

Summary of

Living in our Shoes

Understanding the needs of UK
Armed Forces families



Summary of the report of a review commissioned by
the Ministry of Defence | June 2020

The Review Team



Andrew Selous MP, Lead Reviewer

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



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

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



Dr Gabriela Misca, Research Adviser

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

Our Approach to the Review

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

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

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

Disclaimer

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

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Foreword

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

Lieutenant General James Swift
Chief of Defence People
June, 2020

Introduction to the Review Summary

In January 2019, the then Defence Secretary, The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, commissioned Andrew Selous MP to conduct an independent review to consider the diverse needs of Service families, assess whether the current support offer is meeting these needs, and make recommendations accordingly. The focus of this review was on currently Serving personnel, including those preparing to leave the Armed Forces, and their families.

The Review Team's Approach to the Review

The review team consisted of: Andrew Selous MP, Lead Reviewer; Professor Janet Walker OBE, Emeritus Professor of Family Policy at Newcastle University, Lead Adviser and lead author of the review report and this summary; and Dr Gabriela Misca, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Worcester, Research Adviser on military families. The team were supported by Andrew's parliamentary office staff and his Office Manager, Christine Wallace.

We invited as many members of the Serving community and their families as possible to contribute to the review and to tell us about their lived experiences of military life. We talked to the Chain of Command, welfare officers, and padres/chaplains in the Royal Navy, the Army, and the Air Force. In addition, meetings were held with a wide range of stakeholders. During 2019, the review team gathered evidence to inform the study in a number of ways, including visits to fourteen military bases, visits to schools with large numbers of Service children, and meetings with key military personnel and stakeholders. These are detailed in the Introduction and the Annexe in the main review report.

We heard from and spoke to a wide range of Serving personnel of all ranks, their spouses and partners, and children and young people. Our conversations have included members of the UK Armed Forces community from Commonwealth countries who are currently based in the UK.

Key themes

Key themes emerged during the review about the challenges experienced by military families today which are regarded as detrimental to modern family life and relationships. These refer to: Service Family Accommodation (SFA); mobility; deployment; the impact of Service life on military children and young people; the employment and careers of spouses/partners; the health and well-being of Serving personnel and family members; and the impact of Service life on personal relationships.

Members of the Armed Forces have a great sense of pride in the work they do and the sacrifices they and their families make. The main review report documents the lived experiences of men, women and children within the Armed Forces community, using their own words throughout. In this Summary we have included a few direct quotes to illustrate the key themes. These are all anonymised.

Recommendations

The findings from the review have led to a number of recommendations for change that address some of the issues and challenges faced by military families. The recommendations are targeted primarily at actions for the MOD and the three single Services, but some have implications for other government departments and local authorities in England, the Devolved Governments of the UK, and a range of organisations in the statutory, private and charitable sectors.

The recommendations relating to each issue are prioritised within three categories: short-term priorities for change; medium-term changes; and a few longer-term changes that are either aspirational in nature and/or require policy change and some greater financial investment. The short and medium-term recommendations provide the building blocks for longer-term change and transformation. Moreover, a change in one aspect of Service life would almost certainly produce a positive ripple effect in others.

All the recommendations require a willingness and shared commitment to make changes to the ways in which the Armed Forces value and support their families in the twenty-first century.

Presentation of findings

The findings from the review are presented in two documents:

1. The Review report

The main review report provides the evidence, findings and rationale for the recommendations. It consists of ten chapters, and an annexe summarising the methods used.

2. The Summary report

This Summary report provides a brief overview of the issues raised in the main report and is designed to be the 'go-to' document for those taking forward the recommendations: primarily officials in the MOD, other government departments, and the Devolved Governments of the UK; and senior personnel in the Armed Forces. It summarises the key learning from the review and lists the recommendations. This Summary should be read in conjunction with the main review report.

Acknowledgements

It is not possible to undertake a wide-ranging review of this kind without the help and support of a large number of people. We offer our sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the review and who supported our work throughout 2019. We refer to people individually in the Introduction to the main report.

Most importantly we would especially like to offer our heartfelt thanks to all the Serving and non-serving members of military families, particularly the children and young people, all of whom spoke openly and honestly about their lived experiences of Service life, the challenges they face, the kinds of support they have received and the changes they would like to see. It is their words that tell the story in the main report and which have helped to shape many of our recommendations. We hope that we have done justice to their contributions and reflected their conversations accurately. We have endeavoured to ensure that there is greater understanding of what it is like to 'live in their shoes' and to shed light on the issues that they have raised and the support they need.

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

Chapter 1

Supporting Military Families: The Nation's Commitment

The Armed Forces Covenant

The Armed Forces Covenant was introduced in 2012 under the provisions of the Armed Forces Act 2011. The Covenant constitutes an enduring contract between the people of the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government and all those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their families. It is a promise by the nation to ensure that those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives, and should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Moreover, special consideration is appropriate in some cases.

The Covenant provides tangible recognition that members of the Armed Forces community and their families are required to live their lives within a culture where operational effectiveness must be the number one priority and duty comes first. Joining the military means accepting a range of values which include a commitment to serve one's country and put Service before self. The Covenant also explicitly acknowledges that military families play a vital role in supporting operational effectiveness, and that the whole nation has a moral obligation to offer them respect, support and fair treatment.

The Armed Forces Families' Strategy

The Armed Forces Families' Strategy 2016–2020 developed the commitment articulated in the Covenant. It acknowledges that military 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 can access support. The Families' Strategy was designed to provide direction to officials who are responsible for policy development in the areas that constitute the 'offer' to Service families. The intent is to operationalise the Covenant by removing disadvantage, whether real or perceived, and creating choice, thereby enabling families to make informed decisions.

The subsequent Action Plan set out the priorities for 2018–2020 and key targets and timelines for achieving them. The Annual Report of the Armed Forces Covenant is intended to ensure that Parliament, on behalf of the people of the UK, can understand how the Covenant is being delivered. Since the Covenant was introduced, the focus on veterans has been excellent and provides a blueprint for increasing the support offered to currently Serving Armed Forces personnel and their families.

The Current Review

This review, commissioned in January 2019, was designed to understand the impact of the current and likely future structures and the needs of Service families in the modern day Armed Forces, and to assess if Defence is equipped to respond to their needs. The review team have considered the diverse needs of currently Serving military families, and have made evidence-based recommendations on how Defence, in the light of identified issues, can improve its support to Service families. This review has explored in some depth the issues raised by Service personnel and their families. Many are pertinent to all three Services, but some have more resonance for one or other of the Services due to their varying recruitment patterns and modus operandi. The review aimed to:

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

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

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

Chapter 2

Changes in Family Life: Expectations and Transitions

In order to understand and respond to the needs of Service families today, it is essential to take account of two major factors: the enormous changes in society over the last century which shape all our lives, and the additional challenges that military families face in the light of the expectations placed by the Armed Forces on their Serving members.

In Chapter 2, we describe the main social and economic changes in civilian life in the UK since the mid-20th century. These include: the changing nature of couple relationships; increases in family separation, divorce and step-family formation; changing gender roles; and changing technologies. We then consider the implications of these for the Armed Forces with their long and distinguished histories and cultures. The far-reaching changes shape the expectations of military families in the 2020s. In this Summary we highlight some of the main societal changes and the additional challenges facing military families, and indicate why it is essential to understand the implications to ensure appropriate support is in place.

Changing couple relationships

Although married couples still constitute the main type of adult couple relationship in the UK, choice about the nature of adult partnerships has greatly increased. For most couples today, moving in and setting up home together marks an important step in the formation of a couple relationship. Most couples spend time living together before getting married or forming a civil partnership. Moreover, long-term cohabitation has increased substantially, not just as a prelude to marriage but as a lifestyle choice, and it continues to be the fastest growing family type in the UK. Since 2004, the countries of the United Kingdom have progressively legalised same-sex marriages and civil partnerships, first for same-sex couples and more recently for heterosexual couples.

While the Armed Forces recognise marriage and civil partnerships, until recently they have not recognised cohabiting partnerships, so there are scant data available about the number of Serving personnel in cohabiting relationships. The Joint Personnel Administration System (JPA) in April 2019 indicated that some 64,000 regular trained personnel were married or in a civil partnership. Since these data derive from self-reports it is almost certainly an under-estimate. Since 2019, the Armed Forces have recognised long-term cohabiting partnerships if specific evidence can be produced, but there are significant issues in defining and proving what is meant by 'long-term'. This creates a significant disconnect between the ways in which all forms of couple relationship are recognised in civilian life and their recognition within the military. This is explored in more detail in Chapter 3 of the report.

Over the past 60 years, increasing numbers of marriages have ended in divorce. Civil partners and cohabiting couples also split up. Over 40 per cent of marriages end in divorce in England and Wales. By age 18, over a quarter of children in the UK live in households with just one of their birth parents, and many of these children will have experienced the remarriage or re-partnering of one or both of their parents, and the consequent multiple transitions in family living arrangements. There are no accurate statistics about the number of Service personnel who are separated, divorced, or re-partnered. However, compared with the civilian population, military personnel are more likely to be married, to marry at a younger age and divorce at a younger age, and female Serving personnel are more likely to have difficulties forming and maintaining romantic relationships. It would appear that young, married military families are the most vulnerable in respect of family breakdown and are, therefore, a target group for support with their relationships. Serving personnel over 30 are less likely than those in the general population to be divorced. Abundant research evidence shows that:

- children thrive best in stable, loving households and parental separation and divorce increase the risk factors contributing to poor outcomes for children and young people
- continued conflict between parents has detrimental impacts on children
- being able to enjoy a continuing, loving relationship with each parent when parents split up is important to supporting children's well-being and positive child development
- there is a clear correlation between relationship breakdown and adult ill-health, including mental health and mortality, and children are also more likely to experience negative health outcomes
- repeated family disruptions increase children's vulnerability.

Family breakdown presents a series of challenges for all families but these are increased for military families, especially if they have been living in Defence accommodation.

Changing gender roles

Traditional gender roles in which fathers work while mothers stay at home to raise their children have long been challenged. Both men and women are likely to seek meaningful employment and family life today is frequently characterised by both partners, whether they be in same- or opposite-sex partnerships, working outside the home to boost the family income, and sharing child care responsibilities. This can be especially challenging for military families where parents have to spend long periods apart as a result of deployments.

Family stressors

All families experience a number of life events that create stress on couple relationships and can easily destabilise the family. These include: the transition to parenthood; children leaving home; ill-health; moving house; and death in the family. Service families are likely to move house more often than most civilian families and they often live with the possibility of Serving personnel facing injury and death. In addition, they face increased stress relating to difficulties experienced by spouses/partners in finding and sustaining employment, and the associated financial pressures.

Changing technology

Perhaps the most significant change impinging on partnerships, parenting and family life in the past 20 years has been the rapid development of electronic communication and the centrality of social media. Digital technology has changed working patterns and family relationships. Social networking is a central and ever-present feature in the lives of children, young people and their parents. Global communication is instant and immediate. Mobile phones and social media: enable family members to stay in touch with each other; offer new avenues for support; and create employment opportunities.

The technological revolution also gives rise to cyber-bullying, social pressure and increased expectations of instant communication flows. While there are concerns about the possible negative impacts of instant messaging, there are exciting opportunities for improving the support for military families. These are explored in Chapter 10 of the report.

The specific challenges for military families today

Military families constitute a diverse population and we understand that the socio-demographic and cultural profiles of each of the three single Services varies considerably. Military families face all the challenges and transitions that civilian families face but they also experience a range of unique stressors:

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

Military families have to: understand that 'duty' comes first, and operational effectiveness is the main priority; manage sometimes lengthy periods spent apart as a result of deployments; undertake frequent moves and relocations which entail disruptions in children's education, health care and spousal/partner employment; and cope with tensions in balancing family life with the demands of Service life.

It is essential to understand how resilience is fostered and how families can be helped to find strong coping mechanisms so that they can thrive and overcome any adverse challenges. The evidence from our review suggests that it is helpful to see military life as a series of changes, or transitions as they are described in the family studies literature. Better understanding of these transitions and how each Service family can be better supported to manage them and to foster, enhance and strengthen their family life, has been a key focus in analysing the data. Multiple transitions are a core feature of Service life from the moment of entry through to leaving the Armed Forces.

Military life offers numerous opportunities. Benefiting from these is a matter of balance: by recognising the additional stressors as well as the opportunities constant transition can bring, families can be helped to manage the demands specific to military life, enabling Serving personnel to be strong and resilient and family life to be more stable, thereby aiding retention. The impact of Service life on family and personal life remains the top factor influencing decisions about whether to leave the military. At no time would we or those who gave evidence to the review wish to plead a special case in respect of Service families. We recognise that all families face many of the stressors faced by Armed Forces families but few, if any, civilian families face the degree of separation, relocation and proximity to danger. Military families fully appreciate that they have to make sacrifices in order to support the Serving partner, but occasionally these can have unacceptable negative and cumulative impacts on the health and well-being of everyone involved.

To sustain operational efficiency there must be a national commitment to ensuring that Service families are appropriately valued and supported. This goes to the heart of the Families Strategy. The responsibility for supporting Service families goes well beyond the Armed Forces themselves and the MOD, and requires joined-up support and commitment from across central and local government, the Devolved Governments, military charities, businesses and employers, and society in general. The Armed Forces Covenant and the Families Strategy are key vehicles for driving this forward and making it happen.

Chapter 3

A Place to call Home: Increasing Choice

During the review, the topic most frequently raised by Service personnel and their families referred to accommodation.

In Chapter 3 we:

- examine in some detail the evidence relating to the state of and demand for military accommodation
- consider the Future Accommodation Model (FAM)
- recommend the changes that need to take place in the choices offered to Service families if the widespread dissatisfactions with Service accommodation in recent years is to be fully addressed.

In this Summary, we highlight the concerns relating to Service Family Accommodation (SFA), the steps being taken to improve the Defence estate, and discuss the accommodation options Service families might consider in the future. We put forward a number of recommendations for change.

Service Family Accommodation (SFA)

In the past, the majority of married couples would probably choose to live in Service Family Accommodation (SFA), often referred to as 'married quarters'. Increasingly, families have opted to find alternative accommodation which they either own or rent, in an area of their choosing, often some distance away from the Serving partner's home base. There is a marked difference between the three Services, however, in respect of living arrangements: with some 68 per cent of Army families, 53 per cent of RAF families and 34 per cent of RN/RM families choosing to live in SFA.¹ The demand for SFA remains highest amongst Army families. In 2019, some 40,000 occupants were living in SFA. We spoke to families living in SFA at all of the military bases we visited, and received many responses about accommodation in the Call for Evidence. The lived experiences of these families are explored in depth in Chapter 3 of the report.

The majority of comments related to the poor state of the accommodation and the challenges associated with getting repairs and maintenance undertaken. The Armed Forces Covenant 2011 states that:

- “ Where Serving personnel are entitled to publicly provided accommodation, it should be of good quality, affordable and suitably located.² ”

Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. The MOD is well aware of the need to improve the housing conditions and this is one of the MOD's top priorities. Over the last four years significant funding has been invested in improvements to SFA. These investments are very much welcomed but they are not likely to be sufficient to remedy the poor state that much SFA has fallen into.

Much more significant investment is required if the older SFA properties are to reach an acceptable standard and if Serving personnel and their families are to believe that they are appreciated and valued. While Service personnel acknowledge that SFA offers a relatively inexpensive way to live, in their view that is no excuse for houses being damp and mouldy and for repairs to take months:

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

¹ UK Tri-Service FamCAS Survey 2019.

² Armed Forces Covenant (2011).

According to MOD statistics, 97 per cent of SFA meets Decent Homes Standard as a minimum and 86 per cent reaches Decent Homes Plus. The lived experiences of families who have evidenced mould and damp and other problems in their houses do not support this. Personnel in the Chain of Command at various bases described accommodation problems as one of their biggest issues. Mould seemed to be a relatively common complaint. While we understand that there is a clear escalation and resolution process in place to deal with damp and mould, we heard of numerous examples of how the problem had impacted on families and especially on children's health.

Those who reported satisfaction with SFA tended to feel that they had been 'lucky' compared to other families, with the quality of housing described as being 'the luck of the draw'. This may be due in part to the fact that families do not choose their own properties in the way most civilian families do. Basic Information is provided online when an application for SFA is made, with photographs if they are available. This inability to view a property means that some families choose a house that looks good only to find that it may not be in an area that is suitable to their needs or is some distance from the base, where transport is poor, and schools, shops and other facilities are some a distance away. There is a strong case for providing fuller information about the choice of properties on offer, so that preferences are better informed, and allocation is more about judgement than luck. We understand that the Future Defence Infrastructure Service Housing Contract Statement of Requirement contains provision for 'Estate Agent' information for each SFA. Non-serving partners should be able to get on with applying for SFA while their partner is away on deployment in order to smooth the transition from one SFA to another.

