and other public advocates. Wales has a network of Armed Forces Liaison Officers (AFLOs), funded by the Welsh Government, who are responsible for raising awareness of the issues affecting the Armed Forces community in Wales along with promoting and coordinating work to support the Armed Forces Covenant. The AFLOs have been working with partners to develop specific initiatives that support health and wellbeing issues for Service families. These include GP surgeries running coffee mornings for the Armed Forces where veterans' advice services are available for assistance and support.

In its 2022–2023 report on the Armed Forces Covenant,¹⁹⁰ the Welsh Government stated that the Welsh Armed Forces Expert Group¹⁹¹ had identified as a priority for action the reduction of friction relating to primary healthcare needs for families moving into Wales. The report stated that fresh guidance to Local Health Boards and GP practices in Wales was under development, covering priority consideration of veterans and information on support for families. This guidance¹⁹² was issued in June 2023. Although it is principally veteran-focused it contains a short section on the families of Serving personnel explaining that the health and wellbeing of family members can be impacted as a result of service life, and reminds health authorities that they have a duty under the Armed Forces Covenant to ensure families are not disadvantaged. The policy states that when GPs identify a patient in a military family who requires a new referral or transfer of care as a result of moving into the area, they should flag in the referral letter that the patient is eligible for waiting list parity and provide relevant evidence of the previous length of wait. The Welsh Government has made a commitment that any time accrued on an NHS waiting list for family members when outside Wales, will be transferred so they are not disadvantaged when they access treatment in Wales. Welsh Government officials assured us that all Local Health Boards in Wales are aware of this. The guidance also includes information on sources of support for families.

¹⁹⁰ Armed Forces Covenant: annual report 2022 to 2023, gov.wales

¹⁹¹ This group consists of people with detailed knowledge of issues which affect the Armed Forces Community in Wales. The Group provides advice, feedback and information to the Welsh Government to improve understanding of the needs of the community and how service delivery might be improved.

¹⁹² [Armed Forces Covenant healthcare priorities](#), Welsh Government



In May 2024 the NHS Wales Chief Executive wrote to all local health boards to remind them of their duties under the Armed Forces Covenant, asking them to consider their own compliance with the duty of due regard, specifically in relation to identification of the Armed Forces community, and raising awareness of the issues the families may experience when accessing services.

Progress in Scotland

Every NHS health board in Scotland has an Armed Forces and Veterans Champion. Although principally focussed on veterans, since 2012 these champions have provided support to anyone in the Armed Forces community who is struggling to gain access to health services or who may be encountering other health related issues.

The Armed Forces Personnel and Veterans Health Joint Group was established in 2019 to 'drive progress of [sic] commitments relating to the health of the armed forces and veterans community'¹⁹³ in Scotland. It consists of a Strategic Oversight Group, responsible for progressing the development of relevant policy across Scotland and an Implementation Group responsible for delivery. Both groups include representatives from the Scottish Government, Armed Forces veterans' organisations and charities, NHS Scotland, and NHS and Local Authority Armed Forces and Veterans Champions.

Since 2021 a main priority of the Implementation Group has been to develop a General Practice Armed Forces and Veterans Recognition Scheme. The scheme aims to raise awareness among General Practice teams of the health challenges that veterans and Armed Forces families face as a result of military service. The scheme, launched in November 2023¹⁹⁴ following a pilot phase, includes training to give staff working in primary care a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of military life on health. The Scottish Government and Board Champions continue to promote uptake among individual practices and Boards.

As part of the registration process for the scheme, GPs are asked questions on their experience and understanding of providing healthcare to veterans and the Armed Forces community. In 2024 the Scottish Government were considering how to use these data to make improvements to the scheme. As a further measure, in 2023, the National Clinical Director in NHS Scotland issued a letter to General Practice leads recommending basic steps which practices can take to identify their veteran and Armed Forces community patients.¹⁹⁵

Continuing Challenges

1. Accessing Healthcare

The FamCAS surveys indicate that the number of Armed Forces families needing medical services has remained constant since 2020, at about 90%. The 2025 FamCAS survey reported the number of those being able to access GP services without difficulty (66%) was lower than in 2020 (77%). Of those requiring mental health treatment, 39% had done so without difficulty in 2025, compared to 48% in 2020, a decline of 9%. Moreover, of the families who moved while receiving mental health treatment only 31% had continued treatment without any difficulty, lower than any year since 2020. The proportion of families able to continue hospital/specialist services without difficulty remained at its lowest reported level in 2025 (29%) having fallen from 44% in 2020.

There has been a fall in satisfaction rates with NHS primary care services in society generally over recent years, and this is reflected in FamCAS data. Given the reported experiences of Armed Forces families seeking continuity of care following a location move, and the general tendency for mobility to exacerbate the issues that civilian families experience in accessing health services, FamCAS continues to paint an unsatisfactory picture. The challenges are similar for the civilian population, especially in respect of long waiting lists.

2. Accessing Dental Care

The FamCAS surveys paint an equally dismal picture in respect of dental care. The percentage of military families requiring dental care has been fairly consistent at about 88% each year since 2020. However, the

193 Armed Forces Personnel and Veterans Health Joint Group, gov.scot

194 Scottish Government Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community Annual Report 2024

195 Scottish Government Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community Annual Report 2023



percentage of families able to access dental treatment without difficulty has dropped from 62% in 2020 to 38% in 2025, with an all-time low in 2024 of 33%. Of those families who had moved while undergoing dental treatment, 47% did so without difficulty in 2020 and just 20% did so without difficulty in 2025 – the lowest percentage in the last five years – indicating that the situation is getting worse.

In 2024 the Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report made the following statement:¹⁹⁶

- 6 Anecdotal evidence suggests that Service families sometimes find it harder than the general population to access NHS services, due to the requirement to regularly re-locate around the country with the Serving person(s). The annual survey of Armed Forces families asks Service families if they have been able to access dental treatment in the last 12 months, to which 62% answered yes in 2024. In NHS England's 2024 Summary of the Dental Results from the GP Patient Survey, 76% of GP patients in England who tried to get a dental appointment in the last two years were successful (page 3). Of those Service families who required dental treatment in the last 12 months, 70% were able to access it. It is recognised that there are challenges in accessing NHS dental care nationally, which impacts both Service families and the wider civilian population. However, some mobile Service families are impacted more severely due to the need to change dentists more frequently. 9

We understand that there are no places available at NHS dentists near some bases, for example RAF Valley in Wales, indicating an even greater challenge in some locations.

Priorities Going Forward in Health and Wellbeing

The evidence from contributors to this review has highlighted continuing difficulties experienced by family members in accessing health and dental care when they move to a new location. While there have been efforts to improve the situation, a more coordinated approach is needed, especially between government departments in England and with the devolved administrations. The MOD does not have agency for the provision of these services, but has an important lever through the Armed Forces Covenant which should enable it to hold the relevant bodies to account.

Of specific concern are the challenges facing dual-serving or single-serving families in registering their children in GP surgeries where there are policies that require at least one parent/carer to be registered in the same practice. Registering their children with an NHS dentist is equally problematic. We have not observed any progress in respect of assuring health provision for the children of dual-serving or single-serving families since 2020.

Contributions to this review from Armed Forces charities indicate the need for seamless, integrated support across civilian and military services, highlighting what is perceived to be a lack of collaboration and cooperation between DMS and NHS providers of health care for family members in the UK. A number of responses included the observation that policy changes are slow to materialise, with what is described as 'cultural resistance' to change. There is an urgent need for better support for mental health in particular, including breaking down the barriers relating to stigma in admitting these problems. We noted progress in GP surgeries being more veteran-friendly but a lack of recognition of the health needs of Serving military families despite commitments to tackle this in 2020.

Living in Our Shoes put forward a challenging set of proposals for government to do more for the healthcare of Service families, in particular in relation to ensuring continuity of care for those moving location, and in relation to developing a more integrated healthcare support offer for Service personnel and their families. DMS made it clear that there are no plans to roll out the Catterick model of integrated care more widely. Programme CORTISONE continues to promise significant benefits in terms of easing transitions between those in the care of DPHC and the NHS, but the programme continues to be beset by delays. Another opportunity was lost when the Defence People Health and Wellbeing Strategy was developed without reference to Armed Forces Families.

Accepting that the MOD has little direct agency in relation to national healthcare services, it could nevertheless play a useful role in ensuring DMS and the devolved administrations continue to focus on the needs of the family members of serving personnel. Such a move would be welcomed by stakeholders and

¹⁹⁶ Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2024, op.cit. p26



would add significant value in terms of sharing experience and agreeing consistent approaches, especially to the challenges that geographical moves create in relation to continuity of care.

Without more robust data, however, it will be difficult to progress effective policy and support. This must be a priority.

Support for Non-UK Families

Non-UK personnel include British Overseas Citizens, British Overseas Territory Citizens, British National (Overseas) Citizens, Commonwealth Citizens, Gurkhas and those Nepalese Citizens who transfer out of the Brigade of Gurkhas to serve in the wider Armed Forces. *Living in Our Shoes* found that families of those recruited from these countries and territories experienced additional challenges, including language difficulties, restricted employment issues for partners, and social isolation. Moreover, issues relating to immigration, settlement and visas had a profound impact on the individuals concerned. Concerns were regularly expressed about the cost of visas, which could be a significant financial undertaking, and a lack of understanding among these families about the immigration requirements.

