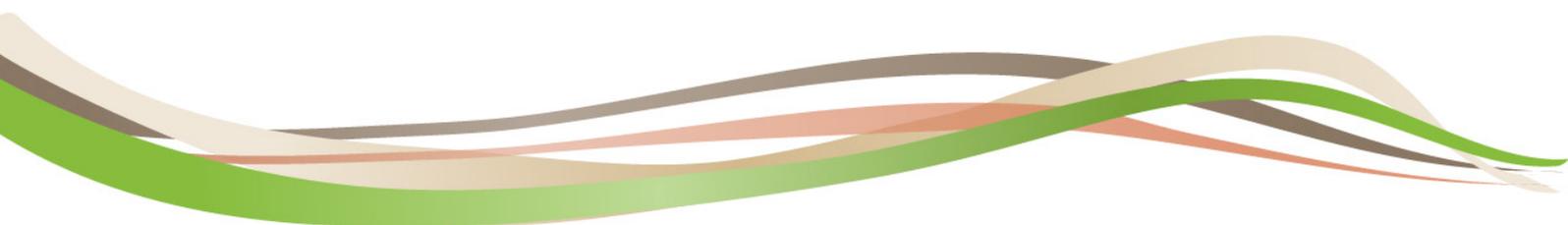




Policy changes needed to improve Army family life

September 2014



Introduction

Army life has always presented uncertainties and challenges, but the huge transformations required by the 2010 Strategic Defence & Security Review have seen families subjected to an unprecedented level of change and insecurity; this has had a damaging effect on family morale. Army families are significantly bruised by redundancy, restructuring of regiments and the reduction to their standard of living brought about by punishing pay cuts. Future increases to the cost of Service Family Accommodation will further reduce disposable income.

We have a stoic population but for many the relentlessness of redundancy, pay cuts and perceived lack of opportunity in a reduced Army has prompted them to reconsider their future.

Families play a key role in the decision to stay or go; as the economy improves, retaining soldiers through an attractive offer for the family will be a central challenge. Recruitment and retention present a problem for defence among a population who increasingly view their commitment to the Army as very short-term with civilian opportunities offering a more secure future.

The Armed Forces Covenant (AFC)

The AFC is producing some positive cultural change and is beginning to improve policy in areas where families and Service personnel are disadvantaged; we are starting to see advances in the services being offered to families in areas such as education and health. However there is still much to be done.

Key is increased communication and co-operation between government departments to enable better access to services. The Armed Forces Covenant undoubtedly provides a conduit for better collaboration between government departments, however, with its current remit it does not address all issues -it is a leveller. It provides Army families with access to the same services as other citizens and should not be confused with offering advantage. It reduces some of the irritations of Service life by ensuring equity with the civilian population but cannot be claimed to be adding value to the package -it's worth to Service personnel and their families should not be overstated.

The New Employment Model (NEM) element of the Armed Forces Covenant will take time to deliver on its promise of increased stability and will continue to struggle to provide predictability.

Families still face disadvantage because of their soldiers' service in areas such as childcare and employment. Unless access to childcare is up-scaled beyond that of the civilian population to rebalance the gap left by the unpredictable nature of the soldiers' role, and restricted access to flexible working, families may continue to feel disadvantaged.

Until pay recovers to pre-pay-freeze levels, soldiers and their families will continue to question whether the covenant is working. Soldiers judge the value the nation places on them by their disposable income and their standard of living and thus pay is a major component in retention.

Distinguishing what can be addressed by the Armed Forces Covenant and what must be addressed by financial compensation i.e. the X-Factor will be a key challenge for the MOD to ensure that the 'offer' for our Forces personnel remains competitive and fairly reflects their commitment.

Localism - The policy of allowing individual local authorities to determine levels of service creates significant challenges to the Armed Forces Covenant. Families moving from one area to another may continue to feel disadvantaged if the service they receive in the new area is significantly worse than the area they have moved from. Developing a national, acceptable standard for Forces personnel could aid the effectiveness of the Covenant.