A number of positive changes are being made by the MOD and Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) which should improve the experience for families living in SFA, and it is important that continuous improvement is a key goal going forward.

Maintenance and repairs

The concerns about SFA focus primarily on the state of the housing stock and the response to and quality of maintenance and repairs. Despite a recent increase in satisfaction levels, the major issues are with the length of time it takes for Amey (previously Carillion Amey) to deal with repairs and the seeming lack of concern expressed by them when families are without heating or hot water for periods of time:

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

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

One of the biggest frustrations for families is the fact that the wrong trade is sent time after time. Being able to report problems online would enable the repair process to be properly monitored. Some Commanding Officers expressed the view that it would make sense for minor repairs to be done locally and for families to be able to get quotes from a List of Approved Local Contractors in the local area so that repairs can be executed speedily. We understand that local repairs are allowed in Canada ensuring a more efficient service for families.

We have been made aware of the difficulties experienced by families with special needs, particularly when a non-serving partner has a long-term illness or disability. Long delays in ensuring that houses are suitably adapted to meet the family's needs can impact on the Serving person's ability to work effectively. Families with disabled children had faced similar difficulties.

Complaints

There were consistent concerns expressed about the complaints process in respect of repairs and maintenance. The three stage process is regarded as flawed as Amey seems to fail to log all complaints as 'complaints' (Stage 1), so that there is no way of escalating a complaint to Stage 2 if the complaint has not been logged in the first place. We understand that changes are being made and we urge that complaints should be logged online and dealt with via a simple-to-use web-based system to ensure greater transparency and timeliness.

Home improvements

Families want to be able make their SFA feel like home so they feel very disheartened by rules which require them to return the property to its original state when vacating it, even if that means undoing obvious improvements such as applying a fresh coat of paint, putting new tiles in the bathroom, hanging new curtains, repairing broken taps and creating flower beds in the garden. We understand that more flexible rules are being circulated. Given the general understanding among families living in SFA that improvements are not encouraged or allowed, we believe that the policy should be reviewed and greater clarity offered to families as to the improvements which are generally regarded as welcome and as enhancing the property, and which do not have to be reversed.

Remaining in SFA: protecting children's education and partner employment

Several families spoke about the difficulties they experienced as a result of having to move home every two years or so. These difficulties fall into three specific categories: problems with children's education and partner employment; family breakdown and the consequences of this in respect of parenting responsibilities; and the negative impact on family stability. Families also face difficulties when they are required to move at short notice when the Serving partner is assigned elsewhere. Non-serving partners need to have sufficient time in which to make arrangements in respect of their employment, either being able to complete a specific work task, or being able to transfer to another company without facing a gap in employment and the consequent loss of income.

Moreover, the current three month rule for claiming removal expenses on assignment can be extremely disruptive to children's education and spousal/partner employment. While there is an established process whereby the Serving person can apply for a mid-assignment move outside of the usual timeframes and be eligible to receive removal expenses, these concessions do not appear to be well-understood.

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

Separation and divorce

Non-serving partners are usually required to leave SFA within three months when the family splits up but they often experience problems when attempting to apply for local authority housing. A lack of connection to any one area can make applications for local authority housing very difficult. Not only are non-serving partners and their children having to leave their family home but they are faced with rules which deny them access to social housing. We understand that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) went out to consultation in 2019 on new comprehensive statutory guidance for local authorities covering the Armed Forces Community and social housing. This included the suggestion that the local connection test should be waived for divorced and separated spouses and partners of Serving personnel. We very much hope that changes will be made. This is critically important to ensure that stress and conflict are reduced. If one or both parents is under stress the detrimental impacts can be long-lasting.

Although the majority of civilian children continue to live primarily with their mother following separation/divorce, both parents are expected to maintain parental responsibility and to cooperate to

ensure that each child is able to maintain contact with both parents unless it is against the child's best interests to do so. Given that the majority of military children will be living with their mother following separation, male Serving personnel are expected to take their share of parental responsibility and do their best to sustain regular contact. Operational requirements render co-parenting demanding and challenging for Service personnel. We are aware that wherever possible SFA and other facilities are made available for Serving personnel to enjoy quality time with their children as frequently as operational requirements allow. The provision of 'contact' houses is an important life-line for Serving parents who live apart from their children after separation or divorce.

Widening Access to SFA

Increasing numbers of couples choose to live in long-term cohabiting relationships and raise their children without formally legalising their own relationship. Partners who are not married nor in a civil partnership have been denied access to SFA until recently. This clearly discriminated against cohabiting couples. Now, a cohabiting couple who meet certain requirements can be eligible to apply for surplus SFA but this does not confer any kind of entitlement. There is a four year military service requirement and the Serving partner has to show evidence of the relationship being 'long-term'.

While on the face of it the new policy recognises the choices increasing numbers of couples make, the requirements and lack of entitlement continue to be discriminatory. Couples who are married or in a civil partnership have priority on the allocation of SFA and only if there is a clear surplus can unmarried families apply for accommodation. Not all bases and stations have spare accommodation, and even when SFA has been allocated to a long-term partner family, should that surplus SFA be needed subsequently by a family who are 'entitled' to it then the long-term partners' family will be given 28 days to vacate the property. Senior staff and welfare officers in all three single Services have highlighted the unfairness of this policy.

We understand that the rules pertaining to couples in long-term relationships are currently under review. If the MOD and the Armed Forces are committed to supporting all families then they need to embrace the choices Service personnel make about whether to formalise their adult couple relationship or not and remove the disadvantages and discrimination they currently face.

Increasing Accommodation Choices

There is widespread recognition that the current accommodation model is not sufficiently agile to meet changing demands and expectations and to mitigate the level of dissatisfaction with SFA. The long-standing tradition of providing accommodation as part of the Service offer clearly needs to be reviewed in the light of modern family life. An important task for the MOD and the Armed Forces must be to clearly understand the various accommodation requirements that fit with the principles of fairness and support for military personnel and their families, and which meet the needs of operational efficiency, and then to consider the most appropriate options for change.

The RN/RM and RAF families have been less dependent on SFA in recent years and more likely to buy their own home and provide stability for the family while the Serving partner commutes weekly to the base they are assigned to when they are not deployed, known as 'weekending'. There are clearly sacrifices which accompany this choice which Service families acknowledge as the price they pay for greater stability in some aspects of Service life. But the price can be considerable:

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

(RN non-serving partner)

It is very important to ascertain the kind of supports that families living off the patch need in order to cope with the possibility of loneliness and isolation, especially during deployments, and to assess the impact of weekending on couple relationships.

The Forces Help to Buy Scheme (FHTB)

The Forces Help to Buy Scheme is regarded as a very positive offer for Serving personnel:

“ *The FHTB scheme is a massive retention positive tool and should be a standing offer, rather than the yearly update to extend the scheme each December. This policy alone could retain personnel by tying them in to long service as they repay the investment.* ”

(RN serving partner)

We are delighted that the scheme has been extended for three years to 2022, and that plans are in hand to consider some amendments to provide wider eligibility and flexibility.

The Future Accommodation Model (FAM)

During our review, plans progressed to pilot a new accommodation model which is designed to increase choice and encourage stability. The Future Accommodation Model (FAM) features a basic accommodation allowance, supplemented by additional payments, depending on whether the Serving person chooses to be mobile or stable. The model offers two specific options over and above existing housing provisions via SFA and SLA. The new approach is based on each Serving person's need rather than their rank or marital status.

The FAM is broadly welcomed by the Royal Navy and the RAF but many in the Army remain uncertain and harbour a degree of suspicion that the real aim is to do away with SFA and require Serving personnel to find their own accommodation. Many people referred to it as a cost-cutting exercise and one that would effectively destroy the sense of community built up on the patch, rendering Service families more isolated. This view was more likely to be expressed by Army personnel since the patch-based community remains a dominant feature of Army life:

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

(Army Serving partner)

We have been assured by the DIO that there is no intention to reduce the availability of SFA during the pilots. Nevertheless, the issue raised by some families is that if they buy a house in one area they might then find that a posting takes the Serving partner a long distance from the home, with a negative impact on family life. It is imperative, therefore, that the FAM pilots look carefully at the unintended consequences of living apart and weekending when long distances are involved, and that families need to be fully aware of the pressures that might accompany such an arrangement, so that they make informed choices about whether moving into the private sector is right for them. The FAM evaluation needs to look further than the choices people make and attempt to understand individual motivation and outcomes. The ability to have control over accommodation quality, maintenance and location is an important factor. A whole family, systemic approach to supporting Service families should go hand-in-hand with the revised accommodation offer. Key to future considerations will be the evidence and feedback received from the FAM pilots.

Looking to the future: a revised accommodation strategy

There is widespread agreement that Defence accommodation must be of sufficient quality to be a place that families can be proud to call 'home'. The poor state of the housing stock has had negative impacts on military family life and relationships, and on retention. For families wanting to live in SFA, the investment in improvements and ongoing maintenance needs to be made now. The vision of creating regional clusters that provide a range of accommodation choices and options is valuable, but it will need investment and careful planning. The aim is to deliver a more modern, fit for purpose and right-sized estate and a more agile accommodation strategy that meets the needs and aspirations of Service families today.

Our Recommendations

SFA: short-term

Recommendation 1

The Ministry of Defence to ensure that:

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

Recommendation 2

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

Recommendation 3

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

Recommendation 4

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

Recommendation 5

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

Recommendation 6

The Ministry of Defence to:

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

Recommendation 7

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

Recommendation 8

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

Recommendation 9

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

Recommendation 10

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

SFA: medium term

Recommendation 11

The Ministry of Defence to:

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

Recommendation 12

The Ministry of Defence to:

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

FAM: short term

Recommendation 13

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

Recommendation 14

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

Chapter 4

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

The impact of Service life on children featured highly during this review, with the majority of military parents raising concerns about the effect of their lifestyle on their children and, in particular, on their education.

Chapter 4 of the report explores in detail the:

- factors which impact on Service children
- impact of repeated cycles of deployment
- evidence relating to the educational attainment of military children
- transitions which disrupt schooling and sever friendships
- evidence about entry to higher education
- support needs of military children, especially those with special educational needs
- support needs of young carers
- ways in which children and their parents can be better supported.

The impact of Service life on children and young people proved to be one of the most sensitive issues and one which has led to the largest number of recommendations for change. In this Summary, we refer briefly to all of the issues explored in the main report and list our recommendations.

While there are no accurate records of the number of military children in the UK, the 2019 FamCAS Survey indicates that 79 per cent of Service families have children, 53 per cent of all Service families have at least one child of school age, and just over a third (34%) of families with children require early years (0–4) childcare.³ Military children and young people face the same challenges as civilian children, but having a parent in the military creates unique stressors and challenges which are not always recognised by the military or addressed in schools and in wider society. These include: high mobility; long periods of parental separation; the revolving shift from a two-parent to a one-parent household; and disruptions in education and friendship networks.

Deployments and separation

Military parents regard deployments as a catalyst for difficulties for their children and the longer the deployment the greater the perceived negative impact. The UK Ministry of Defence Harmony Guidelines vary between the three single Services, and are measured slightly differently. The Royal Navy experiences the highest number of days away from home, and the longest deployments of up to nine months, which are considered by most families and the Chain of Command to be too long, especially for children. Work is currently in train to revisit the Harmony Guidelines and the amount of time spent away from home overall for each of the Services. Operational efficiency must be the foremost consideration but reducing the time families spend apart is an important goal.

Dispersed living arrangements also increase the time spent apart. This raises issues about how families make choices about where they live and the importance of ensuring that they have a very clear understanding of the pros and cons of each option. Greater information is required about how ‘weekending’ impacts on the numbers of days spent away from the family over and above the time spent apart as a result of military activities:

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

(RM non-serving partner)

³ FamCAS 2019 op.cit.

Families stressed that 4 months is about the right length of time for a deployment in normal circumstances, and that 6 months and over is simply too long when children are growing up. Young children can be confused and upset by their parent going away for long periods, and this can lead to behavioural problems. In Chapter 4 we refer to a number of research studies showing that deployment has an adverse impact both academically and pastorally on children.

Uncertainty about when Serving partners will be coming home adds to the stress of time apart and the inability to plan:

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

(RN non-serving partner)

Non-serving partners often feel lonely and overwhelmed with their parenting responsibilities, especially if they have several very young children and are living ‘off the patch’. The Royal Navy ‘Guide for Parents’ provides information about the emotional cycle of deployment experienced by parents and by children of different ages. This kind of sensitive information should be provided to every Service family.

Young people would like their own clear briefings provided when a parent is going on deployment. The Defence Children & Young People's Board is hoping to try and address this through the development of a virtual online platform which would enable children and young people to access professional support. This is very welcome.

Education Challenges and Opportunities

The impact of Service life on children's education was raised repeatedly. The majority of concerns were about the frequency of school moves, the potentially negative consequences of disruptions to education, and the variable nature of the support provided. Being a child in a military family does not necessarily impact negatively on educational attainment, but if military children and young people are to thrive at school it is imperative that they have some stability in their education and receive appropriate support at all times. Service children should not be viewed as disadvantaged, but are more appropriately described as being ‘vulnerable’.

In January 2018 the number estimated to be in schools in England was 76,153⁴, and the vast majority of Service children attend schools with fewer than 10 Service children on the school roll. The support available to them differs considerably between schools: those with a high percentage of Service children are far more likely to understand their needs and challenges.

Frequent school moves and educational attainment

Patterns of mobility are different in each of the three single Services, with Army and RAF families moving more frequently than Naval families. Some children we spoke to had attended eleven different schools in three different countries, thus experiencing a variety of education systems and different curricula, often missing out on some elements and repeating others:

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

(Teenager at Catterick Garrison)

While there are a variety of different support mechanisms in place in the UK which strive to ensure that Service children are not disadvantaged, the reality for many is that school life is frequently disrupted, learning is challenged, and friendship groups are severed. Parents, children and young people were especially unhappy about having to change schools during the academic year. Concern about the frequent disruptions in their children's education could contribute to a decision to leave the Armed Forces.

Postings which take place during the school year also pose challenges for schools if the numbers of pupils on the register shift dramatically. While policy measures are in place to try to address this issue, a more nuanced approach is sought by head teachers attempting to ensure that they can provide a quality education to military children who are exceptionally mobile. Ideally, the funding difficulty would be resolved if postings take place in the summer holiday as happens in other countries such as France.

There was a general and heartfelt plea for fewer and less frequent moves and greater stability in children's education. Many families expressed the view that the impact of frequent postings on children's education is simply not taken into account by the Armed Forces and many, especially Army families, questioned the rational for two year postings given the disruptions for the whole family.

Concerns were raised about Service children's educational outcomes being lower at some Key Stages than those of children in the general population. We examined the available data in England very carefully and present our analysis and conclusions in some detail in Chapter 4. We caution against drawing conclusions about the comparative educational outcomes of Service children and civilian children. More in-depth research is necessary. An examination of the data and of various research studies led us to conclude that generalisations about Service children's attainment need to be treated with considerable caution.

While there are almost certainly correlations between disrupted education and levels of attainment, a causal link between mobility and educational attainment has not been proven. Similar investigations in the USA have reached the same conclusions. Factors influencing Service children's attainment are complex and the evidence needs further scrutiny in the light of better data and increased understanding of the impact of other factors which can hinder the attainment of Service children and young people.

Tracking Service children's educational journey

In order to accomplish effective tracking, information about each Service child should follow the child through their educational journey. An education marker placed on the file of every Service child should encourage tracking. There is now greater coordination between the devolved nations of the UK to ensure smoother transitions for Service children between different education systems, and further development is to be welcomed. Service children in the UK would benefit if information management systems could be more closely aligned for easier tracking, and if policies relating to education and other devolved matters could be more closely coordinated.

The Common Transfer File enables state schools and local authorities in England to transfer pupil data when a child moves from school to school. It would be helpful if these files could be routinely used when Service children move between the devolved nations. If the files are not transferred quickly children may miss out if the new school has not received all the information. It is also important for the receiving school to know whether there are elements of school work/assignments uncompleted at the time of the move which the Service child will need to complete at the new school.