There were clear perceptions of unfairness among non-UK Serving personnel, and other issues such as debt, employment, housing and family breakdown could emanate from the pressures of immigration. Junior single-Serving personnel from the Commonwealth pointed to the prohibitive cost of returning home to see their families and the sense of isolation this created. Furthermore, Commonwealth families had a low take-up of welfare support, and a more pro-active approach was needed.

Non-UK personnel and their families were a relatively minor area of focus for the *Living in Our Shoes* review, and the related recommendations were few, largely self-contained and represented a manageable workload for government. The review included three recommendations containing five separate points, focused on the need to:

- improve guidance for non-UK families
- consider an annual get you home allowance
- review policies on the minimum income threshold
- review visa and settlement costs for non-UK families
- develop an action plan to improve support to non-UK personnel.

Progress Since 2020

In its formal response the Government agreed to all three recommendations. The government indicated that the Home Office was undertaking an internal review of settlement arrangements with input from MOD on the processes surrounding enlistment and discharge of non-UK personnel, and intended to launch a public consultation to find a suitable policy solution during 2021.

1. Home Office Immigration Rules and Guidance

The rules and guidance for Service families and Service leavers were reviewed and initial changes published by the Home Office in June 2024 as part of the alignment of format and language across all Immigration Rules.¹⁹⁷ The revised guidance addresses some issues and inconsistencies identified by stakeholders through the Cobseo Non-UK Cluster. The Home Office are conscious of the importance of supportive and fair immigration arrangements for non-UK personnel, and expect their attention to increasingly switch towards addressing more substantive issues within the guidance. The Home Office have an ambition to create a landing page on GOV.UK through which Armed Forces personnel and their families can access all relevant rules, guidance and applications in relation to their immigration status, and hope to realise this soon.

2. Minimum Income Requirement Threshold for Immigration

In its response to *Living in Our Shoes* the Conservative government said that the Home Office was reviewing the operation of the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) as it approached 10 years since

¹⁹⁷ Immigration Rules – Immigration Rules Appendix HM Armed Forces, GOV.UK



its introduction, and that the Armed Forces context would be considered as part of this review. The government announced new immigration rules to increase the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) to £29,000 from March 2024 to sponsor family members to enter, stay or settle in the UK. Despite the government's commitment to consider the Armed Forces in this review, this increase would have placed the threshold above the reach of many non-UK Service personnel wishing to apply for family members to enter the UK, with potentially negative consequences for recruitment and retention. This issue was identified by the MOD in 2023 during routine information exchanges with the Home Office. Negotiations ensued and Ministers subsequently agreed that a lower MIR of £23,496 would apply to Other Ranks in the Armed Forces up to the point of completion of training, at which point, under the 2024/25 pay rise they earn £25,600. The standard MIR of £29,000 will continue to apply to all other groups.

The Home Office told us that a review of the MIR is ongoing which could result in the threshold for non-UK Service personnel increasing in line with pay increases.

3. Visa Fee Waivers

Serving non-UK Service Personnel are exempt from Immigration Control. This allows them to come and go without restriction and provides an exemption from visa fees. In April 2022 the Home Office changed their rules so that non-UK personnel do not have to pay the fee to settle in the UK on discharge, provided they meet Home Office criteria and one of the following additional criteria:

- they have served at least six years at their point of discharge; or are discharged on medical grounds with a condition attributable to service
- they are a veteran who has served for at least six years or was discharged on medical grounds with a condition attributable to service and is currently living in the UK
- they have not yet regularised their immigration status.

We understand that discussions between MOD and Home Office are continuing in relation to further planned visa fee waiver extensions arising from the Labour Party manifesto.¹⁹⁸

4. Get You Home Allowance

Although there was no current project to introduce a 'get you home allowance' for Foreign and Commonwealth service personnel, the government said it is looking to address this in the longer term. However, the MOD told us that they did not recognise the long term commitment in the government's response to *Living in Our Shoes* to consider a 'get you home allowance' for non-UK Service personnel, but pointed to the policy on Domiciled Collective Leave (DOMCOL) and DOMCOL Substitute which provides for an extended visit home for those who came to the UK specifically to join the British Armed Forces. This policy applies to personnel who are single or who are serving unaccompanied. After every 5 years' qualifying service, eligible personnel can take 45 working days' leave in their home country instead of 30 days of their annual leave allowance. There are no plans to reduce the qualifying period for this entitlement.

5. General Guidance

A key theme during *Living in Our Shoes* was the need to improve the accessibility of information available to non-UK Service Families. While we have seen no evidence of a MOD-led communication strategy for non-UK families, in 2024 the Army updated their guidance booklets on non-UK personnel issues, aimed at both unit administrators¹⁹⁹ and non-UK personnel and family members.²⁰⁰ The guidance for personnel includes information on immigration and settlement, travel, state benefits and education and is available on the Army Families Federation website. The guidance for unit administrators is broadly similar in scope and includes suggestions on where some flexibility may be appropriate for non-UK personnel, for example in relation to compassionate leave involving travel to a country of origin.

198 'We will also scrap visa fees for non-UK veterans who have served for four or more years and their dependents' Labour Party Manifesto 2024

199 Army non-UK personnel Guide For Non-UK Nationals And Unit Support Part 3

200 Army non-UK personnel Guide For Non-UK Nationals And Unit Support Part 2



The Armed Forces Families Hub²⁰¹ launched in February 2025 on 'Discover My Benefits', accessible to families, contains links to government polices relevant to non-UK personnel already published on GOV.UK. Work is ongoing with the Home Office to create a dedicated landing page which would contain links to all relevant immigration information for Armed Forces personnel and their families.

6. Transition

Non-UK Service personnel can apply to have their immigration status changed 18 months prior to discharge. The evidence indicates that this can cause some difficulties. The Home Office are aware of the issue and a specific process is in place to consider rapidly any settlement applications from the non-UK cohort. The Home Office confirmed that the rules around this are being reviewed.

7. The Armed Forces Families Strategy: Non-UK Families

The Armed Forces Families Strategy describes an end state for its Non-UK Families work stream in the following terms:

- 6 Non-UK families are valued and accommodated in supportive UK government and Defence policies cognisant of their experiences. This helps to mitigate potential disadvantage conferred by their immigration status wherever possible and provide wider support that is sensitive to cultural backgrounds. 9

The Army careers website states that: Commonwealth soldiers 'are, and always will be, an important and valued part'²⁰² of the fabric of the UK Army. The number of trained regular personnel in the Regular Armed Forces and Brigade of Gurkhas who fall within the description of non-UK personnel was reported to parliament in March 2025 as 11,450.²⁰³ This is approximately 9% of the total.

The important contribution that non-UK Service personnel make to operational effectiveness is beyond doubt, and while the work stream is relatively niche and largely self-contained, its importance lies in the unique difficulties that non-UK families encounter due to their nationality and immigration status and the cultural differences they are exposed to. Recognising the particular needs of this community and ensuring appropriate support is available to them is therefore important. The end state encapsulates well the ideal that policy makers and support organisations should be aiming for.

In 2021 the MOD instigated a 'deep dive' aimed at identifying the particular difficulties faced by non-UK Service personnel and their families. The results were circulated to stakeholders across Defence and third sector organisations in November 2021 and used as a basis for the development of an action plan, which was finalised in August 2022.

An action tracker, managed by the Defence People Team, is now routinely used to list agreed actions and activities and record progress. The Cobseo Non-UK Cluster is the principal cross-sector forum in which issues are raised for inclusion in the tracker and through which progress is subsequently monitored. This is jointly chaired by the Army Families Federation and the Royal British Legion and includes stakeholders from across MOD, the single Services, the Families Federations, third sector organisations, academic institutions and Service networks.

Within the tracker, actions are assigned to one of the five objectives contained with the action plan that emerged from the deep dive. These are to:

- establish a governance structure to coordinate, track and escalate non-UK issues (now considered closed)
- improve the accessibility of information available to non-UK Service Families, the chain of command and support services
- improve MOD understanding of the non-UK Service community and the challenges they experience
- improve accessibility of immigration policy and processes

201 Discover My Benefits – Families op.cit.

202 Army careers website 'Joining as a non-UK national'

203 UK Parliament, written questions, answers and statements 24 Feb 2025



- avoid any disadvantage that the non-UK Service community experience as a result of their immigration status.

These categories align well with the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations. As at January 2025 the tracker contained 54 closed issues and 38 live issues. Work to address them has now largely concluded – albeit that in one case the conclusion appears to be that no further work should be done.

8. Non-UK Policy and Support

Given the unique circumstances of non-UK personnel and their significant representation within overall Service numbers, it is important that there are enduring structures in place that capture and resolve issues that affect them uniquely, whether the issues relate to immigration, settlement or an aspect of general welfare.

Our evidence indicates that structures are in place. Policy ownership is distributed between the Home Office and different branches in the MOD, and the various parties appear to be well-connected and able to work collaboratively to solve emerging issues. The Cobseo Non-UK Cluster captures issues identified by the Families Federations and the third Sector more widely, and raises these to government as appropriate. The resolution of the issue around the MIR reveals a system that is able to react to an emerging issue and solve it. However, improving guidance to and communication to families remain work in progress.

We are aware of the significant in-depth casework undertaken by the Families Federations. The Naval Families Federation provided a series of case studies which indicate the complexity of some non-UK issues and the knowledge required by the specialist NFF staff to resolve these. Referrals for support have increased over the years and indicate an important role for military charities in offering specialised help and support on a one-to-one basis. The case studies demonstrate that this support is much appreciated by Serving personnel and their families.

Policy in relation to immigration and nationality for non-UK Service personnel is held by the Army Secretariat in Andover, working closely with the Home Office. The Army Secretariat described their relationship and links with the Home Office as both constructive and strong. This was echoed by the Home Office. Meetings take place at senior Civil Servant level three times a year to review current and emerging issues. Other policy issues in relation to non-UK personnel and their families are the responsibility of the welfare policy team within Armed Forces People Support in the MOD, which also leads the Families Strategy non-UK work stream.

A twice yearly cross-government non-UK working group involves the Home Office, MOD and the single Services, and a senior level steering group meets periodically. This group discusses non-UK personnel policy priorities and addresses issues requiring decisions at a higher level, with representation from Armed Forces People Support, Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding, Army Secretariat, the Home Office and the Office for Veterans Affairs.

The MOD accepts the importance of doing more to communicate directly with non-UK family members in order to better understand their needs and to ensure families are better informed about the policies that affect them and the sources of support available.

Continuing Challenges in Support for Non-UK Families

It is clear from the evidence from Phase One that there has been considerable positive movement in supporting non-UK families since 2020. However, often personnel and their families present very complex issues which the Families Federations are currently addressing through their casework. We heard that more work could be done to support this very important group, particularly given the challenges in recruitment and retention within the Armed Forces. Concerns were expressed that the amount of casework undertaken by the Families Federations is not always recognised, and that military charities are providing considerable sums of money to fund compassionate leave travel. The offer for non-UK personnel can seem piecemeal, and it is important to ascertain the extent to which lessons are being learned from the casework and the changes which government needs to consider.

The Home Office indicated their priorities as being to make it easier for Serving personnel to apply for settlement at the end of their service and to improve guidance on the GOV.UK website.



Improving Career Management Policy and Practice: Dual-Serving Families

Even though career management and welfare themes are reflected strongly in the Armed Forces Families Strategy these have received little attention in its implementation. The single Services, acting independently, appear to have made good strides in adopting more family friendly approaches to managing their people. However, both the Army and the RAF pointed out that they are operating in an environment where there are more posts to fill than people to fill them. This, combined with the fact that the operational needs of the Service must come first, inevitably places strains on the ability to meet personal and domestic preferences when managing individual careers.

Living in Our Shoes pointed to the additional stressors experienced by dual-serving couples, especially when they serve in different branches of the Armed Forces. The report advocated for much greater coordination of career pathways to enable both partners to retain their military careers. The report made one recommendation that all three Services should take steps to aid the retention of personnel in dual-serving relationships, particularly those in different services, and ensure that career managers liaise with each other to manage working requirements and deployments.

Progress Since 2020

The recommendation was accepted and the single services committed to refresh their policies and processes for taking the needs of dual-serving couples into account, building on their existing work. During Phase One we examined the progress made.

1. The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032

The Family Life and Service Life work streams include concerns relating to career management. From the outset, the Service Life work stream leader intended to conduct an investigation (deep dive) into areas of friction felt by families, including those in dual-serving partnerships, as a result of the demands of Service life. The initial focus was to be on engagement with career managers to understand the process for career management and how special educational and additional healthcare needs of the Service family are considered. From this focus, best practice would be identified and ideas developed to improve support. There is no evidence that this investigation took place, however. Nevertheless, career managers from both the RAF and the Army painted a positive picture of developments in career management policies and practices where digitisation is enhancing career choice and freeing up time for career managers to have what Haythornthwaite described as the 'conversations that matter' with Service personnel.

Changes have been introduced in relation to the management of dual-serving couples, driven in part by the MOD:

- (i) Bespoke career management arrangements for dual-serving couples from different Services.
- (ii) The introduction (Army and RAF) and broadening (Royal Navy) of policies designed to prevent the separation of dual-serving couples with dependent children. These set out a logical process for the chain of command to follow if dual-serving parents are expected to deploy at the same time. The policy scope includes readiness activities, career courses, exercises, operational deployments and unaccompanied postings.
- (iii) A change to the accommodation regulations to entitle dual-serving couples to reside in SFA between duty stations, where their duty stations are within 100 miles of each other.
- (iv) A change to policy to entitle both members of a dual-serving couple to 5 days relocation leave (this previously applied only to one partner).
- (v) A broadening of the entitlement to transfer leave between a dual-serving couple to include those in evidenced informal relationships and separated dual-serving parents.



Continuing Challenges

The MOD indicated that policy change in respect of dual-serving couples has been rather slow and that there has been a lack of integration of career management policies with other policies such as accommodation and remuneration, suggesting the continuation of a silo approach to policy. Nevertheless some of the changes listed above have undoubtedly helped dual-service couples to manage their respective careers.

Priorities Going Forward to Improve Career Management Policy and Practice

Our evidence indicates that attention needs to be given to:

- flexible working arrangements relating to overseas postings
- policy that does not currently allow both parents to be recognised as primary parents, such that one parent is entitled to SFA and the other is eligible to surplus SFA, which is problematic when partners are serving some distance apart, and can disadvantage the family unit and children
- the level of bureaucracy which limits the pace of change
- more rigorous research data for evidence-informed policy making.

In this chapter we have reviewed progress and challenges relating to three specific areas of policy. The evidence indicates that considerable progress has been made in each of these but greater coordination of policy and practice could resolve some of the unresolved issues.

Having reviewed progress during Phase One in respect of each key area identified in *Living in Our Shoes*, in the final chapter we draw our observations together in the light of Defence reform and the SDR, consider why a change of approach to families policy is both necessary and timely, and offer high-level recommendations for a fundamental shift of focus. We also indicate the questions and issues that could be pursued in Phase Two of the study.



Chapter 6

Assessing the Evidence: A New Era for Armed Forces Families Policy

6 Serving in the Armed Forces requires discipline, professionalism, flexibility, devotion to duty, bravery, personal sacrifice, compassion and a commitment to serving the nation. Strong forces require strong families²⁰⁴ 9

In 2020 *Living in Our Shoes* catalogued the experiences of Armed Forces families through the lens of the serving community and those working to support them. It provided increased understanding of the diverse needs and expectations of modern military families and the pressures of service life on family life and relationships. These pressures were cited by many military personnel as the reason they had decided to leave the Armed Forces early, thereby creating what has been recognised as a 'crisis' in retention.²⁰⁵

The challenges illustrated in *Living in Our Shoes* were not new and, as we noted in Chapter Two, successive policy reviews and strategies had attempted to mitigate the negative impacts of service life, especially for non-serving partners and children growing up in a military family. Nevertheless, *Living in Our Shoes* made a landmark contribution²⁰⁶ to the understanding of the complex needs of Armed Forces families, drawing attention to a range of problems in a single report and offering an extensive list of recommendations for change.

Since 2020, *Living in Our Shoes* has been widely disseminated, cited in parliamentary debates²⁰⁷ and defence policy briefings, referenced in stakeholder and other consultations across government departments and devolved administrations, and used by third-sector organisations and schools to advocate for improved support for military families. While the *Living in Our Shoes* review was commissioned to address the needs of UK Armed Forces families, there is evidence of its international relevance and influence. The review's themes, such as mobility, family separation, mental health issues, and impacts of military life on children's education and partner careers, are relevant across military communities worldwide, making it a valuable international comparative resource, aligned with global challenges in military family wellbeing. *Living in Our Shoes* served as a wake-up call to policymakers and the military. Central to its influence has been the authentic portrayal of the lived experiences of men, women, and children in military families – voices that resonated powerfully and could not be ignored in the development of evidence-based policy.

Five years on, and at a time of increasing geopolitical tension and growing concerns around recruitment and retention, it was timely to review the relevance of *Living in Our Shoes*. In Phase One of the '*Living in Our Shoes Revisited*' study we assessed the continuing relevance of the original recommendations, the vast majority of which the government accepted, within the context of current geopolitical concerns and recruitment and retention challenges.

The Government's positive response to *Living in Our Shoes* indicated that the recommendations would be taken seriously and created expectations that changes would follow. Policy changes were already underway in 2020 and the report gave a boost to these being carried forward. In previous chapters we described the progress since 2020, assessed the effectiveness of the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022–2032 as the preferred mechanism for delivering the changes expected in response to the *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations, highlighted the continuing challenges, and indicated priorities for change.

During Phase One we reviewed many documents, engaged in conversations with MOD officials, the Families Federations, military charities, head teachers, the Chiefs of the single Services, Chief of Defence People and his team, and senior staff in the Royal Navy, the Army, the RAF, and Cyber and Specialist Operations Command. We noted many helpful activities and initiatives since 2020 to take the recommendations forward, a series of policy developments to address the challenges experienced by military families, and considerable goodwill and determination to initiate change. However, while much has

204 Walker, Selous and Misca, op.cit. p62

205 Haythornthwaite, op.cit; Strategic Defence review, op.cit.

206 Walker, J. and Misca, G. (2025) *Reflections on a journey from research to impact: Influencing policy: meeting the needs of UK Armed Forces families*, Family Court Review, Volume 63, Issue 4, Oct 2025

207 "*Living in our Shoes*" Report, Volume 745: debated on Monday 19 February 2024, UK Parliament



been achieved, the evidence from Phase One indicates that many of the issues identified in *Living in Our Shoes* continue to cause disadvantage, disappointment and concern.