Changing schools causes high levels of anxiety for parents and for children. Families need to be assured that the transition will be as smooth as possible and that the child's education will have minimal disruption. We urge a review of the School Admissions Code in England to give clearer direction to admission authorities about placing Service children. Clear information about the allocation of school places should be provided to all parents, including non-serving partners, when the family is being relocated.

Progression to higher education

Serious concerns were expressed by some that a significant percentage of Service children in England are not progressing to university as might be expected. We have examined the available data carefully and lay out our conclusions in the main report. It is essential to examine military children's progression in far more detail and with more accuracy than has been possible thus far in order to reach definitive conclusions about the impact of military life on children's educational outcomes and university admissions.

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

The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019⁵ includes data which suggest that the proportion of Service children who go on to higher education after the end of Key Stage 5 is four percentage points lower than it is for non-Service, non-free school meals children, with Service children being more likely to go into employment at age 18 than non-service children. We know that a number of Service children choose to follow in their parents' footsteps and join the Armed Forces. More research is needed to fully understand the onward progression of Service children when they leave school. In the meantime, the data available and the associated generalisations should be treated with considerable caution. The data reported in the 2019 Covenant Report show that in 2017–2018 the performance of Service children in England as a group was largely on a par with that of non-Service children across most measures, as in previous years.⁶ After Key Stage 4, Service children are as likely as non-Service children to stay in sustained education or employment. The correlation with relocations and school moves supports our recommendations that postings should take account of the potential impact on Service children's education and that fewer moves would be beneficial for children and for spouses/partners.

Service Pupil Premium

Governments in the UK are attempting to provide additional support for Service children. In England, the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) was designed to provide pastoral support, principally to mitigate the impact of mobility and deployments. We have focused specifically on understanding how the SPP is being used, the extent to which it is well-understood, and how good practice is disseminated. The wide dispersal of military children across England means that some schools near the major bases will receive substantial income from the SPP, while the majority of schools with few Service children will receive relatively small amounts.

The use of the SPP has been a controversial topic. Some children are clearly not seeing much benefit from the SPP and others are being well-supported. Flexibility and guidance should be given to schools to use the SPP in the most appropriate way for each Service pupil to ensure that they have the best possible support. Parents have also challenged the lack of SPP for pupils aged 16 and above when emotional stability is key to their success. There would seem to be a strong case for SPP to be available until Service children leave school.

Many Service children need help with some of their subjects, especially maths, if they move schools and miss out on certain elements. Teachers are keen for modules to be available online which will assist children who might be falling behind and which they can access in their own time at home. We are pleased that one of the SCiP Alliance priorities is to assist in the development of resources and training to support educational professionals. The SCiP Alliance has identified ten areas for action. Our review concurs with these priorities and supports the proposal to develop an online resource bank to help teachers to be more effective in their roles and to share good practice.

Supporting children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)

All families with children with special educational or additional needs or disabilities (SEND) face a number of challenges. These are exacerbated by military life. Many parents feel that the Armed Forces do not understand the pressures on parents with additional needs children and that these are not taken sufficiently into account:

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

These children are especially vulnerable, particularly if their family is posted to another country in the UK as different nations have different systems for supporting SEND children.

⁵ Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report (2019) Crown Copyright.

⁶ Ibid. Annex B.

There appears to be a 'grey' area in the SEND Code of Practice. The Schools Admission Code includes specific actions a local authority in England must follow when supporting a Service family moving into their authority area: a school place must be allocated in advance of a Service family's arrival. However, there is no such requirement within the SEND Code of Practice. Since many Service families move every two or three years then, cumulatively, a child with additional needs can miss many months, if not years, of education.

We believe that more can be done to support SEND children who have to cope with additional learning needs, hence the current focus in DCYP to address this via the MOD Local Authority Partnership (MODLAP) between the MOD and local authorities in England. The Devolved Governments are also taking further steps to support this vulnerable group. The clear message from all the work being undertaken across the UK is the importance of ensuring as far as possible that policy-makers collaborate to find common principles and pathways to support Service children through their formative years. We have made a number of recommendations accordingly.

Supporting young carers

Young carers tend to be a 'hidden' group in society generally. The challenges of military life can be greater when a family member has long-term health difficulties, especially if they are suffering from PTSD or mental health issues. Unfortunately there is no reliable evidence as to the numbers of young carers in the UK within Armed Forces families, and they are a hard to reach group. This can make providing support difficult, particularly as Service children move around. More needs to be done in schools and by the Armed Forces themselves to identify and support young carers. We support the recommendations in the recent FANDF (Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum) report.⁷

Promoting Stability and Continuity in Education

The Continuity of Education Allowance (CEA) is offered by the MOD to assist with funding a place in boarding school in order to provide educational stability for a child aged 8 and over when parents move around. Accompanied service is the overriding principle for maintaining entitlement and the family have to expect to be mobile. While boarding school does not appeal to all parents, boarding school offers continuity in education that is especially important in the run up to GCSEs and A levels.

A change of rules in 2018 requiring a new CEA Eligibility Certificate when a child is preparing to enter sixth form is causing concern amongst many parents, young people themselves and their teachers. Having to reapply for CEA at the 6th form stage does not meet the expressed aims of education being continuous, especially as the years between GCSEs and A level are of extreme importance for successful outcomes for young people. Education provision should be as continuous as possible. Changing from a boarding school to a day school after GCSEs, unless it is by choice for a specific educational or personal reason, is a transition too far for Service pupils at this stage of their education. Teachers are clear that the new rule for CEA can severely disrupt education at a vital stage. Recognising the cost to the public purse, parents and teachers made several suggestions for change which would retain the level of the current budget envelope and allow continuity of CEA into the 6th form. Eligibility for CEA must be based on educational needs and in the best interest of the pupil involved, rather than on rules about what constitutes mobility.

Supporting Service Children: the evidence

As a group, military children cope well with the challenges and transitions, but deployments and frequent moves can disrupt education and friendships. These can have an adverse impact on academic outcomes. While growing up in a Service family can help children to build resilience, confidence, tolerance and adaptability, mobility can result in a sense of uncertainty which can lead to anxiety, loneliness, bullying, and low self-esteem. Moreover, when both parents are Serving personnel every effort must be made by the Armed Forces to ensure that they are not deployed at the same time. Service children and young people can benefit from accessing youth clubs and other activities but it is sometimes difficult to

⁷ FANDF (2020) *Families Fighting On... Giving a voice to Forces families with additional needs and difficulties*.

achieve this if the child moves every two years or so and clubs have long waiting lists. We refer to some of the initiatives designed to support Service children in the main report.

Children and young people are proud to have a parent in the military. None of them want to be treated as disadvantaged, but they want people to understand what it's like to be the child of military parents and the additional stresses they experience. They need to know that support is available when they need it. Accordingly, providing support for military children must be a key policy priority.

Our Recommendations

Over-arching recommendation

Recommendation 15

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

Relocation: short term

Recommendation 16

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

Recommendation 17

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

Recommendation 18

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

Relocation: medium term

Recommendation 19

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

Recommendation 20

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

Deployments: short term

Recommendation 21

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

Education: short term

Recommendation 22

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

Recommendation 23

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

Recommendation 24

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

Recommendation 25

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

Recommendation 26

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

Recommendation 27

The Department for Education to:

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

Recommendation 28

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

Education: medium term

Recommendation 29

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

Recommendation 30

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

Recommendation 31

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

Recommendation 32

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

Recommendation 33

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

Recommendation 34

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

SEND children: short term

Recommendation 35

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

Recommendation 36

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

Recommendation 37

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

Recommendation 38

The Department for Education to:

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

Recommendation 39

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

Young Carers: short term

Recommendation 40

The Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence to:

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

Recommendation 41

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

CEA: short term

Recommendation 42

The Ministry of Defence to:

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

General: medium term**Recommendation 43**

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

Recommendation 44

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

General: longer term**Recommendation 45**

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

Chapter 5**Not Just a Partner:
Employment Challenges and Opportunities**

A military model based on a notion of a working father and a stay-at-home mother looking after her husband and her children, willing to go anywhere the Armed Forces require, whenever they require it, is no longer realistic. It is increasingly expected and financially necessary that both partners in military and civilian families will be in paid employment. Balancing paid employment with bringing up children and navigating a military lifestyle nevertheless presents a number of additional challenges for the non-serving partner. Partners and spouses acknowledge that Serving members of the military expect to be moved around and to be away from home for lengthy periods, and that these requirements will have an impact on whether and how the non-serving partner chooses to work.

In Chapter 5 of the report we explore the difficulties non-serving partners have experienced in seeking employment, describe some of the initiatives which are designed to support them into work, and consider the steps that the MOD and others might take to promote a culture change such that non-serving partners can foster fulfilling careers. In this Summary, we provide a brief overview of the challenges and suggest ways forward.

Restricted employment opportunities

Civilian and military families usually face challenges when both parents wish to work when they have children. Employment options are often determined by the availability and affordability of suitable childcare, the working hours required, and whether the demands of a job can be balanced with the demands of sustaining family life. Across the three single Services, 46 per cent of spouses/partners are in full-time employment; 26 per cent in part-time employment; and 7 per cent are self-employed, and a lower proportion of Army spouses/partners are in employment.

Studies suggest that military partners experience difficulties in securing employment primarily due to:

- the impacts of separation and deployment
- frequent relocation and high mobility
- the challenges associated with keeping up with professional development
- the lack of (re)training opportunities
- having to change career path
- general military culture.⁸

Our review shows that non-serving partners are often restricted in the choice of employment and frequently take jobs that do not make use of their education and/or academic qualifications or technical skills:

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

Welfare Officers and families described the financial difficulties when non-serving partners have to take low-paid jobs despite their qualifications. There are also significant differences in earnings between military partners and civilians when comparing equivalent educational attainment. While teaching and social work

⁸ Lyonette, C., Barnes, S-A., Kispeter, E., Fisher, N. and Newell, K. (2018) *Military spousal/partner employment: identifying the barriers and support required*. Army Families' Federation, Warwick University and QINETOQ.

are normally considered to be portable professions, qualifications gained in one country are not always accepted in another country without additional training. We urge the Armed Forces and the Devolved Governments to continue to work together to provide information about employment opportunities when military families relocate between different nations of the UK, and to facilitate the portability of credits and professional qualifications wherever possible.

Living on a military base can isolate military spouses from the wider community, which, along with commuting problems (e.g., accessibility of public transport), may make it more difficult to secure employment. Clearly, there are a number of factors to be taken into account when considering the employment prospects of non-serving partners, such as the age of the Service spouse, their level of education, employment history, and whether they have children or not and their children's ages. But factors such as mobility, accommodation, and education are amenable to change in order to support employment opportunities.

Difficult employment choices

Non-Serving partners often feel that they have to make a choice between being with the Serving partner or having a stable base and pursuing their career, but that they can never have both. They frequently argue for longer assignments and fewer moves:

“Partner employment has always had an impact on my family. With the constant moving around my wife cannot really settle down into a decent job, and even if she can get a job, then by the time she has built up her experience we move again and she has to start from scratch again and again.”

(Army Serving partner)

Postings overseas present the most serious challenges. A number of partners asked why they are not able to apply for civil service jobs on military bases, especially when they are living overseas. They referred to a number of 'gapped' posts which they would have the skills and expertise to fill.

Decisions relating to childcare, preserving the relationship with the Serving partner and whether and how to obtain employment are hugely important decisions and they often involve significant compromises. The difficulties faced by partners in securing a satisfying and worthwhile career while moving frequently are clearly drivers in Serving partners' decisions to leave the military. The loss of confidence and self-esteem and the loss in earnings reported by some partners had a negative impact on their relationship with their Serving partner, resulting in high levels of stress within the family:

“The impact this has had on me, my relationship with my husband, my relationship with friends and family and the toll on my mental health has been devastating. Lack of employment opportunities for me will be the reason my husband leaves the Army. We have regularly lived on one income and I am at the very bottom of the employment ladder...it is thoroughly depressing and demoralising.”

(Army non-serving partner)

Studies show that being in employment is associated with non-serving partners having lower levels of distress and better well-being and quality of life. Giving up employment in order to accompany the Serving person can be a significant sacrifice. Moreover, partner employment is a significant factor in the Serving partner's retention, readiness for Service, and well-being.

Perceptions of employer discrimination

There is a general perception amongst Serving and non-serving personnel that employers discriminate in various ways when military partners apply for jobs: if they think that the family will be posted again fairly soon; when spouses/partners' CVs have gaps and show evidence of frequent changes of employment which lead employers to question their commitment to a job they might be offered; and when a SFA address indicates a lack of stability and a possibility of being moved away. If such discrimination is blatant this should be robustly challenged. In addition, JobCentrePlus staff often fail to understand the nature of military life and why there are frequent gaps in the employment history of non-serving partners.

The quest for childcare

Decisions about whether to work and the kind of job to pursue are often associated with the availability, accessibility and affordability of childcare:

“I am currently working 30 hours a week. We have three children. I earn about £800 a month and pay £540 on childcare...We are now up to our eyeballs in debt and having to work like ships in the night...I personally can't wait for my husband to tell me he is leaving the military. The day to day stress is beyond putting into words.”

(Army non-serving partner)

The availability of high quality childcare is a challenge for civilian families also, and they encounter high costs in some areas, many of whom struggle to pay for it in order for both parents to work. Parents living in single parent households also have to weigh up the costs and benefits of working and paying for childcare. These concerns are not exclusive to military families and it is difficult to make a special case for military families in respect of subsidising the cost of childcare. However, the challenge for military families who move around on accompanied postings is that they are obliged to move when the military require it if they wish to stay living as a family and are occupying SFA, and the choices about when and where military families move are restricted by operational requirements. This usually means that military spouses and partners need to seek employment in a new area and look for childcare more frequently, especially those in Army and RAF families. Military families can encounter long waiting lists in some areas, so even if childcare exists it may not be available for some time after moving to a new posting. There are waiting lists on most bases that have a nursery/childcare facilities and for some the waiting list is between 12 and 18 months. Regional variations can result in uncertainty about what is available, what the costs might be and how this will impact on both spousal/partner employment and on children themselves. We note that Scotland will introduce an early years offer in August 2020 which has parity with the hours currently offered for 3 and 4 year olds in England.

Arguably, the most challenging factor for military families is locating childcare services that offer extended hours during the school day and coverage during school holidays. During deployments the parent left at home may well need to find childcare that covers unsociable hours and continues throughout the school holidays. Not only can this be expensive, but because childcare seems to be scarce in some military locations parents may find that they are on a waiting list for extended provision. We suggest that schools could do much to help with this concern by providing before and after school clubs, particularly for military families and single parents. We are aware that parents do have a Right to Request extended provision if a group of parents in a specific school can demonstrate a need for before- and after-school care. This Department for Education policy may not be well known or well understood by military families.

Childcare provision in local communities is at a premium in many areas and may be located some distance away from where Service families are living. A lack of transport or a non-serving partner's inability to drive can render it impossible to maintain a job and manage childcare:

“As a general rule, spousal employment comes down to childcare, childcare, childcare. While I have been very lucky to have a profession which is mobile, being married into the Royal Navy has meant that my career has suffered. I am expected to work antisocial hours, causing problems if there is no childcare at weekends or after 6pm.”

(RN non-serving partner)

Staff on all the bases said that they regard better childcare provision as a key priority.

The importance of comprehensive policies and initiatives to assist with childcare

The MOD has recognised that mobility and repeated transitions can have a seriously detrimental impact on partner employment and, therefore, has included the employment of spouses and civil partners as one of seven priority areas of activity within the Families Strategy. This recognition is clearly welcomed by Armed Forces families, but it raises many questions about how to support spouses/partners.

Many Commanding Officers on bases with inadequate childcare facilities have expressed their desire to provide more childcare facilities wherever possible, and many can identify buildings on the patch which would be suitable. One of the challenges they face is assessing the nature of the demand among their Service families and the extent to which this can be reasonably met by existing childcare providers in the local community. Childcare provision is regulated through national registration in the different nations of the UK, and any provision on a military base must conform to the standards set. We suggest that Commanding Officers on each base, using the Community Needs Analysis and Childcare Sufficiency Reports, should assess: the demand for childcare; whether this can be met locally outside the military estate; and the benefits of establishing childcare and nursery provision on their base. While the Community Needs Analysis is a mandatory action it is not universally completed. It is important also that local authorities carry out Childcare Sufficiency reports which detail the availability of childcare provision in their area.