Living in Our Shoes recognised that many of the pressures felt by Armed Forces families in 2020 were also experienced by civilian families. That remains so in 2026, especially in respect of access to high-quality education and health care, particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and access to affordable childcare. Timely access to GPs and dentists and long national health waiting lists have been a source of serious national concern since the COVID-19 pandemic, as has the availability of appropriate childcare and waiting lists for childcare places. What makes Armed Forces families unique, however, are the non-negotiable obligations on Serving personnel to be operationally ready, to commit to 'duty first,' and to manage long periods of separation and frequent mobility:

- 6 The majority of military families experience a level of mobility and repeated periods of separation that are unparalleled in civilian life, or indeed anywhere else in the public sector, and they live with the knowledge that their loved ones may face the kind of danger which may require the ultimate sacrifice for their country.²⁰⁸

These realities of military life are even more pertinent in 2026 in an increasingly unstable world. By understanding and addressing the needs of families and building their resilience, the nation is also protecting its military personnel and contributing to operational readiness and retention. The observations in Phase One have emphasised the critical importance of 'thinking family' in all aspects of Defence people policy.

In this chapter we draw the Phase One evidence together, highlight the challenges which demand a more family-oriented approach to people policy and the questions which need to be addressed, consider why families policy in Defence is critically important, and suggest a new way forward. The evidence has led to a number of high-level recommendations which are designed to provide the impetus for a more integrated approach to families policy within One Defence, in line with the changes heralded in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review. We also offer some preliminary thoughts about the focus of Phase Two of the study.

Unresolved Issues: the Need for a Different Approach

Throughout the review of progress since 2020 we learned about a range of activities to address the needs of Armed Forces families and mitigate the challenges of balancing family life with the demands of military life. We noted the dedication and commitment of all those attempting to improve the quality of life for military families. Those contributing to the review, nevertheless made strong pleas for a more integrated approach to people policy and a better understanding of the whole Armed Forces community within a framework which supports all families and relationships. Despite the progress made in some areas and the obvious commitment to do the best for families, the pace of change often appears to be too slow and, as a result, families report the same concerns year on year.

The evidence presented in previous chapters points to a number of key issues which need to be resolved if satisfaction with service life is to increase and the negative impacts on family life and, thereby, retention are to be reduced. These include:

Children's education: concerns remain in relation to how school moves are managed, and the potential for educational disadvantage for children growing up in Armed Forces families, especially those with additional educational needs. Greater coordination is needed across the nations of the UK to ensure that children are supported at all times when they move from one educational system to another, including overseas. Attention needs to be given to the future positioning and role of Defence Children Services within Defence.

Housing: frustration has continued about delays in delivering the long-promised new approach to the allocation of Service Families Accommodation (SFA), coupled with the failure of existing policies to encourage a substantial and enduring increase in home ownership rates. The recently published Defence Housing Strategy 2025 promises far-reaching change and the implementation of this strategy needs to be pursued urgently.

Recognising modern relationships: although changes in family living arrangements and in society generally have been recognised, Defence people policies have not been updated to reflect the reality of modern

208 Walker, Selous and Misca, op.cit p57.



relationships, including extending entitlement to couples in long-term relationships in respect of allocation of SFA.

Partner careers: despite efforts to provide information about employment opportunities, more needs to be done to understand and remove the continuing barriers for non-serving partners seeking to build careers and sustain rewarding and fulfilling employment, especially in overseas locations.

Childcare: the absence of a comprehensive and joined up approach across Defence to supporting the childcare needs of Armed Forces families has led to missed opportunities to solve known issues, for example in developing a consistent and sustainable model for the governance of childcare settings on the Defence estate.

Healthcare and dental services: families continue to find it difficult to register with GPs and dentists and ensure access to continued healthcare when they are required to move location. The Covenant commitments of no disadvantage in accessing health and dental care services need to be respected.

Variations in policies and service provision: moving between the nations of the UK and to and from overseas can be stressful because of the variations in policies and service provision. The impacts of inconsistent policies need to be resolved and removed.

Communication with families: communicating directly with family members continues to be a key challenge, including the ability to ascertain their views and hear their voices on relevant policy development, provide relevant information, and inform them of the changes that most affect them. It is not acceptable that communication has to flow through the Serving family member, especially during deployments.

Joined up working: the MOD and Front Line Commands, bringing in the third sector when needed, must work more closely together to agree priorities for action and develop effective policies where MOD has the power to act.

Cross government collaboration: the paucity of effective mechanisms, in particular at senior levels, to discuss and agree the necessary actions across central, devolved and local government in those aspects of policy delivery where MOD has limited or no agency is a serious impediment to change.

Many people indicated that progress in addressing these issues has simply been too slow, resulting in a perceived lack of urgency to implement change:

“Defence struggles to change the simplest of things.”

“Families need to know what is being done – even if not completed. The wheels grind slow in MOD and families are asked a lot about the issues they are facing but don’t get to see any results in the short term.”

Others referred to a tendency to look for an easy solution, and to patch things up rather than improve them:

“There is too much quick fix, but not dealing with the root cause of a problem.”

“It’s about fixing the potholes and not resurfacing the road properly.”

Communication and collaboration emerged as key issues, including the need for better data and more robust evaluation of initiatives. Communicating directly with families has continued to be a concern which has made very little progress since 2020. Although the establishment of the Families Hubs in 2025 has sought to place official information in one accessible location, it is but one aspect of communication. The three Services and the Families Federations emphasised that empowering families to actively participate in decisions which affect their wellbeing is crucial, as is hearing their voices in conversations about policies and finding ways to ensure that positive change is achieved. The following comment from an Armed Forces charity summarises many conversations during Phase One:



“There needs to be a proactive approach to public relations and communications, moving away from a culturally defensive mind-set and focusing on engagement and understanding. Instead of responding defensively to feedback or criticism, government and public sector organisations should embrace transparency and open dialogue, taking the time to listen and show genuine empathy. PR and communications should focus on building trust with families, providing clear explanations of policies while acknowledging their lived experiences. It’s not enough to simply state that something is in place; there should be an ongoing effort to ensure that families feel heard, respected, and supported in meaningful ways.”

This proactive approach has to take account of the growing number of Service personnel and their families who live away from military bases, for whom communication, accessing information and the availability of support can be more challenging. This was highlighted clearly in another response from a military charity:

“The experience of families we engage with is that they and their needs are entirely invisible or ignored under the current system. This has to change, especially with increasing numbers of families opting to live unaccompanied and the make-up of families being increasingly complex.”

In 2020, *Living in Our Shoes* called for greater collaboration, specifically in the third sector, to enable families to access the most appropriate information and support. Similar pleas were made during Phase One of this study:

“There needs to be a more cohesive and joined up approach between government departments, the Armed Forces, and third sector organisations. Currently, the fragmentation of services can leave families navigating multiple systems for support. A coordinated, family-centred model that ensures all agencies work together seamlessly, sharing information and resources, would help reduce confusion and make support more accessible.”

“The MOD and broader government must work alongside wider sector partners, including charities, to co-design solutions to challenges, and ensure policy and delivery effectively meet needs.”

“We would like to see greater input and collaboration with smaller third-sector organisations. In our experience, much of the existing collaboration focuses on larger, more established organisations, while grassroots-level groups—which often have closer ties to the families they support—can be overlooked.”

Charities indicated that they would like to be consulted early and valued as equal partners with government in developing policy to support Armed Forces families.

The new Cobseo Children’s Cluster is taking bold steps to encourage greater cooperation and collaboration through partnership working, which indicates an increasing willingness to work across organisational boundaries to resolve the issues facing children growing up in the military families. As noted in Chapter 3, over the last five years an increasing number of players, especially in the third sector, are seeking to meet the needs of these children and young people. Until recently there has been little coordination of the many activities and initiatives, few shared objectives, little evidence of evaluating impact, and no obvious blueprint or mechanism for sharing good practice. It is to be hoped that the Cobseo Children’s Cluster will remedy these gaps and offer a blueprint for collaboration in other areas. *Living in Our Shoes* drew attention to the importance of hearing the voices of children and young people in military families, and while the individual services have done much to build on this recommendation there appears to have been little coordinated effort at a national level.

One of the contributors to Phase One suggested that a new study should be commissioned which:

“...looks at the service charity sector which identifies overlap, creates synergies and efficiency, with a view to rationalisation. This would enable more funding for delivery to the benefit of those in need.”



The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032

Despite the far-reaching vision and good intentions of the Armed Forces Families Strategy when it was launched in 2022 and the concerted best efforts of members of the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team to respond to a large number of recommendations and challenges within *Living in Our Shoes*, Phase One evidence pointed to a lack of necessary resource and agency to drive the changes needed. While reviewing the implementation of the strategy a number of factors were identified which compromised the effectiveness of the work streams:

- broad end-goals and theories of change not being used effectively to drive progress
- an inconsistent approach to monitoring progress
- staff changes and a depletion in staff resource during the first three years of operation rendering it difficult to adequately deliver on the promises in the strategy and maintain consistent activity across all work stream areas, despite best efforts
- insufficient evidence that learning from projects funded by the Armed Forces Families Fund (AF3) and the AFCFT has been used to support the implementation of the strategy and drive change
- many activities being undertaken but without consistent measures of their impact and sustainability
- a disconnect between the strategy team and other teams in Defence responsible for aspects of military life which impact on families, such as accommodation, remuneration, and career planning, with few shared objectives, action plans, agreed outcomes, and measures of effectiveness
- the inability of the Armed Forces Steering Group to effectively steer or challenge the strategy agenda or the progress being made
- inability to exploit the potential of the Armed Forces Covenant to lever change in support of the strategy, especially where MOD lacks the necessary agency to drive change.