A more thorough assessment of childcare demand and supply should lead to the development of an action plan for meeting the needs of the military families for whom Commanding Officers have a responsibility. The Armed Forces should develop local partnerships and work together with local authorities and childcare providers to provide the childcare needed. We would urge the MOD to continue to work closely with the Devolved Governments to find ways of harmonising the arrangements for childcare. This would assist civilian families as well as military families who move between the nations of the UK. We suggest that a specialist team within DCYP should take on the responsibility for these aspects of policy and practice development.

Childcare providers should be supported in understanding the specific needs of military children and the military lifestyle, so that they can be better informed about the child development challenges and opportunities for Service children: CPD modules should be extended to the professionals working in childcare.

During the review we have considered various initiatives being developed on military bases to better support childcare and family life which we believe have merit and should be evaluated with a view to extending effective practice. One of these, described in Chapter 5, is the RAFA Kidz Project which offers childcare training for military spouses and partners in the childcare facilities on a number of RAF stations. Such programmes could be a solution to several problems for military partners interested in pursuing childcare as a career, and enable many other non-serving partners to find work and to access high quality childcare for their children.

Creating new employment opportunities for non-serving partners

Recognition of the importance of spousal and partner employment has begun to take account of the wider benefits of supporting partners to be able to build careers which can fit with the military life style and the obligations on Serving personnel to put duty first. Employment provides partners with a sense of purpose which is very important during long periods when their Serving partner is away from home. So while the challenges of working are greater for Service spouses and partners during periods of deployment and training, the benefits of having one's own employment are considerable. The ability to develop professional and social networks through employment is even more significant for Service partners when families decide to move away from the patch and live in non-military communities. Not being defined by their Armed Forces connection allows the family, and especially the non-military partner, to integrate with the wider community and cope with the emotional challenges of loneliness.

The MOD Spousal Employment Support Trial was offered to 200 RAF spouses at RAF stations throughout the UK and to 240 spouses/partners in Joint Forces Command, Cyprus (including all three services) between 2015 and 2017. The offer of training courses was welcomed and had a positive impact on the partners' lives, increased their confidence in seeking or enhancing employment opportunities, and enabling them to build on their skills and increase their confidence. An unexpected but very important outcome was the participants' sense of being valued and supported, receiving recognition for the sacrifices they make as military partners. A revised trial was in the process of development during 2019.

Barclays Military Spouses/Partners Programme in HMNB Clyde is a new pilot initiative which began in October 2019 in conjunction with the Naval Families Federation, and which offers opportunities for remote working. Barclays is providing a two week course for naval spouses/partners based at HMNB Clyde. The course gives non-serving partners the opportunity to get involved in a wide range of work activities to help them learn more about Barclays business and culture. Twelve spouses/partners enrolled and completed the first course, several obtained work quickly and other outcomes included: a renewed enthusiasm for work; having clearer direction about a career; gaining skills in writing a CV and interviewing; learning networking skills; and increased peer support. This initiative will hopefully encourage other national employers to train non-serving partners to be able to gain employment in what is a fully transferable role.

Co-working hubs enable spouses and partners to work in the same space together, but not for the same company. Co-working offers flexibility, networking opportunities and productivity benefits. The first hub opened at Leuchars station and the vision is to promote the establishment of a network of enterprise hubs in all military bases across the UK and overseas which will enable non-serving partners to have independent careers. Some 25 hubs are being developed. As the hubs are developed, it is essential that their usage and impact are properly evaluated. Evaluation must include an assessment of their potential for alleviating the difficulties faced by Service partners in finding employment and progressing their careers.

Recruit For Spouses; Supporting the Unsung Hero; The Independent Spouse and the RFEA Families Programme are other initiatives which are attempting to support spouses/partners with finding employment. It is very important that they are robustly evaluated so that best practice can be replicated where appropriate.

Forces Families Jobs

Forces Families Jobs, a new online one-stop shop for employment and training opportunities was launched in September 2019. Partners of Serving personnel can register a profile and search for jobs by sector, salary range, role type, and location, in the UK and overseas. The platform is designed to help everyone regardless of their level of work readiness and employment history. In order to advertise on the new platform, employers must have signed the Armed Forces Covenant. Defence Relationship Management are working with employers to adapt their human resources policies and practices to make robust spousal employment pledges, which is rewarded via the Employer Recognition Scheme. This is a very important activity which should encourage companies to take the Armed Forces Covenant seriously.

Promoting joined-up working

Although there are many new initiatives, it is clear that limited awareness of support opportunities among spouses/partners points to an urgent need for better information for spouses and partners and a more joined-up approach to coordinating it. Providing information on bases is important but there needs to be a far more comprehensive way to ensure that all partners of Serving personnel are given information about what support exists and how to access it. The various initiatives are helpful but they would almost certainly be more influential and effective if they worked together. Maybe the new platform and the co-working hubs will provide a mechanism for encouraging a more joined-up approach.

The importance of culture change

The MOD and the Armed Forces have recognised the critical importance of addressing the concerns of Service spouses and partners who have felt forgotten when it comes to understanding their employment aspirations and making sure that support is available for them to pursue their own jobs and careers. Similar recognition is in evidence in the US and Australia. In the UK the former Chief of Defence People (Lt General Nugee) has directed that Defence will provide spousal/civil and long term partners support into employment through the Career Transition Partnership (CTP). This follows an announcement from the then Secretary of State for Defence in September 2018 of a new scheme to help partners of Service personnel to find the jobs they want.

Developing a more holistic approach

Planning in the military must take account of the whole family and not simply prioritise the Serving person when decisions taken have considerable implications for spouses/partners and their children. Given the changing expectations of military spouses and partners, support for the wellbeing of non-serving partners should extend to taking measures to protect and enhance their employability. In turn, spouses and partners are committed to supporting the Serving person in their employment and are contributing to operational capability. Addressing the career development of military spouses and partners should be an essential element of support for military families and an issue of concern in its own right. Work is a recognised social determinant of health, and Service partners expect acknowledgement that their career can be just as important as that of the Serving person. Family readiness also impacts military readiness and performance and is a crucial part of successful transition to civilian life, explored in more detail in Chapter 7. It is important to develop a more detailed picture of what works for whom. The MOD Partner Employment Steering Group has a significant role to play in taking culture change and employment opportunities forward.

Our Recommendations

Spousal/partner employment: short term

Recommendation 46

The Ministry of Defence and Devolved Governments to continue to raise awareness amongst employers through the Employer Recognition Scheme of the significant skills and expertise offered by military spouses/partners and about the commitment in the Armed Forces Covenant that Service families should be treated fairly and not be disadvantaged.

Recommendation 47

The Ministry of Defence to strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme by requiring employers to support the whole military family and giving awards only to those who provide tangible demonstration of this commitment through job interviews and job offers.

Recommendation 48

The Ministry of Defence to challenge the FSB, IOD, CBI and Chambers of Commerce to:

- apply the Armed Forces Covenant more effectively to partners of Serving personnel
- facilitate continuity of employment when spouses/partners are relocated
- eliminate real and perceived discrimination.

Recommendation 49

The Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that staff in JobCentrePlus offices understand the challenges that mobility and frequent relocation create for military spouses/partners seeking employment, and advise and support them appropriately.

Recommendation 50

The Armed Forces to enable non-serving partners to take advantage of training opportunities which are already available on a base, where resources allow, to advance spousal/partner employment opportunities.

Recommendation 51

The Ministry of Defence to encourage Barclays and other employers to promote the Armed Forces Covenant, and promote partnership with the Armed Forces to develop employment initiatives for non-serving spouses and partners.

Recommendation 52

The Ministry of Defence and Devolved Governments to support the development of Forces Families Jobs to become the 'go-to' place for high quality information, advice, guidance, training and job opportunities, and partner employment support.

Recommendation 53

The Ministry of Defence to undertake comprehensive evaluation of the revised spousal support programme that allows further understanding of the drivers for participation, the outcomes in respect of employment uptake, sustainability and satisfaction, and the impacts on retention.

Spousal/partner employment: medium term

Recommendation 54

The Ministry of Defence to enable military partners to apply for 'gapped' civil service jobs via the Forces Families Jobs portal where appropriate and when a post remains vacant.

Childcare: short term

Recommendation 55

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

- undertake an assessment of the demand for childcare by military families living on or in the vicinity of each UK military establishment
- encourage the establishment of affordable nursery and child care facilities at every military establishment wherever the demand is shown, and where it would enable continuity of childcare provision and facilitate non-serving partners to seek and take up employment
- work closely with local schools in the provision of before- and after-school clubs
- support families with 'right to request' applications, and provide evidence that articulates to schools the needs of the local military community
- provide local authorities with the evidence to incorporate childcare needs of Service children within their statutory sufficiency assessment processes and action plans
- enforce mandatory completion of the Community Needs Assessments by Commanding Officers.

Childcare: medium term

Recommendation 56

The Ministry of Defence to consider ways in which the variations in childcare costs in different bases and localities can be addressed so that families who are moved around the UK are not disadvantaged and spousal/partner employment is facilitated.

Recommendation 57

The Department for Education and the Devolved Governments to ensure that child care professionals are provided with information/training to enhance understanding of the needs of Service children and the specific challenges of the military lifestyle.

Recommendation 58

The Armed Forces to encourage and facilitate military spouses/partners to train in child care and/or train in child minding if they wish to do so as supported by the Defence Childcare Strategy.

Postings and relocation: medium term

Recommendation 59

The three single Services to:

- take account of the nature of a non-serving partner's employment when relocating the Serving partner and to ensure that a period of time is allowed in which to manage a shift of employment (including retaining SFA)
- review the necessity for frequent postings every two or three years and to consider whether the current military model could be redrawn to allow families to stay longer in one location or commutable area without compromising operational effectiveness.

Evaluation/research: medium term

Recommendation 60

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to encourage research to understand the needs of early years Armed Forces childcare and to discern the most appropriate evidence-based practice which should be employed by the sector to enhance the positive aspects of childcare provision, mitigate any risks, and encourage the sharing of good practice across the Armed Forces community.

Recommendation 61

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to ensure robust evaluation of the individual employment initiatives to assess the role they play in supporting non-serving partners, the resources they need, the numbers of partners they are able to support and the demand for using them, their effectiveness in promoting and sustaining employment and other outcomes in respect of partner satisfaction and wellbeing, the appropriate governance structures, and their impact on retention.

Recommendation 62

The Ministry of Defence, through the Partner Employment Steering Group, to develop greater understanding of what works best for which military partners/spouses, and foster collaboration and joined-up initiatives to enable better coordinated partner employment support across the nations of the UK.

Chapter 6

Health and Wellbeing: Looking After Military Families

In Chapter 6 of the report we consider the health needs of Service families and the ways in which health services are provided to them. We draw attention to the differences in the provision for Serving personnel and family members and highlight the challenges faced by families as a result of their mobile lifestyle.

In this Summary, we:

- note the challenges faced by military families
- set out a number of recommendations which could alleviate these.

We acknowledge that the MOD, the Armed Forces, and the health services across the UK are already working together to address some of the difficulties family members face.

The primary healthcare, including community mental health, of Serving personnel is taken care of by Defence Medical Services (DMS) who provide an all-inclusive, comprehensive package of health services. For families accompanying the Serving person overseas, primary healthcare for the whole family is delivered through DMS facilities or in combination with host nation health facilities and local contracts where appropriate. Overseas, DMS medical and dental staff are responsible for providing a comprehensive healthcare service broadly equivalent to that provided in England by the National Health Service. Within the UK, while the DMS provides healthcare for Serving personnel, their families are primarily dependent on the national health services provided by the four nations. NHS England and Improvement, NHS Scotland, NHS Wales, and Health and Social Care, Northern Ireland all adhere to the principles of the National Health Service as set out in 1946, but the approaches in the four nations diverge somewhat and each nation sets its own health policies and priorities.

Serving personnel can expect continuity in their medical care, but their partners and children are required to make their own arrangements via the national health services in whichever country they live in the UK unless they happen to be assigned to one of the DMS medical training bases. This is a very different pattern of primary healthcare provision than most civilian families' experience who register with the same 'family' doctor. This more holistic approach has distinct benefits, especially in the treatment of family members with mental health or chronic conditions. Dual-serving families face additional difficulties when they have to register their children with a civilian GP and find a civilian dentist while they themselves have access to DMS provision. There is considerable risk to the child from being registered as an 'orphan' as the GP is unable to provide any oversight of any child protection concerns and these are just as important in military families as they are in civilian families. Registering children and their parent(s) with the same GP allows any child protection or safeguarding issues to be flagged up much earlier as the whole family is being cared for.

Serving personnel who contributed to the review were extremely positive about the healthcare they receive but concerned that their families do not share in this. The split system of healthcare is a concern that has been raised by the three Families Federations for some years.

Challenges for military families

The main challenges include:

- registering with and accessing GPs and dentists
- moving from one waiting list to another, particularly in respect of mental health services
- securing continuity of treatment
- repeated assessments for special educational needs and disability
- the time it takes for the transfer of patient records
- variations in healthcare provision in different localities and in the evolved nations of the UK.

All the concerns are heightened by the frequency of relocation and the need for family members to undergo repeated transitions to new healthcare practices. In order to support fair access to treatment, the Armed Forces Covenant sets out a number of health commitments for the Armed Forces community. They include the following:

- the Armed Forces community should enjoy the same standard of, and access to healthcare as that received by any other UK citizen in the area in which they live
- family members should retain their place on any NHS waiting list, if moved around the UK due to the Service person being posted.

There are very clear guidelines in respect of the healthcare military families can expect to receive. However, our review shows that access to healthcare varies across the country and between the four nations of the UK, and families often feel disadvantaged as a result.

Accessing GPs and dentists

There is a good deal of evidence that spouses/partners who contributed to the review had found it very difficult to register with a local GP when they moved to a new area. The difficulty in registering with NHS doctors is exacerbated by the relative isolation of some bases. Families might have to travel some distance to see a doctor or dentist, even if they can find one. Since not all non-serving partners are able to drive or have a car they are reliant on public transport, which can be poor. Welfare staff and the Chain of Command reiterated these difficulties during our visits to military bases:

“ My wife invests hours in reapplying for medical and dental services every time we move. ”
(Army Serving partner)

“ My husband has access to free dental care and onsite medical provision with every posting. Meanwhile I have to scabble around signing myself and our children up to a new doctor’s surgery and dentist with every move. I went for about three years without seeing a dentist because of waiting lists and house moves. At every posting there are medical professionals available to the serving person, why can’t these be made available to the families? We are being forced to move house yet no provisions are made to assist our transition. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

DMS doctors suggested that there are significant benefits associated with families being able to access their services: partners and children do not have to search for a new doctor every time they move; the healthcare facilities are on the spot; and the Defence doctors are able to get to know the whole family, which can be very helpful when the Serving person is sick and needs family support, or there are mental health or safeguarding concerns in the family. We agree with this view. The DMS already provides care for families at selected bases in the UK. This primarily supports the training of new General Practitioners and Primary Care Nurses, and allows DMS primary care clinicians to maintain their family medicine skills in order to remain suitably experienced to be assigned overseas where family support is necessary or to deploy to operational theatres where treatment of the local population may be required.

A more integrated system of medical care was regarded by many families as being enormously helpful since it enables doctors to be aware of the issues facing families in respect of the health and wellbeing of each member, an advantage which is lost when non-serving family members are obliged to register with a completely different practice. Furthermore, DMS staff indicated that it is extremely difficult to ensure that families receive the necessary support from the Chain of Command if civilian GPs feel unable to share concerns with DMS staff. In the report we draw attention to the Catterick Integrated Care Centre scheme which aims to provide safe and effective primary care to Service personnel, veterans, reservists, families of Serving personnel and to the wider local civilian community. It represents an opportunity for the NHS in England and the MOD to work collaboratively to deliver a unique model of healthcare that meets the needs of both the military and civilian populations, offering high quality healthcare and value for money. The scheme should be operational in 2022/3.

We are aware that the Catterick Integrated Care Centre project is in its early stages and that there are other models in Aldershot and Larkhill providing different styles of partnership. These partnerships may well offer an exciting method of sharing best practice and may be a model for other locations to follow in the future. However, we acknowledge that the infrastructure costs are significant and will need new funding, not only for these larger projects but also for the smaller extensions to existing facilities to cope with the additional demand. Nevertheless, we believe that the various models for providing more integrated care should be pursued and evaluated.