These observations do not indicate any lack of commitment or effort by the Strategy team but point to the difficulty in engaging effectively with other people policy leads on matters of importance to families. Equally, some policy leads outside of the Strategy team excluded family considerations from their policy work on the basis that families are a discrete area of policy which is not their responsibility. Most of the continuing challenges require the cooperation and input of other government departments and the devolved administrations, and coordinating the key players and leveraging change require sustained leadership at a senior level.

In addition, with some notable exceptions, engagement with families in the policy development process has not always been consistent. Several charities referred to this:

“Empowering Armed Forces families to actively participate in decisions that affect their wellbeing, whether within the military system or in broader societal contexts, is crucial.”

“The voice of military spouses and partners is not currently part of the conversation regarding policy that affects them. A priority must be to have them in the room.”

“The MOD and broader government must engage directly with a wide range of Armed Forces families, on an ongoing basis and using a variety of approaches to ensure that positive change is achieved.”

“Ongoing and extensive collaboration will be key to achieving consistency in outcomes for Armed Forces families and this must include collaboration with families themselves.”

A perceived lack of progress in implementing the Strategy was noted by the single Services, the Families Federations, the charities and the schools who contributed to Phase One. The following responses were typical:

“Many of the commitments set out in the strategy have yet to drive any significant change. We are concerned about the lack of updates that have been published, particularly in relation to evaluation and tracking of commitments.”



“The visible evidence of how the UK Armed Forces Strategy (2022-2032) has been evaluated to date has been disappointing. A brief summary of progress was published in 2023. There must be a much more robust and open evaluation process and a far greater emphasis on defining metrics and tracking progress.”

The evidence reveals that despite the undoubted ambition and commitment of individuals involved in the work streams to make progress, the mechanism of a stand-alone families strategy has not been able to generate the necessary conditions for transformational change. Nor is it likely to be the most appropriate vehicle to respond effectively to the demands of a new era for Defence in which integration, joined up thinking and consideration of the Defence community as a whole are central tenets. Rather than reinvesting in the existing delivery model, therefore, the Phase one findings indicate that a different approach is needed.

Why the Observations from Phase One Matter

Annual attitude surveys repeatedly point to a link between the impacts of Service life on family stability and the often reluctant decision to leave the military. The issues identified in *Living in Our Shoes* and highlighted in Phase One are not new nor confined to the UK. The growing empirical evidence of the links between family support and military readiness is relevant world-wide. A US report²⁰⁹ in 2019 highlighted that, inter alia, family members:

- provide essential support to serving personnel throughout their careers
- influence whether serving personnel remain in the military
- raise a significant number of future military recruits.

The research found that specific and targeted military family support systems aimed at partners and parents positively impacted operational readiness and the ability of Armed Forces personnel to focus on their mission. These outcomes impact positively on performance and, ultimately, the Armed Forces' ability to fight and win.

A recent summary of the research evidence from the US and Australia²¹⁰ shows that comprehensive support systems for non-serving partners, childcare, and mental health programmes can increase retention rates among senior officers by up to 1.98 times. These systems reduce stress, improve mission focus, and foster long-term commitment to service. Key findings from the review indicate that:

- partner support is a top predictor of retention – service members with supportive partners are significantly more likely to stay in service
- family readiness systems enable service members to focus on operational duties, reducing separation risk
- access to mental health services and childcare improve family well-being and resilience
- families who understand and accept the obligations required by military service and maintain strong communication are better equipped to handle the challenges of military life
- healthy family functioning allows serving personnel to stay mission-focused during deployment
- family stressors, such as relationship conflict, divorce, and caregiving burdens are significant risk factors that can negatively impact the mental health and suicidal tendencies and, in turn, the mission readiness of serving personnel.

The researchers concluded that investing in support for military families is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity.

209 *Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society*, (2019) National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

210 The Penn State Clearing House for Military Family Readiness (2025) Strengthening Military Retention by Investing in Family Readiness – summary of research evidence from US and Australia; Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State. (2025, April 24). *Empirical evidence of the connections between military family readiness and military readiness, warfighting capability, and lethality (Version 3)*



These conclusions are similar to those of researchers in Australia²¹¹ in 2023:

6 Couple and family factors can have a significant influence on a serving member's commitment to their military employment. [...]. Defence forces have both an important goal in the retention of military families and an obligation to address the health and well-being of non-serving partners and family members, as well as that of their serving employee.²¹² 9

Although these evidence reviews were undertaken in respect of Armed Forces personnel and their families in countries other than the UK, they echo the understanding here about the factors influencing retention, and paint a picture of the important contribution of a stable and supportive family to operational readiness. Family well-being is seen to directly impact the performance of serving personnel during deployment and is directly linked to mission readiness. Since there is no equivalent research in the UK, during Phase Two of this study we consider it important to trace the critical moments in family decision-making, and the impacts of targeted support for families on retention and mission readiness within the UK Armed Forces community.

During Phase One, military charities emphasised the important contribution families make to operational effectiveness:

“ The lack of a family-centric approach within military policy means that families are not given the same level of attention or consideration as the serving individual, despite the significant impact that family support has on service personnel's wellbeing and career longevity. ”

“ The MOD's longstanding policies and mind-set regarding family involvement in the military are slow to change, and without strong advocacy and systemic reform, this issue remains entrenched. ”

“ A cultural shift is needed where families are recognised for the sacrifices they make and included in the military support framework as equal partners. ”

Our conversations with senior members of each of the Services indicate a growing belief that taking account of the needs of families in people policy is a moral and strategic imperative which should not be left to a small team of officials in the MOD to deliver in isolation from people policy generally, but has to be owned by everyone, with leadership taken at the highest level if the shortfall in recruitment and the unwanted outflow are to be tackled effectively.

Defence Reform

The changing geopolitical context forms a central backcloth to the recent Defence Reform programme and the Strategic Defence Review 2025 which was published as we considered the evidence from Phase One of the study. The ambitions of Defence Reform provide a critical moment during which to rethink how a more families-centred approach to Defence people policy can be taken forward in parallel with other far-reaching changes in Defence. The vision within the SDR offers the blueprint which acknowledges that:

6 people are fundamental to UK Defence and to delivering the transformation set out in this review.²¹³ 9

Drawing on the findings from Phase One, we considered the expectations for structural and administrative change embedded within the SDR (shown in italics below), and mapped how meeting the needs of families supports them (shown in bold below):

1. *Transformation of Defence to a fighting-ready force: evidence shows that to prepare a fighting-ready force, families need to be supportive.*
2. *Integration at the heart of transformation: requires integration at all levels - an integrated approach to Defence people policy, including ensuring families considerations are at the heart of a joined-*

211 McIntosh, J. E., Painter, F., Opie, J., Hameed, M., Vuong, A., Dowling, R., Boh, J., McLean, N., Jiang, H., & Booth, A. (2023). *Family Cohesion and Relationship Quality in Defence Force Families: Rapid Review*. Open Journal of Social Sciences, 11, 56-93.

212 Ibid. p 74

213 *SDR (2025)*, p 64, GOV.UK



up approach to people policy development involving the MOD Department of State and Front Line Commands.

3. *A new vision for how the Armed Forces should be conceived as One Force: requires coordinated policies across the individual Services, sharing of best practice and collaboration.*
4. *Breaking down barriers between the individual Services, between the military and the private sector, and between the Armed Forces and society: requires refocusing and strengthening the application of the Armed Forces Covenant, increasing understanding in society of the role of the military in providing security, and building bridges between the whole Armed Forces community and society.*
5. *A whole society approach – widening participation in national resilience and renewing the nation's contract with those who serve: requires improved awareness of and compliance with the Covenant, and greater public understanding of military life.*
6. *Increasing integration, reducing duplication, improving delivery: means moving away from a siloed approach to policy implementation, towards increasing integration and cooperation to address the continuing concerns expressed by families, and greater collaboration with and between the third sector in the provision of support.*
7. *Delivering a general renewal of military accommodation, including investment for rapid work to fix the poor state of family housing, and revised support towards home ownership: requires urgency in the delivery of the Defence Housing Strategy 2025, revised incentives for home ownership, and a new inclusive offer.*
8. *Rebuilding medical capacity and capability together with the national health services, coupled with organisational reform within Defence: this encourages a fresh look at the benefits of an integrated Defence Medical Service which is closely linked with NHS-based care for families, and embraces medical support for family members, especially children in dual-serving and single-parent serving families.*
9. *New research and evaluation: all research, including that designed to understand the needs of families and evaluating support for families, must ensure outcomes are measured and evidence of impact captured, and technical scientific military research should take account, where appropriate, of all impacts, especially those that are unintended, on Serving personnel and their families.*
10. *Transformation to be delivered by its people, empowered through a change in culture and people policies that remove red tape: this must be driven by the whole Armed Forces community which includes family members, and requires appropriate direct communication with families, hearing their voices, and faster implementation of relevant policies.*
11. *The whole of Defence must change how it supports the Armed Forces as part of a more flexible policy response: such flexibility must have people, including family members, at the centre of people policy development.*

The SDR suggests that Defence must work with the DfE in England and with the devolved administrations 'to develop understanding of the Armed Forces among young people in schools.'²¹⁴ A similar recommendation about awareness training for teachers was made in *Living in Our Shoes* which was not accepted at the time. There was strong evidence from children and young people that talking about the Armed Forces was not always welcomed by teachers, especially in schools with low numbers of children from military families.

A number of contributors to Phase One, referred to the important role played by cadets, who provide an important bridge between schools, the military and society. The SDR expects a 30% increase in cadets by 2030. Their families will be central to conversations that aim to reconnect the Armed Forces with society as a whole, and to renewed efforts to boost recruitment. We note that the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations have the strapline 'connecting society to defence'. We have been encouraged, especially by senior staff in the Army and the Royal Navy, to consider the ways in which cadets and their families may be considered as members of the wider Armed Forces community during Phase Two of the study.

²¹⁴ Ibid.p19; See Baverstock, A. (2021), 'What were the processes and associated impacts of enabling Education students to increase their awareness of the specific educational issues of Service families?' Education 3-13 July.



The SDR also refers to recruiting and retaining new generations with different requirements. Along with information about the offer and the promise of education, training and skills, any conversation must include the ability of the Armed Forces to support and encourage the role played by families, including the parents/carers of young recruits.

Our conversations with the Church of England Bishop to the Armed Forces²¹⁵ and military chaplains highlighted the programmes being developed by faith organisations to support Armed Forces families in local communities, and extend understanding of the role of the Armed Forces in society.

The Army told us about the importance of ensuring that life skills are developed at the start of a military career: talking about relationships and the need for Serving personnel, partners and family members to develop emotional resilience; and understanding the expectations of Service life as careers progress, summed up in the mantra 'join well, serve well and leave well'. 'Recruit the person and retain the family' is a well-rehearsed slogan we heard on many occasions. We learned about Welfare HARDFACTS²¹⁶ providing links to related policies, additional sources of guidance and sources of support for Service personnel and their families.

Thinking Family - Improving Retention

Research has shown that improving the support for families is itself a mechanism to aid retention. The SDR refers to the priority to deliver a flexible working initiative – policies that include flexible working and greater stability in location and assignments are to be embraced, reducing the frequency of moves and enabling Serving personnel to stay in roles longer.²¹⁷ It will be important to assess the impact of these initiatives on family life and on retention. Finding solutions to the unresolved challenges highlighted during Phase One should not only improve the quality of life for military families but do much to increase retention.

Living in Our Shoes noted that many of the frustrations and concerns felt by families related to mobility and the implications associated with a change in location. Reducing mobility would undoubtedly reduce families' concerns about the impact of military life on children's education, partner careers and employment and access to healthcare, highlighted in *Living in Our Shoes* and again in this review.

Resolving challenges in children's education

Attention in Phase One has been drawn specifically to the issues faced by Armed Forces families with children with additional needs at a time when the government is looking to introduce reforms in education to address these needs and new evidence about the extent of the challenge is emerging. We received a number of comments such as the following:

“ Currently families often have to make the hard choice to remain in county when serving parent is [stationed], so that they do not lose their place on the waiting list for [SEND] assessment/diagnosis or give up support that has already been put in place at the current school. ”

Researchers at Oxford Brookes University recently undertook a study, funded by the AFCFT, to develop a holistic understanding of the impact of Service life on children with additional needs and their families' experience of supporting them.²¹⁸ The study examined the educational attainment of Service children with additional needs compared with their non-service peers, alongside an in-depth investigation of the factors that support or prevent them thriving. Civilian and Armed Forces parents alike reported a lack of understanding of additional needs by the people and organisations they interacted with, and described understanding and managing their children's needs 'as a lifelong journey, full of unexpected hurdles as their children grew and circumstances changed.'²¹⁹

215 Bishop Hugh Nelson is a member of the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* Advisory Group.

216 Welfare HARDFACTS: an acronym already used in relation to Transition. It translates as Health, Accommodation, Relocation, Drugs & Alcohol, Finance & Benefits, Attitude, Thinking & Behaviour, Children & Family, Training, Education & Employment, Support Agencies.

217 Ibid .p66

218 Lee, C., Cotton, A., Newbury, D., and Connelly, V., (2025) Supporting All to Thrive: the educational experiences and outcomes of children from UK Armed Forces families with additional needs., Oxford Brookes University

219 Ibid, Executive Summary p 11



- 6 Unacceptably long waiting lists for assessments and support, difficulty in accessing support, a lack of information and dysfunctional and disconnected organisations were key challenges for families.²²⁰ 9

For children in Armed Forces families these challenges were exacerbated by mobility:

- 6 For children with additional needs, especially neuro-diverse children who thrive on stability, these moves can be highly challenging. New environments, social groups, carers and educators and unpredictable routines and expectations can lead to increased anxiety, stress-related behaviours and feelings of isolation.²²¹ 9

The study underlines the negative impacts of fragmented systems of support, different policies across the UK and the need for parents to

- 6 restart the lengthy, complex and arduous process of assessments and securing healthcare and educational support with each move.²²²... ..a severe lack of continuity in both educational and healthcare support when families moved. This was the case whether moving internationally, between the different nations of the UK, or even within the same country. Some children were left without educational provision for extended periods and were at risk of losing access to vital medical support and medication. This suggests a systemic and UK-wide problem with disconnected systems rather than isolated incidents of mishandled cases.²²³ 9

Similar references were made to fragmented systems during our Phase One study, often in relation to healthcare:

- 66 *[There is an absence of] true integrated care, where the needs of the whole family are considered and addressed across both military and civilian health services. [Addressing this gap would mean] developing an effective model for whole family care [which would require] large-scale systemic changes.* 99
- 66 *Without a cohesive framework for joint working [between NHS and Defence Medical Services], military families often find themselves navigating separate systems creating confusion and delays in accessing support.* 99

The experiences of Armed Forces families who took part in the Oxford Brookes' study paint a stark picture of what were described as 'battles' to secure appropriate educational support for their children:

- 6 All Service families described their lives as a constant battle with various systems (education, healthcare, and local authorities). The frequency and complexity of these fights were intensified by repeated moves. Parents described these battles as emotionally and physically exhausting, and even harder when a serving parent was deployed, leaving the at-home parent to fight alone.²²⁴ 9

The findings show that Service parents/carers were consistently less satisfied with all aspects of their children's educational provision and less satisfied with the handling of their children's school moves than civilian parents, pointing to disadvantage at a more foundational level for Service children. Despite the promises in the Armed Forces Covenant, Service parents in the study often recounted experiences of disadvantage, repeated each time they moved.

Not surprisingly, then, the research indicates that children's additional needs are cited as the main reason for leaving or as strongly influencing the decision of families to leave the military. Many felt that the level of support received is dependent on the discretion and empathy of the chain of command, with lower-ranking personnel more concerned than those in higher ranks that asking for time off to attend children's appointments, for example, could impact their career adversely. This research highlights a continuing

220 ibid

221 ibid p12

222 ibid p13

223 ibid p14

224 ibid p14



tension between the military's need for mobility and the stability that benefits children with additional needs, and reinforces the importance of finding ways to mitigate this tension, particularly as access to appropriate support is often contingent on a family being able to stay in one place.

The Oxford Brookes study noted the importance of a secure and stable family home in meeting the needs of children with additional needs. Parents reported being unable to secure appropriate education for a child with additional needs because of slow housing decisions on assignment to a new location, and receiving eviction notices when they were trying to retain an especially adapted SFA. These challenges added to the stress felt by parents trying to minimise disruptions to education.

A new report in 2025 by the Children's Commissioner for England,²²⁵ based on conversations with a million children and thousands of school leaders, stressed the need for stability and laid out a vision to reform the education system. The Children's Plan put forward by the Children's Commissioner includes the provision of more and better support for all children, especially for those who face barriers to attending, engaging, attaining, and excelling in school such as those with special educational needs or in need of pastoral support. The report indicates that nearly four in ten (37%) children need additional support at some stage in their education, and 25% will need a social worker. The report points out that:

- 6 Children who face multiple challenges face an escalating risk of not attaining at school. While 82% of pupils without SEN achieve a pass in English and maths, this drops to 43% for those identified with SEN. Pupils with one or more additional need beyond SEN face other reductions in attainment, with each added need compounding the challenge... ..