Awareness of the health needs of Armed Forces families

A number of family members and medical officers commented that there is a general lack of understanding amongst civilian GPs and dentists about the health needs of military families and the kind of lifestyle they lead. We understand that military and veterans’ health needs and information about military families have been a part of the national curriculum for GPs across the UK for the past four years and is part of the qualifying examination for membership of the Royal College of General Practitioners. It is clear from our review, however, that not all GPs are aware of the issues associated with a military lifestyle. A number of families said that they had seen doctors and other medical professionals who had never heard of the Armed Forces Covenant. A Forces-Friendly accreditation scheme for GPs should be reinforced across the UK to ensure that GPs are committed to improving the care of Armed Forces family members. The examples of good practice relating to veterans in GP surgeries should be reinforced to ensure that it includes the families of Serving personnel.

The NHS England Public Participation Involvement Group for the Armed Forces has suggested that all GP practices, particularly those that service Armed Forces families, should identify a member of the practice to be an Armed Forces Care Coordinator who would be the point of contact for partners and children of military families. We note that Health Boards in Scotland each have an Armed Forces and Veteran’s Champion to support patients.

Mental health: care and wellbeing

The 2019 FamCAS survey identifies that 19 per cent of families had required mental health treatment in the past year, an increase of 5 percentage points since 2016. About half of the 19 per cent seeking mental health treatment, had either experienced difficulties in accessing treatment (34%) or were unable to access it at all (17%).⁹ The proportion of families experiencing difficulty in accessing mental health services has increased since 2015. One of the key challenges is the long waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in England so that by the time a child gets to the top of the list they may well be moving on to another area and may fall to the bottom of the list and assessments will have to be redone. They should be able to transfer to the relevant place on the waiting list when they move to a new area but our evidence indicates that this rarely happens.

A Naval families mental health survey¹⁰ reported that only 16 per cent of those seeking NHS help for mental health issues were certain that their child was recorded as being a member of an Armed Forces family, and some 70 per cent said that their GP or other NHS professional was not sufficiently understanding of their circumstances as a military family. Not only does this underline the importance of GPs identifying members of Armed Forces families, but also the need for GPs and other medical professionals to receive training about the specific experiences of military families and the potential impact on health:

“ I have first-hand experience of trying to secure mental health education and social support for my daughter who aged twelve was diagnosed with autism. Of note is the exacerbation of her mental health symptoms every time we moved and each time my husband was deployed ...we have been to hell and back to secure the right services for her to ensure her survival, safety and wellbeing. I realised that the professionals working with her had no concept of what the stresses and struggles might be for a military family. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

⁹ FamCAS Tri-Service Annual Survey (2019).

¹⁰ NFF (2018) Royal Navy Families Mental Health Survey, NFF.

Military families also highlighted the stigma of discussing mental health issues and that this can act as a barrier to seeking help. Families are scared to admit to mental health issues in case this has a negative impact on the Serving person's career prospects. While the Armed Forces Mental Health Strategy focuses on the Serving person, it is crucial that mental health issues need to be considered in the context of the whole family. It is not helpful to separate the Serving partner from the rest of the family when addressing mental health issues. Mental health issues reverberate throughout the family and more research is needed to understand how mental health issues in military families are affecting children and young people, and how the young people's own mental health concerns impact on the wellbeing of their parents and siblings. The research on military families shows clearly that mental health issues can be triggered by the military lifestyle and deployments.

The Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017–2022¹¹ recognises that mental health problems are the second most common cause of medical downgrading and discharge in the Armed Forces. Increasing the awareness of mental health issues, preventative strategies, the early signs and how to respond, as well as communicating the extent of available support to family members, is a really challenging task. Engaging family members, particularly spouses and partners, remains an urgent challenge. While DMS provide comprehensive mental healthcare for Serving personnel, the same easy access to mental healthcare may not exist in the community. Currently, the onus is on non-serving partners to have to ask for help with mental health concerns, a step most people take only when the problem has escalated to crisis point. More needs to be done to ensure families of Serving personnel have information about the support on offer and how to access it.

Continuity of care

One of the most difficult and upsetting experiences for non-serving partners and their children is the repeated disruptions to their treatment and care when the Serving person is assigned to another area:

“ My husband has served twenty-two years in the Armed Forces. We have moved every two years. I have had ongoing health issues which involved regular consultant appointments. Every move we have I have to firstly register with a GP and then be referred to a new gastrologist and rheumatologist. I'm currently on a forty week waiting list. So this reoccurs every time we move. The lack of treatment has a detrimental effect on my health. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

It is important to note that the same difficulties will almost certainly be experienced by civilian families who move from one place to another. However, most civilian families do not have to relocate every two years and they are more likely to have a choice about moving in the middle of treatment. Relocations between the devolved nations of the UK can add to the disruptions in continuity of care. Greater coordination between the devolved nations would assist in addressing the delays that military families experience. While the Armed Forces Covenant should be the most appropriate vehicle for ensuring continuity of care there is a case for a more explicit code of practice which is clear about how the promises in the Covenant should be fulfilled. We note that the UK Service Families Health Working Group aims to tackle health issues relating to the Armed Forces community collaboratively. The Group will work across the UK to address health issues that impact Service families. This is very welcome.

The transition to parenthood

Some non-serving partners suggested that it would be helpful to know where they can get support when they are having a baby, and advice about how to manage separation times in future. We were impressed with the Devonport Parental Support Programme for Serving and non-serving partners, provided by the Royal Navy, and recommend that this kind of support is made available across the Armed Forces community. This programme is described in more detail in Chapter 6 of the report.

¹¹ MOD (2017) Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017–2022, MOD.

Promoting a more comprehensive healthcare service for non-serving partners and their children

It is easy to view the concerns raised in Chapter 6 as being a litany of complaints about the healthcare provided in the UK. It is important to stress, however, that it is not the quality of care provided for military families that is at issue, but the difficulties in accessing it when the family is moving frequently and having to start all over again. Our review shows that the continuity and transfer of care is less than ideal for many non-serving partners and their children. Our review has focused on three key areas of concern:

1. Difficulties experienced with maintaining continuity of care.
2. The need for greater awareness and understanding amongst healthcare professionals about the specific healthcare needs of military families.
3. The need for common pathways and transfers between the nations of the UK, and, in particular, with respect to mental health issues.

In all these areas, partnership working and collaboration between the Armed Forces, MOD, DMS and the various national health services of the UK is essential. If the Armed Forces were able to reduce the number of postings and enable greater stability in living arrangements, many of the healthcare concerns would disappear. Moreover, initiatives which promote integrated care between DMS and national healthcare providers would reduce the perceived discrepancies between the care provided to Serving personnel and that provided to their families, and have the additional merit of allowing medical professionals to have a more holistic overview and approach to family health and wellbeing. It would also improve oversight of safeguarding, intimate-partner violence, and domestic abuse concerns, and promote stronger multi-disciplinary working.

We were told by some Serving personnel who had decided to leave the Armed Forces that this was because of their inability to manage and ensure the healthcare needs of their families. It becomes very difficult for the Serving partner to commit to the military lifestyle and sustain operational effectiveness when they are worried about a partner or child with serious and/or chronic healthcare needs.

Our Recommendations

Access to GPs and dentists: short term

Recommendation 63

The National Health Service England and Improvement (NHSEI), NHS Scotland, NHS Wales and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland to ensure that information leaflets, guidance and top tips for delivering healthcare to Service families are provided to all GPs in the UK.

Recommendation 64

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Devolved Governments to require GPs to transfer records speedily when Service families are relocated.

Recommendation 65

The NHSEI, NHS Scotland, NHS Wales and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland to require GPs to:

- reinforce the veteran-friendly GP practice accreditation scheme to include Serving military families
- routinely ask whether adults and children are members of a Serving military family
- identify previous GP/dental practices for transference of health data relating to military families, upholding the requirements of confidentiality, as stated in the Armed Forces Covenant.

Recommendation 66

The Royal Colleges to require medical and healthcare professionals across the UK to undertake an accredited programme of training to increase awareness and understanding of the health needs of military families.

Continuity of care: short term

Recommendation 67

The Ministry of Defence to continue to work with the national health services across the UK to ensure that an Armed Forces Family Code articulates what is required to deliver appropriate continuity of care for Service families as they move around the UK, and to ensure that information is available to advise families about maintaining continuity of care on posting to a new area or healthcare system.

Recommendation 68

The DHSC in England and national health services across the UK to ensure that family members of Serving personnel are able to retain their relative place on waiting lists when they move to another area, and that GPs and other healthcare professionals support their transition from one area to another, in line with the commitments made in the Armed Forces Covenant.

Recommendation 69

The Clinical Commissioning Groups in England to be required through the Armed Forces Covenant to ensure timely access to CAMHS and paediatric services and that children and young people maintain their relative place on waiting lists when their parents are required to relocate to another area.

Recommendation 70

The Ministry of Defence to take account of the healthcare needs of military families when posting Service personnel to a new area.

Continuity of care: medium term

Recommendation 71

The NHSEI, NHS Scotland, NHS Wales and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland to ensure that all Armed Forces families have access to an Armed Forces Care Coordinator or an Armed Forces Champion if they need support and help in accessing healthcare services.

Integrated care: medium term

Recommendation 72

The Ministry of Defence to work with the providers of national health services across the whole of the UK to evaluate new models of integrated primary care being established in some military bases and consider how to extend effective models to other military bases.

Recommendation 73

The Ministry of Defence and Defence Medical Services (DMS) to consider allowing family members to access Defence primary care services wherever possible and appropriate, and particularly when national health facilities are not easily accessible in the immediate locality.

Mental health: medium term

Recommendation 74

The Ministry of Defence to consider how families of Serving personnel can be more involved in breaking down the stigma of mental health issues, and can benefit from the comprehensive activities and treatments to support Serving members of the Armed Forces, in order to promote better mental health and wellbeing for the whole family.

Mental Health: longer term

Recommendation 75

The Ministry of Defence, in consultation with the DHSC and the Devolved Governments, to ensure that future mental health and wellbeing plans include mental health awareness activities and communication strategies aimed specifically at families of Serving personnel, perhaps via a designated App.

Recommendation 76

The Ministry of Defence and Defence Medical Services (DMS) and the national health services across the UK to explore ways in which a range of mental health services could be better integrated to provide holistic care for Serving personnel and their partners and children.

Parenting support: medium term

Recommendation 77

The Ministry of Defence and DMS to consolidate and refine a Parental Support Programme and facilitate roll out to bases in all three Services.

Chapter 7

Returning to Civvy Street: The Ultimate Transition?

The Service families of today are the Service leavers' families of tomorrow and the veteran families of the future. Some 15,000 personnel leave the Armed Forces every year, with the greatest number coming from the Army. Just over half of those leaving are married or in a civil partnership and there are others who are in a cohabiting relationship who are not captured in the statistics.

The increased media, social and political focus in recent years on the transition out of the Armed Forces and on the importance of showing respect for military veterans has led to a widespread governmental and societal effort to provide much greater levels of support for veterans and their families. This is to be much applauded. Our review, however, was focused on exploring the lived experiences of currently Serving personnel and their families. In the Call for Evidence we asked Serving personnel and family members to give us their views and thoughts about leaving the military. In Chapter 7 of the report we:

- consider the responses of Serving personnel and their families who were in the process of leaving the Armed Forces, or were planning to do so
- examine the reasons given for wishing to leave
- reflect on the worries families have about transitioning out of the military
- consider the support Serving and non-serving partners need
- make recommendations for the provision of more holistic support.

In this Summary we briefly describe the push and pull factors influencing decisions to leave the Armed Forces, and highlight the support which can render the transition less traumatic. We argue for a more holistic approach to preparing today's Service families for the time they will leave the military community.

The term 'transition' is used by the Armed Forces and the MOD to describe the period of reintegration into civilian life from military life. Although the MOD Transition Policy takes a 'transition through life' approach, this focuses on preparation for and awareness of future civilian challenges after the Serving person and the family leave the military. We have taken a broader view of the meaning of transition, and what it means for members of the Armed Forces community. Our review has demonstrated that military personnel and their families face multiple transitions from the moment they join the Armed Forces until the day they leave and beyond. The mobility of Service life means that Service personnel and their families face repeated transitions and changes which impact on their day-to-day living arrangements and their relationships.

Leaving the Armed Forces marks what for most, but not all, is the ultimate transition. The term 'resettlement' is used to describe the formal processes and procedures through which the Service Leaver's transition is managed and aided by the Armed Forces. They are inevitably inter-connected. The majority of Serving personnel and their families manage the ultimate transition fairly well, but there is a minority who do not. Some struggle to find work, some have mental health problems and others may have alcohol or gambling addictions. Preparing well for this shift into civilian life is critical.

Reasons for leaving the Armed Forces early: understanding the push and pull factors

Retention is a current concern within the Armed Forces, and especially in the Army. The review has highlighted a number of factors which influence the decision to leave the Armed Forces. Push factors include:

- the incompatibility of Service life with family life
- dissatisfaction with pay and allowances
- lack of job satisfaction

- lack of promotion and career progression
- poor work-life balance
- feeling undervalued.

The most common pull factors include:

- the appeal of a civilian lifestyle
- perceived better career opportunities and employment
- greater choice and control over family life
- more stability
- more time to spend with the family.

The incompatibility of Service life and family life featured heavily in our review and is almost certainly the single most significant push factor:

“ I have recently retired from the RAF. I look back at my time with enormous pride and affection. I have had wonderful experiences, achieved a great deal... In many ways I regret leaving the RAF ... The blunt truth is that continuing my RAF career was incompatible with family life. ... The strains of life as a career-minded officer were a significant factor in the breakdown of my first marriage and I did not want to repeat the experience ... Following the birth of my son I was no longer prepared to plan to be at home only at weekends. ”

(RAF recently retired Serving partner)

“ My husband has just put in his notice to leave the military due to the detrimental effect that its having on our family life... There is a huge retention problem throughout the military ... Family life is the reason why. If you want to solve that problem, make the military a good thing for families, not the negative thing it currently is. ”

(RN non-serving partner)

There was rarely one factor that had prompted the decision to leave the military. Usually, cumulative factors, all of which were placing stresses on family life and increasing the desire for family stability, had led to the decision. For some people, there was a cumulative impact of disappointments in respect of spousal/partner employment, the lack of educational stability for children, discontinuity in healthcare, frequent assignments which require moving around the country, and the multiple separations that are incompatible with a desire to create a stable family life. There is often a further disappointment, regarded as 'the final straw', that tips the family over the edge. The majority of Serving partners expressed regret at giving up a job and lifestyle that they loved, but they had to make hard choices. They suggested that ending short-notice assignments, better medium-term career planning, so that there is a chance that a spouse/partner can maintain their career, and making it more affordable to move one's private home when posted some considerable distance away if the choice is to leave SFA, would reduce the outflow of personnel.

Worries about the future

Family members may experience a range of emotions when they leave the military community, however well-prepared they are for making the transition, including: sadness, happiness, relief, excitement, pride, anxiety, a sense of loss, and worry about the future. Some expressed worries about mental health issues, money, finding somewhere to live, and finding a job:

“ I have been married into the military for twelve years ... Although I am extremely proud of my husband and the job he does, I feel that the military in this country are poorly cared for or supported... Leaving the military, we are about to be starting on this milestone shortly ... we are quite worried about what we are going to do house wise. The level of stress my husband is feeling is already rising at the thought of leaving. ”

(Army non-serving partner)

Disclosing mental health issues, as well as gambling and excessive drinking, are also worries for some families. Stigma is still an issue, making it hard to talk about these problems. Civilians can face long waiting lists for mental health treatment so it is essential that Service personnel with mental health issues, including PTSD, can transfer to NHS support seamlessly when they leave the care of the DMS.

Finding a job in 'civvy street' can also be stressful. We heard about interactions with JobCentrePlus that had been very unsatisfactory. As one person put it: 'they were trying to fit a square peg into a round hole with no understanding of the Covenant or life as a military family'. This had caused upset and disappointment. JobCentrePlus staff were described as lacking understanding about military life.

Ensuring holistic support

The Defence Holistic Transition Policy¹² is important in promoting holistic support, and the UK Strategy for Our Veterans¹³ encompasses a ten year vision which is designed to ensure that the transition to civilian life should be as smooth as possible so that veterans can contribute fully in a society which understands and values what they have done and what they have to offer. In order to achieve this it is fully recognised that appropriate support must be in place throughout a person's military career for them and their family. Transition support needs to be available for the whole family long before anyone takes the decision to leave the Armed Forces. This holistic approach should address many of the concerns we heard during the review and serve to reduce the worries and anxieties some Serving personnel and their families spoke about.

It is critically important to understand the transition out of the military through a wider lens and to provide holistic support to families from an early point in the Serving person's career. We suggest that planning for a military life is essential from before the first day in uniform and that this emphasis on planning should continue smoothly through a military career and, ultimately, into planning for a life beyond the military. Support should be on a continuum which caters for every transition/change in circumstance experienced by the Serving person and by their family throughout a military career. We believe that the Families Strategy can set the principles and objectives for a more holistic approach which includes consideration of family wellbeing, on the understanding that a well-supported family can better support a fully functioning Serving person. Supporting families supports operational effectiveness.

Because families hold the key to smooth transition and positive adaptation to civilian life, increasing their engagement with the transition process is vital. However, one size and one approach will not fit all families transitioning from the Armed Forces, and it is essential to take account of differences in age, rank, experience, life-stage, and branch of the military. Families who have always lived in a local community rather than on the patch are likely to find leaving the military easier than those who have spent their life surrounded by other Service families with a strong identification to the military culture. A recent report¹⁴ highlights that more men and women are leaving the Armed Forces at a younger age, and more than half of the veterans had experienced problems in the first year after leaving the Armed Forces. The most common problems are: mental health or emotional wellbeing issues; difficulties finding or keeping employment; relationship difficulties or breakdown; physical health problems; and general difficulties in transitioning to civvy street. These include coming to terms with a loss of identity as a member of the Serving Armed Forces and accepting a new identity as a civilian, albeit carrying the identity of 'veteran'.

Experience in other countries and studies elsewhere suggests that families can be better supported through the ultimate transition through: more targeted, personalised and practical preparations, particularly for those with ongoing medical issues; clearer and better targeted communications with families; more responsive and streamlined service provision; and more detailed information about the issues they might face, and clearer guidance as to how and where to seek support.

¹² MOD (2019) *Defence Holistic Transition Policy*.

¹³ MOD and Cabinet Office (2018) *Strategy For Our Veterans*.

¹⁴ SSAFA (2019) *The Nation's Duty: Challenging society's disservice to a new generation of veterans* SSAFA, Compass Partnership.

Our recommendations

Transition and resettlement pathways: short term

Recommendation 78

The Ministry of Defence transition and resettlement pathways should always include family members to ensure a holistic approach to support before, during and after the Service Leaver has exited the military.

Transition and resettlement pathways: medium term

Recommendation 79

The Ministry of Defence to continue to work with other government departments, local authorities, Devolved Governments, the Families Federations, and the private and charity sectors to provide joined-up, consistent and seamless transition and resettlement processes for Service Leavers and their partners.

Chapter 8

Duty of Care and Moral Responsibility: Supporting Service Families

Looking after and providing support to military families and ensuring their wellbeing are essential if the Armed Forces are to meet their objectives and mission. When families are cared for in the military community, Serving personnel are more likely to concentrate on their jobs when deployed or away from their families and to stay in the Armed Forces. The perceived incompatibility of military life and family life is a key driver in decisions to leave the military earlier than might have otherwise been the case.

The aims of our review were threefold, to:

1. Consider the diverse needs of Service families.
2. Assess whether the current support on offer is meeting these needs.
3. Provide evidence which will enable the MOD and the Armed Forces to enhance the delivery of vital support for military families.

In Chapter 8 of the report we look specifically at the concerns identified by Service families during the review, beyond those concerning accommodation, education, health and social care, and spousal/partner employment, all of which can put pressure on the everyday life of Service families and which were discussed in some detail in previous chapters. We then examine how each of the Services responds to the identified concerns and the support provided, refer to the welfare reviews undertaken by the Army and the Royal Navy, and consider the barriers families face in seeking help and support. We present two case studies in Chapter 8: the first, describing Aurora New Dawn's approach to support relating to domestic abuse; and the second, describes a new approach to the offer of tri-service support at sea by the Royal Navy, Project Frontline, on HMS Queen Elizabeth and her escort ships, which has achieved very positive outcomes. In this Summary we briefly highlight the specific concerns identified by Service families and the ways in which the three single Services respond to them. We then offer a number of specific recommendations for change.

Military personnel in all three Services have stressed how the pressures of Service life can be very demanding for families and pointed to a range of stressors which exert huge pressure on families and disrupt family life. These include:

- the current demanding work tempo
- long working hours
- manning gaps
- the isolated location of some military bases
- frequent moves
- restrictive employment opportunities for spouses and partners
- a lack of affordable and accessible childcare in some locations
- long periods of separation
- worries about disruptions in children's education
- ensuring continuity of health and social care
- Serving personnel being asked 'to do more and more with less and less'.

“ This profession is like no other. It requires a special kind of someone to want to do it, and more so it requires patience, sacrifice, resilience, dedication from both the Serving person and the family... ”
(Army non-serving partner)

Family and Relationship Stress

Stress is common in most couple relationships, civilian and military, at some point or other. It is often intensely personal and not a topic that many adults talk about openly. The nature of military life and the repeated separations can exacerbate stress in relationships: non-operational separations can have

a negative effect on spouses/partners' employment, family functioning, and health and wellbeing. Repeated transitions for couples with children from being a two-parent to a one-parent household can be difficult for everyone and can lead to resentment and conflicts about roles and relationships within the home. Families referred to the difficulties experienced in couple relationships when the Serving partner returns home: resentment; problems adjusting to changing roles; disappointment; and, in some cases, episodes of domestic abuse. The emotional pressures on couple relationships are inclined to increase as time goes by, and some relationships get near to breaking point:

“ The pressures on Service couples in the military is vast and as a result many relationships do not stand the brunt of what is thrown at them. ”
(Army Serving partner)

“ When my husband returned after eleven months away he was a different person and it took a long time for him to adjust. He was frankly vile and very hard to live with for a short while and we argued a lot, but there was no support for me as the partner... ”
(RN non-serving partner)

Growing apart, feeling resentful, spending less and less time together, and putting the relationship on the back burner mirrors the experiences of many civilian couples who separate without communicating about their problems or seeking help. There continues to be a huge stigma in society about admitting to relationship difficulties and about asking for help. This stigma is heightened in the military due to the perceived risks of disclosing marital problems to the Chain of Command and the possible adverse consequences for the Serving partner's career. Preparing people for couple relationships and preparing them for life in the military are both important preventative strategies.

Dual-serving couples face additional stressors on their relationship when they are not co-located, a problem which is increased if they are serving in different branches of the Armed Forces. There needs to be much greater coordination of career pathways for these couples if both are to continue in a military career.

Loneliness and social isolation

One of the pernicious aspects of Service life can be the loneliness felt by the non-serving partner when the Serving partner is away from home. Periods of deployment, living away from a military base, uncertainty about return dates, inability to plan family holidays and special occasions; and a lack of a peer group locally have a cumulative impact which can add to feelings of loneliness and social isolation for the partner left at home:

“ It's a very lonely life, [our emphasis] and the sacrifices that we go through as a family always seem so significant yet not recognised. ”
(RN non-serving long-term cohabiting partner)

Loneliness and isolation can lead to ill-health and relationship breakdown and vice versa. Postings to different areas disrupt social connections and support networks, especially for those not moving as a unit or not living on the patch. This sense of social isolation was evident in all three Services amongst families who were living away from a base. Moreover, the Armed Forces culture is such that it promotes self-sufficiency which in itself can mitigate against Serving and non-serving partners admitting to feeling lonely or isolated and seeking help and support.

Domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence

We were told by welfare staff that domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence appear to be increasing issues. There are insufficient data on domestic violence within the Armed Forces, and a lack of information about its extent. It is widely accepted, however, that there are risk factors in the military community which are known to show a correlation with domestic abuse and barriers to disclosing abuse and seeking support. To a large extent it remains a hidden issue. Disclosing domestic abuse and intimate-partner

violence remains difficult throughout society and victims are often afraid of the negative consequences of doing so. Women and men can be victims as well as perpetrators and the complexities of domestic abuse highlight the need for sensitive approaches. It is almost certainly more difficult for military spouses/partners to feel confident about reporting abuse by their military partner because it may have consequences for their career, and it may ultimately lead to relationship breakdown, which can result in the loss of the family home for families living in SFA.

The Ministry of Defence Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018–2023 promises to develop a culture of support that does not tolerate domestic abuse and which ensures access to high quality services. It is essential that the MOD Strategy is consistent across the whole of Defence if the culture of silence is to be tackled, abuse is to be addressed, and family members are able to seek support and safety. More work is needed to encourage domestic abuse victims in military families to feel comfortable seeking help without fear of reprisal from the abusive partner.

Mental health problems and aggression are significantly associated with both family and stranger violence, and there is a higher risk of family violence among military personnel who report symptoms of PTSD. There is evidence that being in the Army is associated with the perpetration of both stranger and family violence, while there is a reduced risk of family violence amongst Naval and RAF Serving personnel. This may well reflect sociodemographic differences and higher exposure to combat situations by Army personnel. More research is needed to understand potential differences in violent behaviour between military personnel in the three Services. In addition, exploration of the complex dynamics of intimate couple relationships in military families is essential to developing interventions and support for each partner and for the couple. Partnership working with expert providers, such as New Dawn, is essential.

Providing welfare support: how well are identified needs being met by the three Services?

The provision of welfare support is considered to be core Armed Forces business. Welfare is defined as:

- 6 Provision of a widely-recognised and accessible personal and community support structure that secures and improves the wellbeing of Serving personnel and the service community, is capable of adapting to societal, legislative and operational change and, in so doing, optimises the military capability and motivation of all Service men and women.¹⁵ 9

The Tri-Service Welfare Policy provides guidance for Commanding Officers and welfare specialists across all three Services, and sets out a number of important principles. The principles make it clear that Serving personnel must take some responsibility for ensuring that their families know how to seek welfare support. Nevertheless, providing access to welfare support is a prime command responsibility. The Chain of Command is required to ensure that appropriate welfare support and signposting are in place, and Serving personnel are responsible for maintaining the communication links between available support and their families alongside their requirement to ensure personal records are both accurate and up-to-date. Each Serving person has a responsibility to communicate effectively with their family in respect of support and other military matters. It is the failure of this expectation that is frequently held responsible for family members feeling as if they have been neglected by the military and are receiving little or no support.

Although the Tri-Service Policy lays out the welfare responsibilities for all three Services, each of the three Services has its own way of delivering welfare support to Serving personnel and to their families. These are described in Chapter 8 of the report. All three Services manage their welfare support in a way which they believe is appropriate for them and their military communities. It is clear to us that despite the best efforts of all welfare staff on the various military bases, there are considerable barriers to seeking help and a reluctance to disclose personal problems.

¹⁵ MOD (2019) *Tri-Service Operational Welfare Policy*, JSP 770, Foreword.

Barriers to help-seeking

Whatever the model of welfare provision offered by each Service, a recurring theme throughout the review was the reticence of both Serving personnel and their partners to seek support for personal issues, especially if it means going through the Chain of Command. This is not surprising. A number of barriers are in evidence in civilian and military populations:

- inhibitions, taboos, attitudes and social stigma about relationship and personal pressures
- denial of the problem and/or fear of exposing it
- the need to put on a brave face
- not knowing where to go or what to say/lack of knowledge.

Stigma appears to be a large barrier to seeking help for personal issues and loneliness and social isolation in both the general population and in the military community. There is a general reluctance to admit to a problem and a sense that if it is not talked about it might just go away. There are sometimes genuine fears that disclosing a problem might result in social services getting involved if there are children in the household, and that the consequences of asking for help may be worse than simply putting up with the problem. Many Service families believe that they should cope on their own and be self-sufficient. It is also the case that a certain level of scepticism exists about whether seeking help will do any good. Families living on the patch may know welfare staff personally and not want to open up to or confide in them about their personal concerns. The families were not sure whether welfare staff could be trusted with very personal information because of being part of the Chain of Command. A bigger fear is that engaging with welfare staff will reflect negatively on the Serving person and may negatively influence decisions about promotion.

While some families reported having received excellent support from welfare staff, others were less complimentary. In other words we heard a mixed response to the welfare services being provided. Non-serving partners living away from military bases were particularly critical of the lack of support.

There is clear reluctance to be seen as a 'welfare case': the very term 'welfare' conjures up connotations of being a failure, being unable to fend for oneself, or being needy, and we welcome the move by the Royal Navy to change the language away from welfare support to the Naval Service Family and People Support (NSFPS). Whether this changes perceptions remains to be seen.

Views from Welfare Officers and the Chain of Command

Welfare staff and Commanding Officers in all three Services take their various roles very seriously and are keen to offer as much support as is possible to Serving personnel and families under their care. They are also putting immense effort in to working more closely in partnership with local service providers and local health and clinical care teams. There is general agreement that an integrated model of welfare provision and support for families which brings together the military and public services, voluntary groups, schools and businesses in the local community, is essential and by far the best way forward. This can increase the sense of belonging and reduce the isolation that families can feel.

Commanding officers stressed the duty of care for military personnel but pointed to a lack of clarity about how this translates to providing care for the families, wherever they happen to reside. Understanding the military commitment to supporting its people is vital, and being aware of the needs of the families is key to addressing welfare issues. Some welfare staff told us that they lack specialised training and feel unprepared to address mental health and domestic abuse issues, for example. Welfare officers accept that the military needs to be smarter in ensuring greater mental health awareness and training for as many people as possible so that they understand the signs and encourage people to seek help early. They acknowledge that they face a difficult task reaching out to dispersed families. Integrating care and support is much harder when military families do not live on or near the base. A number of staff felt that the military needs to be more pro-active about providing welfare support rather than taking a reactive approach which responds to distress only when help is sought. Reaching out seems to be an ambition for those who want to see welfare support for the whole family to be given a higher priority in military training and in Service life.

Breaking down stigma in seeking help for worries and concerns that can cause stress calls for strong and pro-active leadership by Commanding Officers who need to be proactive in creating the right environment to reassure Serving personnel and their families that it is perfectly acceptable to seek help. Given the known barriers to seeking help there needs to be greater pro-active engagement with families throughout the Serving person's military career. The duty of care for Service personnel needs to extend to their families as well.

Reviewing the Tri-Service Welfare Policy

The Tri-Service Welfare Policy sets out key principles while recognising the individuality of each Service. A Joint Welfare System across all three Services which is owned/overseen by the Chief of Defence People would ensure parity of support across the Services. Traditional models of welfare may not be fit for purpose in future, and a more professional, inclusive and tailored set of support services will need to be available if families are to be valued and protected and Service personnel retained. The changing nature of family life and relationships and the expectations of modern families suggest that a more coherent model of welfare support across the Armed Forces is needed. Serving personnel and family members highlighted the variations in training between welfare staff in the different Services as unhelpful; and questioned the rationale for variation in the pathways of support.

The Tri-Service Specialist Welfare Agreement endorses the ability for welfare to be provided across the Armed Forces. This agreement is a practical arrangement that allows more effective provision of specialist welfare support services to Service personnel and their families by enabling access to the services provided by other single Service agencies. Project Frontline, discussed in Chapter 8, has demonstrated the value of one Service, in this case the Royal Navy, offering tri-service welfare support at sea. While the MOD employs the Serving person and their needs are clearly paramount, it is essential that the spouses, partners and children of Serving personnel are appropriately supported as an essential aspect of the duty of care which promotes operational effectiveness across the whole of the Armed Forces.

“ The pressure on families and relationships is always hard, especially those with frequent deployments and awful shift patterns. I know of many couples that have separated or divorced at our current posting, or moved camps to try to save their marriage. ... I wish someone took the time to live in our shoes, [our emphasis] especially those wives and children left at home, where they become single parents for months at the time. Where they won't tell the Serving person anything about what is going wrong at home because they want them to concentrate on doing their job and come home safely. ”
(Army non-serving partner)

Our Recommendations

Preventing relationship stress: short term

Recommendation 80

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to take a pro-active approach to supporting families and preventing relationship breakdown by:

- being more aware of the cumulative pressures on couple relationships
- ensuring every family is given information about the potential stressors on their family relationships as a result of Service life, particularly before, during and after deployment, and about the support available
- providing clear information in plain language, avoiding military acronyms, about how to access confidential help and support
- ensuring early intervention and personal support are available and accessible for all families.

Recommendation 81

All three Services to take steps to aid the retention of Serving personnel in dual-serving relationships, particularly those in different Services, and ensure that career managers liaise with each other to manage work requirements and deployments in order to minimise relationship stress.