For example, children who frequently move home are less likely to achieve in their GCSEs than children who have a stable home throughout their education. Those with one address were most likely to get five GCSEs passes (65%), compared to just half (50%) of those with three home moves over their school career. And just over one-in-ten (11%) of those with ten moves.²²⁶ 9

Living in Our Shoes highlighted the impacts of mobility on children's education, the length of time it took some children in military families to get a SEN diagnosis, and that many waited too long to get an EHCP and found the system slow and difficult to navigate, particularly when they moved schools and had to start again to secure the most appropriate support. This situation was highlighted again during Phase One. The Children's Commissioner's Children's School Survey found that:

- 6 For children with EHCPs, too often they are not effective. In some cases, they are low quality, poorly written, and include interventions that are not underpinned by evidence. The current definition of SEN is not clear or consistent and children's access to the system is too dependent on where they live, where they go to school, and even on individual professionals.²²⁷ 9

The Children's Commissioner noted that while schools and teachers are doing their best to meet children's needs, their efforts:

- 6 are not consistent across the country. Too often, there is insufficient coordination and expertise ...²²⁸ 9

The Children's Commissioner makes the case for a different and more inclusive approach to education which would better meet the needs of all children and do more to support those with additional needs. Among a number of recommendations the report argues for a new approach to statutory education support with:

- 6 A plan that works for every single child. A system that ensures the right support, at the right time, with tailored plans for children based on their needs, backed by a better understanding of children's lives, and evidence of what works.²²⁹ 9

225 *The Children's Plan: The Children's Commissioner's School Census, September 2025*, (2025) Children's Commissioner for England

226 *Ibid* Executive Summary p11

227 *Ibid* p12

228 *Ibid*. Foreword

229 *Ibid* p19



The emphasis in the Children's Commissioner's report on understanding children's lives is especially relevant to children in Armed Forces families, as is the call for better support for children with SEND, and the recognition of the impact of school moves. If Armed Forces families had fewer concerns about children's education it is reasonable to suggest that this would impact positively on retention. The Children's Commissioner's remit, however, applies only to England, so if her recommendations are accepted by government the issue of coordination with the devolved administrations remains a key challenge for Defence. Contributors to Phase One repeatedly commented on the challenges children face when moving between the nations of the UK:

“Not enough has been done to support service children in ALL nations. Movement between devolved nations can be particularly difficult.”

“Tracking [the movements of Service children between schools] does not seem to work especially between devolved nations.”

“[the] common transfer file doesn't seem to have worked.”

Although our focus is on Armed Forces families, we recognise that the issues in education are felt across society. A new report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS)²³⁰ describes a crisis which has been building for ten years, and the system for support for children with SEND in England as being 'broken' with costs 'spiralling', the quality of provision 'patchy', and everyone involved at 'breaking point'. The IFS highlights the rapid rise in the numbers of children with SEND and the rising costs of EHCP provision for children with autism, ADHD, and speech and language difficulties. While the solution to the challenge is complex, the IFS calls for better training for teachers and support staff, more flexibility in schools to meet children's additional needs, improving accountability on outcomes, and a clear vision for supporting all children while delivering better value for money.

Increasing stability

The evidence from research supports a family-focused approach to addressing the additional challenges military parents face, finding ways to mitigate the impacts of mobility, and increasing the opportunities for stability wherever operationally possible.

The drive to invest in Defence infrastructure and create homes for Serving personnel and their families, prioritised in the SDR, should enhance SFA which is:

essential to the morale and retention of Service personnel, as is ending the uncertainty regarding access to SFA by personnel in long term relationships, including same-sex couples.²³¹

As we noted in Chapter 5, the buy-back of SFA from Annington Homes offers the opportunity to reset the accommodation strategy and consider a wide range of options, including redesigning and remodelling the SFA estate to deliver wider social benefits.²³² The Defence Housing Strategy 2025 should allow greater stability for military families, and our evidence indicates that policies that support better quality housing, home ownership, and flexible working can aid retention. Increased home ownership could strengthen understanding of the Armed Forces in civilian communities, and enable families with children who require stability to avoid having to move and disrupt education.

Living in Our Shoes recognised the link between well-maintained housing and families feeling valued. Annual attitude surveys have re-emphasised the importance of feeling valued, which could aid retention. The SDR underscored that acknowledgment of family circumstances and the needs of children, especially those with additional needs can do much to help families feel valued:

In the event of Defence returning to enduring deployments at scale, pastoral, practical, and financial support for families will be fundamental to personnel retention and should be accounted for in operational planning.²³³

230 Sibieta, L., and Snape, D., (September 2025) England's SEND crisis: costs, challenges and the case for reform. [Institute For Fiscal Studies](#)

231 Strategic Defence Review op.cit. p133

232 Ibid p134/135

233 Ibid p



A New Era for Families in Defence: 'Think Family'

The case for change stems from observations about the current approach to families policy, and challenges in the implementation of the Armed Forces Families Strategy as a separate line of policy development. The evidence indicates that concerns continue in the key areas highlighted in 2020 despite considerable progress in some aspects. Phase One evidence leads to the conclusion that the Armed forces Families Strategy 2022–2032 is not the best mechanism for delivering the change that is needed and expected by Defence Reform. For reform on the scale envisaged in the SDR to succeed, families need to be central to the thinking and planning for a different career offer, greater flexibility and better integration. A 'think family' approach could shape a new conceptual framework which encompasses the whole Armed Forces community, including Serving personnel, reservists, veterans and families. As the Armed Forces Offer is redesigned and the concept of flexible 'zigzag' careers takes shape, more families will come into the ambit of the whole military community. A different role for reservists through integration will have significant implications for their families, many of whom may not have identified themselves as Service families.

A survey²³⁴ undertaken with family members of reservists in the UK found low awareness and low use of family welfare services within the military. Most participants did not know how to access support, even during deployment, and had inconsistent local experiences of welfare support. The key role of the reservist as a barrier or facilitator of information was highlighted, especially as most families of reservists did not identify as military families, indicating a lack of any sense of belonging to the Armed Forces community. The study found that reservists' families think of themselves as having a member of the family in the military, rather than as being a military family. This perception may well change as new career structures are developed and operationalised.

The evidence suggests that a transformational One Defence approach to people policy, could more effectively meet the needs of personnel and their families across the whole military community. To achieve this, family considerations need to be woven into all aspects of people policy development, and the Armed Forces Covenant with an extended legal duty needs to be leveraged more effectively to build collaboration across central, devolved and local government to address the issues which can disadvantage families.

A few of those who contributed to Phase One referred to the role of the Armed Forces Covenant, but our observations indicate that the Covenant is still not widely understood and, therefore, does not act as a strong mechanism for ensuring appropriate support for Armed Forces families. Contributors to Phase One noted that more work is needed to realise the full benefit of the promise between the nation and the Armed Forces:

- “ There is still a lack of understanding of the Armed Forces Covenant and inconsistency in its application. This has a direct impact on Armed Forces personnel and their families when they engage with public and commercial organisations. ”
- “ If the Covenant is to be a promise from all of society, the public needs to have a stronger awareness of what the Covenant is and what support it can offer. ”
- “ The Government should implement a dedicated programme of promotional activity on the Armed Forces Covenant and Covenant Duty, accessible to all to improve awareness of the positive contribution of Armed Forces families and to ensure they feel valued for their contributions and sacrifices. ”
- “ Expanding the Covenant Duty to cover all policy matters throughout the UK and devolved governments would enable a more comprehensive and consistent approach to supporting families, ensuring all layers of government plan and deliver policy and services in accordance with the Covenant principles. ”
- “ [The MOD should] ensure that authorities understand the Military Covenant [sic] and ensure it is enforced across all devolved areas. ”

234 Connelly, V., Hennelly, S., Fear, N.M., Morrison, Z., Gribble, r., and Smith, J., (2024) [Reservist families and their understanding of military welfare support as a \(non\)military family](#)



A new 'think family' approach should take account of the needs of modern families and relationships, reduce complexity and maximise collaboration across the Front Line Commands, government and the third sector. Families need to occupy a much more secure place in the Defence institutional consciousness, and to be recognised more widely as a critical component at the heart of the military community, with a key role in supporting operational readiness and effectiveness. Many of those who contributed to our study emphasised this belief:

“The MOD has historically maintained a view of families as secondary to service members. This institutional mind-set makes it challenging to shift towards a more inclusive family-centred model. Structural and policy reforms require long-term advocacy and the MOD's slow adaptation to the evolving needs of families has hindered progress.”

We consider that the new Armed Forces Commissioner could champion a more integrated framework for families within people policy if provided with the necessary authority and resources. We noted, however, that those who contributed to our review rarely mentioned this new role.

The case for change stems from observations about the current approach to families policy, and challenges in the implementation of the Armed Forces Families Strategy as a separate line of policy development. The evidence indicates that problems continue in key areas: for example, the uncertainty for those running early years settings on the Defence estate is a major risk to childcare provision; partner careers, especially in overseas locations; children's education, especially for those with SEND; disadvantages in health and dental care; the need to implement new accommodation policies at pace; delays in fully recognising the changing nature of family life and relationships; and the career challenges facing dual-serving couples.

The lack of direct communication with families has been a major concern for many years, yet little progress has been made since 2020 to ensure that families are heard, involved in discussions about policies which impact them, and can receive information first hand. A recommendation in *Living in Our Shoes* was based on a suggested change in the JPA. Five years later, this issue needs to be urgently resolved if the agency of families is to be respected and valued.

To develop people policy in an integrated way, it is essential to gather and analyse consistent evidence and undertake robust research which answers the key questions. Currently, there is a lack of routine robust evidence about the impact and sustainability of initiatives, and an underuse of data in the MOD which could cast more light on people's decision to leave the military early.