Increasing welfare support: short term

Recommendation 82

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to work in partnership with an established helpline, such as ChildLine, to set up a confidential helpline specifically for children and young people from military families.

Recommendation 83

The Chain of Command and Welfare staff to ensure greater awareness of factors which increase loneliness and social isolation and pro-actively reach out to families who are especially vulnerable as a result of deployments, mental health concerns, additional needs or disabilities, postings to new areas, and dispersed living arrangements.

Recommendation 84

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

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

Recommendation 85

The three single Services to work together to:

- ensure there are no gaps in welfare support when Serving personnel and their families relocate
- offer welfare support to all military families irrespective of whether they live on the patch or are dispersed, and to find new ways to reach the most vulnerable families
- ensure appropriate support is available and accessible to all military families without stigma or fear
- break down barriers to seeking help
- harmonise terminology and move away from references to 'welfare' (following the Royal Navy lead).

Increasing welfare support: medium term

Recommendation 86

The Armed Forces to actively explore the integration of specialist welfare support with deployed units and ways to provide better coordinated support across the Armed Forces community.

Recommendation 87

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

- review and refresh the Tri-Service Welfare Policy to encourage a more integrated and pro-active approach to welfare which includes prevention, early-intervention and specialist support available to all military families in all three Services
- establish a more coherent, consistent Tri-Service offer of support for all military families, including the use of modern technology, recognising that one size does not fit all
- realise the benefits of greater harmony across the three single Services and a Defence-wide approach to specialist welfare provision to ensure parity of support and better reflect the increased joint working environment.

Increasing welfare support: longer term

Recommendation 88

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to establish a Defence Case Management Information System to ensure continued support for all military personnel and their families.

Chapter 9

Small Acts of Kindness: A Pro-Active Approach to Meeting the Needs of Service Families

In Chapter 9 we consider some of the additional and vital support provided by third sector organisations either through partnership programmes with the Services or via projects funded by the military charities and the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund. We point to examples of very promising practice and new approaches to personal support, and look briefly at some of the innovations in military welfare support in Australia and the US. We became aware of the limited evaluations of many initiatives which render it difficult to assess ‘what works’ in welfare support. In this Summary we describe briefly the various approaches and consider ways in which support for Service families could be strengthened.

There is considerable confusion and, indeed, ignorance amongst military families about where and how to seek support. There is a plethora of provision for Serving personnel and families across the Armed Forces, much of it offered by external partners. If welfare support is to be accessed effectively by military families in a non-stigmatising manner at all stages in a military career, external organisations need to be working closely with Armed Forces providers to ensure appropriate access to and understanding of the work they do.

Partnership approaches to providing family support

The three Services each have their own military charities and each Service works with a number of partners to provide support. In 2014 some 2,200 Armed Forces charities existed in the UK, with the number estimated to provide welfare support today standing at about 400. This is a large number of different charities which play a hugely significant role in supporting veterans and Serving families. With such a broad range of charities, collaboration and co-ordination is a challenge. While the Confederation of Service Charities (COBSEO) provides a single point of contact with government and the Devolved Governments, it is virtually impossible for Serving personnel and their families to be fully cognisant of the charities and organisations that are available to help them. The large military charities fund an enormous number of programmes and projects for the three single Services.

During the review we were able to look at but a few of the charities and we refer to the work of those we have engaged with in Chapter 9. These included: SSAFA; the NSPCC; Home-Start; Big White Wall; The Warrior Programme; Ripple Pond; Give Us Time; and Relate. We also visited programmes directed at supporting Service children and young people such as the RAF Benevolent Fund Air Play programme and specialised counselling support. All these charities offer a range of support for Service families but the programmes are not necessarily available across the country. We also heard about Kings Camp, run exclusively for Royal Navy families since 2009. In 2018, 1,410 Royal Navy children took part in one of the eight Kings Camp locations at Naval bases across the UK. Kings Camp is extending its reach to include Royal Navy children throughout the UK, irrespective of where they live.

We examined as a case study the professional counselling offered by Relate since 2016 to Royal Navy and RAF families, sponsored by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity (RNRMC) and the RAF Benevolent Fund respectively. The offer of professional, independent and confidential relationship support interventions is achieving very positive outcomes, and these are discussed in Chapter 9 of the report.

The role played by family centres and hubs

We visited family centres and spoke to staff and families about the facilities in the military bases we visited. The family centres vary considerably across the Defence estate as to their location, condition and the facilities offered. We heard about a wide range of activities for families, including parent and toddler groups; art clubs; coffee mornings; wives/partners’ breakfasts; and physical activity classes taking place

in these centres. Family centres are also used for briefings for families. It was not uncommon for families to tell us how brilliant some of these facilities are and how much they are appreciated. Discussions with Commanding Officers and welfare staff highlighted the need for welfare to be much more pro-active in reaching out to families:

“ We could be smarter. Good line managers know their personnel and should be able to spot stress and breakdown much sooner. Training needs to focus more on caring for our personnel and there is not enough about people. Reactive work can work well but we need pro-active welfare. We need to do better, invest in leadership and ensure every person understands mental health issues. ”

(Senior RAF Officer)

Welfare staff suggested that more should be done to prepare Service personnel and their families for military life, to build resilience early in a military career, and that more could be done to develop a sense of community...being pro-active rather than waiting for people to ask for help. Many families want someone to reach out to them, especially when they move to a new area, and would welcome a more pro-active stance. Family centres provide a useful location for pro-active support.

Not all family centres have been purpose-built, and some clearly require investment. In Chapter 9 of the report we feature the new family centre at HMNB Clyde which offers a blueprint for the Armed Forces for the kind of centre that meets many needs. Drumfork is a state of the art family centre which will serve a military community of some 2,000 families. The Drumfork Centre has the potential to trial a range of approaches and models of support to meet the needs of a variety of Service families, and to forge links with the civilian community. One of the on-going challenges will be to ensure that families living away from the naval base can also find ways to benefit from the exciting opportunities offered at a newly refurbished family centre like Drumfork.

Reviewing the role of the charity sector

In Chapter 9 we refer to just a small proportion of the total amount of charitable work that is undertaken with military families. We have been enormously impressed with the various initiatives around the UK to support Service families and the commitment and dedication of those who organise them and deliver services. Many are volunteers who give their time generously to improve the quality of life of military families through direct assistance and innovative interventions. There are a myriad of different charities all working within the military space. It is hardly surprising that military families say that they do not know what help is available, for whom and how to access it. For example, some 76 Armed Forces charities provide support for mental health issues, 43 charities offer support for depression and anxiety, and 33 support those suffering from substance misuse.

Collaboration is a key principle of best practice, and through greater cross-sector collaboration Forces charities could benefit from shared resources and knowledge, and improve referral pathways for military families. Our review has highlighted the barriers to help-seeking in the Armed Forces, the lack of knowledge as to what is available and how to access support, and the variation in provision between the three single Services and in different geographical locations around the UK. Because the military charity sector is fairly crowded, Cobseo has a strategic role to play in promoting the highest standards of governance across the sector and in supporting efficiency and rationalisation of the sector to make it easier for families to seek and obtain support.

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund was established in 2015 with funding from the MOD, originally using LIBOR funds. By the end of March 2020 it had distributed £50m, supporting a range of programmes for veterans, their carers and families, and Serving families, and supporting the integration of military and civilian communities. The Trust has four broad themes and is a major grant provider for a wide range of programmes. These are referenced in more detail in Chapter 9.

In the early years of grant funding although projects were required to report on their work, there was no systematic way for the learning from the projects to be disseminated and best practice identified. More recently the aim has been to undertake more systematic evaluations and to disseminate learning. An Outcomes Measurement Framework developed in the US for work with veterans has been introduced which the Trust hopes can be adapted for use in a wide range of projects here. We have looked carefully at the new evaluation framework and the Trust's ambition to use a standardised measure for a range of funded projects, and recognise that considerable work is required to develop a comprehensive evaluation toolkit for the future, recognising that one size does not fit all projects. We discuss this framework in more detail in Chapter 9.

Meanwhile, outcome measures need to be tailored, specific and appropriate to the aims of each project in order to build a database showing 'what works'. Through increased collaborative inter-country research it is to be hoped that a greater understanding of 'what works' to support Service families will be increased in the coming years. The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust has a pivotal role to play in funding innovative interventions and in coordinating support throughout the Armed Forces. Much of the programme funding thus far has been directed at supporting veterans and their families, and it will be important to ensure that programmes for Serving personnel and their families are increasingly supported in future.

The Trust also has a vital role to play in supporting and increasing the collaboration between the sectors and promoting greater coordination and the sustainability of the various initiatives, programmes and projects designed to support the wellbeing of military families. After five years, the Trust is at a critical point in its development and accordingly we have made a number of recommendations to encourage and support its contribution to enhancing the welfare provisions for military families.

Learning from approaches to providing support in other countries

We have looked at some of the welfare services offered in other countries, particularly those in Australia and the USA which offer interesting approaches to the provision of preventative work with military families and which we believe could be usefully considered in the UK. In Chapter 9 we provide details of the SMART programmes in Australia and describe a range of initiatives in the US. The US Defense Department is responsible for managing the range of programmes, including all those which impact on welfare and morale. In 2011, a Presidential initiative was designed to support military families through a coordinated Federal approach that directs Cabinet secretaries and heads of agencies to focus on four priorities central to the lives of Service families, which we have also highlighted in this review:

- enhancing the wellbeing and the physical and psychological health of the military family
- ensuring excellence in military children's education and their development
- developing career and educational opportunities for military spouses/partners
- increasing childcare availability and quality for the Armed Forces.

Looking to the future and establishing a more pro-active support system

We refer in Chapter 9 to a number of small acts of kindness which can increase resilience and bolster self-sufficiency. These do not require much investment beyond a willingness to change the culture of welfare support. Increased sharing of good practice across the Armed Forces is needed if perceived stigma and barriers are to be broken down. Programmes which increase resilience and build strong families are decreasing dependence and giving families the tools to manage and benefit from Service life. With increasing tri-service working it seems sensible to promote shared approaches to welfare provision. There is a hidden demand for support within the military community which is not being met at the current time.

The Service Families Working Group in the MOD can play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the Families Strategy. It can also play a key role in ensuring that the Government's Family Test is taken seriously across the Armed Forces. The Covenant provides an important vehicle to address the kinds of questions raised by the Government's Family Test, but to be optimally effective it needs to have an element of enforceability and accountability. In Chapter 9 we indicate how the five aspects highlighted in the Family Test could usefully be applied to the provision of support for promoting

welfare and wellbeing, and the projects designed to support family members. Applying the Family Test suggests that it would be timely to undertake a review of a number of issues raised during this review, including:

- Harmony guidelines and their application in the different Services;
- the assignment and posting policies which move units and personnel every two or three years
- the length of deployments and time Serving personnel spend apart from their families
- the preparation and support offered to Serving personnel who form new relationships and create a family
- equality and parity across all families irrespective of marital status and living arrangements
- rules about occupation of SFA and rules about CEA
- the impact of multiple transitions/changes in everyday life
- the current models of welfare support across the three Services through a family lens with a view to achieving greater clarity and coordination.

Our Recommendations

Welfare support: short term

Recommendation 89

The Armed Forces/Military Charities to:

- continue to facilitate access for Serving personnel and their families across all three Services to independent, professional relationship support services outside the Chain of Command
- promote through-life support and encourage Serving personnel and their families to seek timely and appropriate help.

Recommendation 90

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to:

- support the use of a range of robust, validated and appropriate evaluation tools to measure outcomes, benefits and the effectiveness attributable to each project/programme of work
- consider the appropriateness and modifications needed to use the Outcomes Measurement Framework with UK Serving personnel and their families
- ensure learning is widely disseminated and best practices identified to enable replication of projects which are effective and which meet a clear support need
- continue to encourage greater coordination of support services for military families and ensure the long-term sustainability of effective interventions
- take the lead in building a directory of evidence as to 'what works' in supporting military families.

Recommendation 91

The Ministry of Defence to:

- take into account the learning from welfare approaches elsewhere
- encourage increased international research to build the evidence base of 'what works' in providing welfare support for Service families
- encourage further research into the effectiveness of early intervention programmes which aim to enhance the wellbeing of military families and prevent relationship breakdown.

Recommendation 92

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to:

- encourage the replication of good practice across the Armed Forces to support military children and young people
- strengthen the delivery of the Defence Youth Offer through appropriate resourcing and investment in community spaces for military children and young people
- ensure that all children and young people from military families are able to access specialist, confidential counselling if they need it.

Welfare support: medium term

Recommendation 93

The Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence to:

- encourage small acts of kindness, including a welcoming committee to engage with families moving into a new area
- promote pro-active support to enhance wellbeing through a family centre/family hub on every military base as the safe 'go to' place for information, group activities, education, co-working hubs, children's activities, informal peer support and professional support programmes, and to encourage community integration
- develop support through webinars, FaceTime/zoom/skype and Apps to include dispersed families unable to access family centres in person
- break down barriers to help-seeking by reaching out to families and adapt the military culture of maintaining a 'stiff upper lip' to make it acceptable and normal to ask for help.

Recommendation 94

Charities and organisations offering support to Armed Forces families to work closely together; cooperate, collaborate and combine their resources wherever possible; reduce complexity; and ensure clear information and referral pathways to provide better coordinated support for military families.

Recommendation 95

The Ministry of Defence to establish a dedicated Serving Families Gateway, separate from the Veterans' Gateway, to collate information and advice about the support available, and ensure greater coordination of the range of interventions and how to access them.

Chapter 10

Recruit the Person and Retain the Family: Strengthening The Armed Forces Covenant

This review set out to understand the support needs of military families and to assess whether the current support available to them is meeting their needs. During the review we have looked carefully at the various aspects of military life that impact on the everyday lived experience of Serving personnel and their families in the three single Services. In Chapter 10 of the report we draw together the evidence from across the review and make some further recommendations for change. In this Summary we highlight the issues which we believe merit attention, given the shared commitment of the MOD and the Armed Forces themselves to do what they can to support Service families, and propose some ways forward.

Throughout the review and in writing this report we have been at pains not to indulge in special pleading on behalf of Serving personnel and their families. They would not want or expect that. We recognise, too, that many of the pressures felt by Armed Forces families in terms of access to high quality education and health care, the availability of affordable and accessible childcare, and opportunities for employment for non-serving partners, are experienced by civilian families. What makes military families unique, however, are the obligations inherent in military service which put operational efficiency and commitment to 'duty first' as the number one priority. Yet family stability is essential to the ability of the Serving person to do his or her duty to the best of their capability. 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. By supporting military families and building their resilience the nation is also protecting its Serving personnel. The resilience military families demonstrate day after day and their pride in the work they do for the nation, makes them fully deserving of the nation's respect.

We have made the point throughout this report that the Serving personnel who responded to our review have stressed their love for their work, a sentiment endorsed by their spouses/partners and children. Yet their pride in military service can be challenged by the stresses and strains they experience:

“ Despite the many benefits of military life, there are significant struggles which are even more frustrating as most of them are avoidable. Generally they stem from the mobility required for Service families, together with significant periods of separation. ... There are many benefits ... but this does not mean that the disadvantages should be tolerated and that action should not be taken to address the many challenges that are faced by the Armed Forces community. ”

(RN Serving partner and his wife)

Many couples pointed to the long periods of separation; the inability to plan family life; forced and frequent moves which disrupt children's education; having to move away from friends; being offered poorly maintained houses; the challenges for spouses/partners to obtain employment and build a career; uncertainty about future assignments; and the lack of a permanent and enduring support structure; as putting undue pressure on personal relationships and, very often, causing the Serving partner to 'make the invidious choice between career and family'.

In this report we examined the challenges through the lens of the Serving community and those working with them, and would argue that some of the challenges are almost certainly avoidable if there is a willingness to make changes. The challenges and stressors should be acknowledged and addressed if military life is to be regarded as less stressful and more rewarding, particularly for families. We hope that our review has provided a better understanding of the diverse needs of modern military families and the problems which lead many to feel thoroughly frustrated, particularly living in poorly maintained accommodation.

While we are aware that satisfaction levels with SFA fluctuate, it is clear that living in poorly maintained property affects relationships, the quality of family life and, ultimately, the quality of the work undertaken by the Serving partner. There needs to be more investment to bring the habitable estate up to an acceptable standard, and a serious conversation about just how much Defence accommodation will be required in future. The MOD is already making changes and taking a pro-active approach to tackling the housing problems. However, it will take more time and money, to address the kinds of issues and complaints we have heard.

The quest for stability and certainty

The multiple relocations, deployments and time spent apart put pressure on family life. Moving home is one of the most stressful transitions that any family, civilian and military, can experience. Families worry about the impact on children and young people when they have to change schools multiple times. Non-serving spouses and partners experience repeated challenges in building a career which is transportable or in finding and sustaining new employment every time they move. In addition, family members have to search for a new GP and a new dentist every time the family moves to a new location. These transitions/changes can be particularly detrimental for children with special educational needs, and family members with chronic physical and mental health conditions. Long-term stability is rare for Service families. We have suggested that the current model of military life should be revisited with the aim of finding better ways to promote stability and certainty in family life while continuing to maintain operational capability. Fewer relocations should also reduce the financial cost to the public purse as well as the social, emotional and economic costs to the family.

All military families expect the Serving partner to spend time on deployment, but the length of some deployments, coupled with the uncertainty about when the serving partner will be coming home, all add to family stress. When the balance between the demands of the military and the demands of the family becomes too difficult to sustain, it may result in the family breaking up or leaving the military in order to reduce the strain. If the number and frequency of moves could be reduced, the length of deployments shortened as far as is operationally possible, and the frequency of trawls minimised, many of the concerns raised in this report would be addressed constructively and the quality of life improved. The Armed Forces should consider carefully whether the current operational tempo is sustainable in the twenty-first century and whether there are better models which would provide greater stability, involve fewer transitions, and still retain operational capability.

No longer 'dependent'

“ Being called a 'dependent'! How insulting can the MOD/Forces personnel be? I am an educated person, brought up to be independent in all senses of the word and I really struggle with this term. Our husbands/partners are just as dependent on us. Why not simply refer to Serving partner and non-serving partner? ”
(Army non-serving partner)

Spouses and partners do not want to be classed as 'dependent' and many would much prefer to have their own employment and income so as to contribute jointly to the family finances, and be an equal partner sharing in the dual demands of military service and family life. The term 'dependent' continues to be used in UK law but we are pleased to note that the MOD has directed that the term should be avoided. However, until the term 'dependent' is completely removed from the language to describe non-serving partners, then they will continue to carry an identity that is defined primarily by their husband's career and rank and which deprives them of their own identity and agency. Military spouses/partners report feeling marginalised, disconnected and invisible, all of which impact negatively on their mental health and wellbeing. The identity card issued to non-serving spouses/partners in the US does not contain the term 'dependent'. Instead it has the name of the Serving person as the 'Sponsor'. Efforts should be made as soon as the opportunity arises to remove the term altogether from legislation:

“ In the twenty-first century the Armed Forces have exposed themselves as being well behind the times, and a failure to adapt to the career profiles of modern families may result in a continued outflow. ”
(Army Serving partner)

Feeling valued

“ If our people are our greatest resource, as we are told frequently, then the goal should be to respect and value every single person who contributes to the health and wellbeing of Serving personnel. Our families are almost certainly the Service person's greatest resource! ”
(Army Serving partner)

Many Serving and non-serving partners told us that they do not always feel valued by the Armed Forces. This was particularly prevalent amongst spouses/partners but Serving personnel frequently referred to a culture in the Armed Forces which does not value its people. If people do not feel valued then they are more likely to leave the military. The US recognised some time ago when President Obama increased the visibility of the sacrifices made by the military community, that valuing veterans, Acting Service personnel and their families is an essential part of society's covenant with the Armed Forces. Our discussions with US military personnel underlined the importance of being thanked for their Service. The attitudes and courtesy shown to the military and to their families is one of respect and gratitude. Families are invited to ceremonies to mark the achievements of Serving personnel and awards/medals are given also to spouses/partners and children for their commitment to supporting the military. These small acts of kindness are clearly appreciated by families who can openly share in the pride of achievement.

Spouses/partners in the UK say that they often feel as if no-one really appreciates the sacrifices they make to support the Serving person and that an occasional 'thank you' from the Armed Forces would go a long way to helping them to feel valued:

“ For 19 years I have happily taken a back seat and fully supported my husband's career but I have received NOTHING in return. We have to stop this mindset that families only need support during deployment... ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

Serving and non-serving members in all three Services who were currently or had been serving in the US were keen to point to the ways in which they felt much more valued in the US. Small acts of kindness go a long way to help military families feel valued and to reduce social isolation, and we believe that more needs to be done to bring about a shift in social attitudes in the UK. The respect for veterans has undoubtedly increased in this country but respect for active duty military personnel and their families has a way to go. Armed Forces Day should realistically be Armed Forces Week each year to capture the nation's attention and increase interest in and appreciation of the military. This would enable more activities and events to be held in schools, colleges and in organisations in local communities.

The urgent need for better communication with non-serving family members

A key aspect of military life that causes immense frustration for Service families, the Chain of Command and welfare staff is the apparent inability of the Armed Forces to communicate directly with families. Relying on the Service person to pass on messages and information is not only ineffective, because many Serving personnel forget to do this or the information becomes diluted or scrambled when it is delivered, but also it is disempowering and belittling for spouses/partners to have to receive information from and be 'dependent' on the Serving person. Dispersed partners are even less likely to receive information:

“ Bypass my husband: communicate directly with me. I'm an adult. I have got an Armed Forces Railcard and its expiring and I can't replace it by myself. My husband has to do it for me. Give me power... Recognise the fact that I do everything so that my husband can be in Africa for two months. I've hardly seen my husband in six years. It annoys me when I feel powerless because I do not feel a valid part of the Armed Forces community.... I just don't want to feel forgotten (our emphasis) ”
(RAF non-serving partner)

We were told that permission has to be given by the Serving person for direct communication to be made with the non-serving partner. The reason is said to be the restrictions imposed by data protection rules. The Data Protection 2018 Act provides seven core principles for the protection of personal data and a number of guidelines as to how to apply them. Interpretation of these by the Armed Forces has had unintended consequences for how the Services are communicating with spouses/partners, especially while Serving personnel are on deployment. This situation needs to be reviewed as a matter of urgency. Families want to receive communications directly via existing channels of communication including emails, Apps, and social media. The expressed intent of the Armed Forces Families' Strategy is to ensure that families feel informed and engaged in Service life. Communicating directly with family members must be possible.

In Chapter 10 we make suggestions as to how this can be achieved via modification of the JPA Self Service (Employee) DPA Compliance page, which relates to the Service person giving consent for their contact details to be used in a variety of circumstances. In our view it would be relatively straightforward to make changes to this section of JPA and remain GDPR compliant. We lay out the steps to be taken in Chapter 10. There are many good examples of how other agencies have achieved permission online to contact a spouse/partner which conform to GDPR requirements. The process would open up a vitally important channel for addressing the current communication problems. Our review has shown that communication with families is a major issue for all three Services and the MOD, all of whom want to find a solution as speedily as possible. Improving the situation is urgent.

Supporting the families of Foreign and Commonwealth Serving personnel

The Armed Forces in the UK have recruited personnel from the Commonwealth and from other countries throughout the last century. The vast majority of Commonwealth recruits enter the Army, with the RAF and the Royal Navy taking far fewer. These families experience additional challenges, including language difficulties, employment issues for spouses/partners, and social isolation. Moreover, issues relating to immigration, settlement and visas have a profound impact on the individuals concerned. Concerns are regularly expressed about the cost of visas, which can be a significant financial undertaking, and a lack of understanding about the immigration requirements. There are clear perceptions of unfairness, and it is suggested that other issues such as debt, employment, housing and family breakdown can emanate from the pressures of immigration.

We understand that Commonwealth families have a low take-up of welfare support. This may be because of cultural differences and language barriers for spouses/partners, and it suggests that a more pro-active approach is needed to reach out to these families:

“ While I totally understand that we are immigrants and cannot claim public benefit, we NEED support too. A lot of times, Serving personnel are committed to their jobs and foreign wives are giving up a life overseas with their families to support the UK's Armed Forces. ... We don't want special treatments, but do consider that when we miss home, it is a few hundred pounds and hours of flights away.I must emphasise that I am not whinging....but I wish politicians can take this into account. ”
(Non-serving Commonwealth partner)

Single, junior Serving personnel from the Commonwealth pointed to the prohibitive cost of returning home to see their families and the sense of isolation this creates when they can never afford to go home. Welfare officers suggested that they should be allowed to claim a 'get you home allowance' once a year, given that UK personnel can claim routinely for this allowance if they live away from their home base.

We are aware that the Home Office have put forward a range of options to address some of the issues raised and that officials from the MOD and the Home Office, together with representatives from the Army, have further meetings planned to discuss other options, which could include the MOD picking up some of the costs incurred by Foreign and Commonwealth personnel. The call is for some greater flexibility in policies which can have a detrimental impact on military families from Commonwealth countries, routine application of the Family Test, and greater pro-active support for families.

Strengthening the Armed Forces Covenant

We have argued throughout the report that some small acts of kindness together with more significant changes would have a huge impact on morale, wellbeing and retention in the Armed Forces. The substantive changes we have recommended include:

- reducing the number and frequency of the changes and relocations families are expected to make during a Serving career
- providing greater stability and certainty in family life
- respecting the agency of spouses and partners
- ensuring choice in accommodation and making military homes fit for purpose
- communicating directly with families
- coordinating the plethora of charitable support and specialised interventions and making it easier and more acceptable to seek help.

Several small acts of kindness would also have significant impact. These include:

- being more pro-active in providing support to families, especially to those who do not live on or near their home base
- actively valuing Serving personnel and their families for their contribution to the military community and to operational effectiveness, and finding more opportunities to say 'thank you' to family members.

We recognise that increasing stability and certainty in military family life is a big ask which implies a change of culture and reviewing a model which has been dominant in the history of the Armed Forces. However, steps are already being taken to create clusters of military activities which should minimise the number and frequency of relocations. The Armed Forces Covenant provides a mechanism through which to achieve many of the changes proposed. However, recent surveys show that the Armed Forces Covenant does not feature highly in the minds of most Service families and many know very little about it. Very few people mentioned it to us, and those who did were largely negative about its value:

“ Although the Armed Forces Covenant appears laudable, it currently is little more than a 'paper tiger', promising much and producing shiny press releases but actually delivering very little in terms of improvement for military families... ”
(RN Serving partner)

The importance of valuing families is central to the purpose of the Covenant. It could act as the facilitator and catalyst for a change of culture in the UK to one which openly values Serving members of the Armed Forces and recognises the role they play, and the commitment they and their families make to ensuring the security and protection of our freedoms. To reach its potential as a promise to the Armed Forces community, the Covenant needs to be much better understood by everyone in society, and indeed in the Armed Forces community. Furthermore, the Covenant 'needs more teeth' and must be much more than a paper tiger. It is not just a question of signing the Covenant and making pledges. Pledges have to be acted on and they have to be seen to make a positive difference.

We are delighted that the Government intends to legislate in respect of the Covenant, and this should be done as a matter of some urgency. The Covenant provides the mechanism for a concerted campaign by government to take steps to ensure that Armed Forces personnel and their families are valued and appreciated, and that they are supported in their local communities as well as on military bases. Military families should not be afraid to acknowledge their military connection. We believe that a separate Serving Families Gateway is needed that distinguishes Serving personnel and their families from veterans and their families.

The recommendations from the review

Throughout the review we have made a number of recommendations for change. They are important because military families are primarily uncomplaining and do not seek publicity for their concerns. Some of these recommendations require investment and a willingness to review traditional ways of working. However, there are many recommendations in the report which can be implemented fairly easily and speedily if there is a will to do so. By unlocking the door to improved communication directly to families, much of the stress associated with military life can be reduced.

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 families. We believe that there is an appetite for challenge and change that is sensible and which meets the over-riding need for operational effectiveness. We suggest that our recommendations are reviewed every six months for the first five years, progress recorded and made open to public scrutiny.

It has been an enormous privilege to undertake this review and to meet so many committed members of the Armed Forces community.

Our Recommendations

Overriding recommendations for change: short term

Recommendation 96

The Prime Minister to spearhead a change of culture to:

- make the recognition and care of Armed Forces families a national priority
- ensure that the UK population understands the critically important role played by the Armed Forces in keeping our country safe
- promote pride in and respect for Serving personnel and their families; and ensure that all Serving personnel and their families feel valued.

Recommendation 97

The Armed Forces to ensure that families are recognised and thanked for their Service and commitment whenever possible.

Policy: short term

Recommendation 98

All Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces policies and procedures should:

- fully embrace a range of family structures and remove any disadvantage
- apply the Family Test and actively consider the impact on Service families.

Recommendation 99

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to address improvements in communication with families as a key priority by:

- exploring and implementing changes to the JPA DPA questions to encourage Service personnel to give permission for their spouses/partners to receive direct communications
- supporting the development and availability of online Apps for family members to access and receive information.

Policy: medium term

Recommendation 100

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to review legislative requirements and remove the use of terminology which is regarded as being out-of-date, demeaning and disempowering, particularly references to non-serving partners/spouses as 'dependents', in all policies and procedures which relate to everyday military family life.

Recommendation 101

The three single Services to:

- review current policies which require frequent moves and repeated upheavals in family life
- make a commitment to facilitate greater stability and choice for military families while maintaining operational effectiveness
- review the length of deployments and associated training activities pre- and post-deployments to minimise the additional time spent away and provide greater certainty about return dates wherever possible.

Recommendation 102

The Armed Forces to ensure that as far as is possible, Ministry of Defence Harmony Guidelines and reasons for breaching them are fully understood by military families and that they are adhered to and breached only in unavoidable and exceptional circumstances.

Recommendation 103

The Ministry of Defence to promote research to develop a greater understanding of 'what works' to support Serving families to aid recruitment and retention.

Foreign and Commonwealth: short term

Recommendation 104

The Ministry of Defence to:

- ensure that, prior to coming to the UK, recruits to the Armed Forces from Foreign and Commonwealth countries and their families are always very well informed about the immigration, settlement and visa requirements and costs that could have a significant impact on their family life
- implement a series of Tri-Service recommendations underpinned by an Action Plan to improve the support to non-UK personnel
- review the availability of a 'get-you-home allowance' on an annual basis for single and unaccompanied Foreign and Commonwealth members of the Armed Forces.

Foreign and Commonwealth: medium term

Recommendation 105

The Home Office to undertake a review of the policies relating to the Minimum Income Threshold and settlement requirements as applied to Foreign and Commonwealth members of the UK Armed Forces, and take action to reduce the negative impacts on their families and their family life as required by the Family Test.

Recommendation 106

The Home Office and the Ministry of Defence to review the cost of visas and the settlement process for Commonwealth Service personnel and their families in the light of the Armed Forces Covenant.

Armed Forces Covenant: short term

Recommendation 107

The Ministry of Defence, Government Departments in England, and the Devolved Governments to:

- reinvigorate and strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant through legislation to drive recognition of the critical role played by the Armed Forces and their families, and raise ambition across society to harness better targeted support for Service families
- ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant eliminates real and perceived discrimination of Armed Forces families
- ensure children and young people are not disadvantaged in pursuing sport and leisure activities in their local community because of frequent relocations
- ensure all organisations and agencies that sign up to the Covenant are held accountable for acting on their pledges and delivering them to Serving personnel and their families
- work together with all organisations that have signed the Covenant to actively promote it throughout society
- ensure that those who deliver their pledges are recognised and rewarded.

Recommendation 108

The Ministry of Defence, in collaboration with the Chain of Command and the Families Federations, to ensure every Serving member of the Armed Forces and every spouse/partner knows about the Covenant and understands how it can benefit them.

Armed Forces Covenant: medium term

Recommendation 109

The Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence to work together to introduce the Armed Forces Covenant in schools and colleges to increase awareness among children and young people of the nation's promise to Armed Forces personnel and their families.

Final recommendation

Recommendation 110

The Ministry of Defence to establish a robust mechanism for an independent review of the recommendations in this report, monitoring their implementation every six months, noting the progress made, and ensuring public accountability.

Living In Our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families, June 2020

Authors: Janet Walker, Andrew Selous and Gabriela Misca

This summary report and the full report of the review are available at www.gov.uk

Hard copies of both reports are available on request from:

Armed Forces People Support - Families Team

Ministry of Defence | Level 6 | Zone A | MOD Main Building
Whitehall | London | SW1A 2H

Website: <http://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk>

Email: billy.king694@mod.gov.uk

Members of the review team

Andrew Selous MP andrew.selous.mp@parliament.uk

Professor Janet Walker profjanw@yahoo.co.uk

Dr Gabriela Misca g.misca@worc.ac.uk