Questions to be Investigated

To plan for the transformational change that is implied in a 'think family' approach we suggest that a number of questions need to be investigated. These include the following:

1. **Who will be defined as being a family member and how might this definition alter in different contexts?**
2. **What needs will families experience as career structures change and the scope of the Armed Forces community expands?**
3. **How will families' needs vary at different stages in military careers, at different life stages, and in different Services and occupations?**
4. **What are the tipping points/crunch times for military families in the different Services, at different life stages, and how can they be mitigated?**
5. **What are the greatest family-related risks to retention across the whole Armed Forces community within the new era for Defence?**
6. **Having identified the risks, how are they best addressed?**
 - Which risks does Defence have the agency to mitigate?
 - Which risks require Defence to work with partners to provide mitigation?

- Which risks are best addressed by others, including the third sector?
 - How will actions to mitigate all the risks be coordinated?
7. **What push and pull factors will be associated with retention across the whole Armed Forces community and how will these change as a result of new career structures?**
 8. **What mechanisms and processes will be needed to ensure that families concerns are effectively integrated into people policy development to support families and retention?**
 9. **How will responsibility be apportioned for designing these mechanisms and processes and implementing and sustaining them effectively?**
 10. **How will the Department of State and Front Line Commands collaborate to drive integrated people policy?**
 11. **What further evidence is needed to establish a robust link between an integrated people policy and retention, drive change to improve support for families at all stages of a military career and encourage long-term commitment to service in the Armed Forces?**
 12. **How can the quality of family life be supported without compromising operational effectiveness and duty first?**

We believe that some of these questions can be addressed in Phase Two of this study in consultation with the MOD and the single Services, including an international review to learn how other Armed Forces have dealt with these issues and consider the relevance to the UK. In addition, it should be possible to re-prioritise the fund earmarked to support the Armed Forces Families Strategy to generate the evidence to answer some of these questions. With better targeted investment and more clearly defined outcomes and impact measures, the funds could support transformation, thereby guiding policy development and implementation. This would contribute to the accumulation of more robust usable data to support evidence-led decisions, along with more effective use of the existing data gathered in MOD, including the annual attitude surveys. To develop people policy in an integrated way, it is essential to gather and analyse consistent evidence and undertake robust research which answers the key questions. Currently, there is a lack of routine robust evidence about the impact and sustainability of initiatives, and an underuse of data in the MOD which could cast more light on people's decision to leave the military early. The need for better data was a theme running through our conversations in Phase One:

“We still need more data and information so that we can properly assess the nature of some of the issues being faced.”

“The needs of Armed Forces families [should be] addressed in all major government programmes and strategies. This must be coupled with improved data to understand families' needs and experiences, the identification of measures of success, detailed implementation plans and ongoing, long term evaluation.”

Our evidence about the need for centralisation of families' concerns in government people policy development, coupled with our call for access to better data, were highlighted in a detailed response from a military charity:

“Meeting the needs of Armed Forces families depends on knowing who and where they are, and how they access services and support. We have incomplete and variable understanding of how, where, and when the Armed Forces community access services. Increased and consistent collection of data could help the sector understand whether the profile of those accessing services matches the wider Armed Forces community population and/or the characteristics of those in greatest need. It can help to identify presenting needs and barriers to accessing support, as well as how far services go to meet these needs. This will help inform future planning, design, and delivery of effective support for the Armed Forces community. Work must be done to ensure all services offering support meaningfully adopt harmonised questions about the UK Armed Forces community in data about access and use of support services, and evaluation.”



Next Steps: Living in Our Shoes Revisited - Phase Two

We welcome discussion on the findings from Phase One and the proposals for a new approach to bring families into the mainstream Defence people policy arena. All our conversations with key stakeholders in the single services and the third sector support the call for transformational change. In Phase Two the focus, *inter alia*, will be on detailed consideration of the most effective ways to achieve this change and investigation of some of the questions posed above. We will continue to work iteratively in collaboration with the MOD, Front Line Commands and key stakeholders, to set the priorities for Phase Two, which will begin in New Year 2026, with a view to gathering the evidence needed to support a more integrated model for people policy across the whole Armed Forces community.

Phase Two will explore in more depth the evidence from Phase One. Working collaboratively with MOD, MinVP, the three single Services, the three Families Federations and other key stakeholders, the focus will be on:

- in-depth evaluation of the priorities and mechanisms for transformation and integration of families policy identified in Phase One, and the questions to be investigated
- accumulating new evidence from members of the whole Armed Forces community and those working to support them, to understand families' needs as military careers change, in order to inform people policy integration
- gaining a deeper understanding of the disadvantage different families face at different times and in different contexts
- determining the actions needed by central, devolved and local government, the three single Services, and others, including the third sector, to mitigate disadvantage
- considering the mechanisms for breaking down barriers between the Armed Forces and Society
- identifying examples of best practice to support the whole Armed Forces community, including international benchmarking to understand how other Armed Forces are dealing with these issues
- developing recommendations which inform, support and guide the implementation of comprehensive people policies in Defence which are data-driven and evidence-led.

Two Delphi panels will contribute to the learning in Phase Two:

- Panel One: consisting of high-level key stakeholders
- Panel Two: consisting of experts, including experts by experience

The final *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* Report is due in 2027.

Phase One High-Level Recommendations

We were invited by Al Carns MP, in his previous role as Minister for Veterans and People, to offer recommendations that reflect the evidence about the progress made since the publication of *Living in Our Shoes* in 2020 and the continuing challenges which indicate the need for a different approach. So we offer a number of high-level recommendations for a change of approach based on the evidence gathered in Phase One.

The SDR 2025 places emphasis on the need to consider the Defence community as a whole – One Defence – and the importance of joined up policies which include families. Our recommendations support this vision which requires a new, more consistent approach to meeting the needs of personnel and their families. The recommendations are designed to address inconsistencies, and to strengthen families and people policy and the role of the Armed Forces Covenant. The recommendations, if accepted, should better support families in the Armed Forces community and have a positive impact on retention at a time of critical change in Defence and increasing concerns about world security.

To address the evidence from Phase One we offer an overarching recommendation and a number of supporting recommendations which address conflicting policy objectives being pursued in isolation, leading to dysfunction and lack of progress. We believe that the recommendations will support the transformational change that is necessary as this time in UK Defence.



Overarching Recommendation

Acknowledge the vital role families play at the heart of the Armed Forces Community and apply the principles of the One Defence concept, oversee a fresh approach to addressing their needs and concerns by building family considerations more firmly into decision making, policy development, and cross-government engagement, and accelerate timely implementation.

Supporting Recommendations

1. Shift the emphasis away from pursuing family-oriented change through thematically organised specialist work streams within a discrete families strategy and incorporate families' considerations systematically into all new and refreshed Armed Forces people policies.
2. To support this shift, and as a step towards removing siloed thinking, produce a clear statement, endorsed and championed at the highest levels of Defence People leadership, committing to the delivery of Principal Policy Objectives for all areas of Armed Forces people policy development, including in relation to families, and consider a portfolio approach to policy development.
3. Resolve the inequalities generated by the differing approaches to devolved policy matters impacting Armed Forces families and ensure no disadvantage accrues from military service in a particular location.

Recommendations Addressing Continuing Concerns

Children and Young People

4. Work with the Department of Education and the devolved administrations to fundamentally understand the nature and scale of the disadvantage being faced by Service children in education in the UK, in particular those with special educational needs and disabilities, jointly agree the required mitigating actions, and determine MOD's future contribution to this work.
5. Resolve the position of Defence Children Services in the Defence organisation and its relationship with the MOD Department of State, and provide it with a clear mandate and appropriate resources.

Childcare

6. Engage with the Front Line Commands to agree Defence's priority actions in respect of childcare, and devise and implement a consistent and workable approach to the governance of childcare settings on the Defence Estate.

Non-serving Partner Careers and Employment

7. Engage with the Front Line Commands and the three Service Families Federations to agree Defence's priority actions in respect of partner careers and employment, and work at pace across MOD organisational boundaries to resolve the legal constraints for non-serving partners who wish to develop and maintain their careers and take paid employment while accompanying serving personnel to Defence locations abroad.

Health and Wellbeing

8. Work with Defence Medical Services and the Front Line Commands to consider how families' needs can be incorporated into a remodelled Defence Health and Wellbeing Strategy and an Action Plan to support the whole Armed Forces community.



Addressing Disadvantage

9. Identify and share best practice in the four nations of the UK to raise standards and address all areas of disadvantage affecting Armed Forces families.
10. Continue to work across policy team boundaries to identify and resolve unintended policy outcomes which disadvantage dual-serving couples and single serving parents.
11. Remodel and revitalise the MOD's strategies for engagement with cross-government stakeholders on Armed Forces Covenant issues, including at senior official and Ministerial levels, and promote awareness of and compliance with the Covenant to remove disadvantage encountered by families across the Armed Forces community.

Communication with Families

12. Build on the Families Hub Information Portal and work at pace with the Families Federations and Front Line Commands to identify and implement best practice in establishing direct two-way communications with family members, so that they are better informed, especially about policies that affect them, and to enable their views to be incorporated routinely into the policy development process.

Research Evidence

13. Maximise the impact and value delivered by programmes funded by the Armed Forces Families Fund by targeting areas of identified need, employing a rigorous approach to evaluation, and ensuring consistency between programme design and declared Principal Policy Objectives.
14. Ensure that all data collected by the MOD relates to an identified requirement and is appropriately analysed and used to inform policy and practice.
15. Develop and instigate as routine a robust evidence-based approach to people policy making.



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Contact the research team: lios-r@outlook.com



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