AFF asks:

- that the AFC continues to make progress on gaining equality of treatment for Service personnel and their families and continues to be a 'living document' - agile and flexible to new issues
- that the Covenant Reference Group explores areas where access to services, above those normally available, is permitted to compensate for the soldier's Service and recognise that the service level may have to be raised for the Service family to benefit as much as a civilian family would.
- that pay is addressed as a significant concern
- that development of a national, acceptable standard of service for the Armed Forces is considered
- that ways to ensure the principles of the AFC are available to service Personnel and families assigned overseas
- The definition of Army family and particularly how to ensure that divorced families are fairly treated is considered

Working hours

Working hours have been arduous with some soldiers 'double hatting' and many posts being gapped as the organisational structure required by Army 2020 takes shape. The demands of absence due to operational tours and lengthy exercises need to be balanced by a sensible working pace when 'in barracks' to allow families to spend time together. AFF's 2013 Working Hours report confirmed anecdotal evidence of unacceptably long working hours:

- 64% of personnel were consistently working over ten hours per day
- Only 24% felt they had a good work/life balance
- 65% reported that their soldier had not been able to take their leave entitlement

AFF recognises that the MOD's recent Continuous Working Patterns Survey 13/14 demonstrates some reduction in average weekly hours worked. The report cites an average of 42.7 hours per week in the UK a reduction of 2.7 hours from 2012/2013.

AFF asks:

- That working hours continue to be monitored to ensure that there is a realistic management of commitments and work-load.

Childcare

Childcare that compensates for the soldier's lack of availability must be a key aim for the future to ensure that a decent second salary is a reality for more families. At present, the non-serving partner has to be the primary carer and wholly responsible for childcare due to the unpredictable nature of the soldiers' working hours. If the MOD is serious about home-ownership and partner employment, it needs to put in place comprehensive, compensatory childcare solutions to support all Army families and recognise the needs of single serving families.

We recognise that £20 million of LIBOR money has recently been allocated for the purpose of improving childcare. Policy within the MOD has previously been to assume that childcare is personal responsibility; a change to accepting that enabling childcare solutions are the norm, as already happens in some areas, will improve access to spousal employment and retention.

AFF asks:

- for comprehensive childcare solutions which support both single serving parents and dual income families - this may include increasing access and decreasing cost to Service families to compensate for the soldier's service
- for consideration by line managers to enable family friendly working practises when possible, without disadvantaging those without children and colleagues

Admissions are improving and have been helped by the Schools Admissions Code, but inconsistencies remain. The scale of a geographical area in which a family may be housed cannot be addressed by the Schools Admissions Code.

AFF asks:

- that schools be transparent on how Pupil Premium is spent to the benefit of its intended recipients
- that sufficient school places are available, within reasonable distance, in 'rebasement' areas
- that Academies demonstrate how they will meet the requirements of the covenant through schools admissions
- that the Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS) is more adequately funded and staffed
- that children are judged on their own potential attainment rather than in comparison to the national average
- that children of Scottish Officers, who signed-up while attending Sandhurst and are not currently entitled to free university funding in Scotland, are able to claim 'habitual residency'. In some circumstances Scottish families are losing out because of their Service.

There are also concerns over the future of Continuity of Education Allowance (CEA) which creates real fear for our mobile population who rely on the continuity of education and quality of pastoral care offered by the current system. Uncertainty over CEA will significantly affect retention levels.

AFF asks:

- that clarity is given on the future availability and eligibility requirements of CEA to enable families to plan and choose whether remaining in the Armed Forces is in keeping with their family's needs

From a low base-point we are beginning to see some improvement in Service Family Accommodation (SFA). Contractor for maintenance, CarilionAmey, and Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) show a willingness to improve the service they offer SFA occupants. The Next Generation Housing Prime contract seems to address many issues - but it is too early to say whether housing will significantly improve as a result.

Of most pressing concern is whether enough housing will be available in the right place as a result of rebasing families from Germany. AFF have been impressed by the enormous work done across the MOD and DIO to facilitate the vast influx of Army families. We recognise that rebasing could create deficiencies in housing, education and health care for all living in SFA and will be monitoring the situation.

The introduction of a new charging system - Combined Accommodation Assessment System (CAAS) - which may increase rent for many families, will be very difficult to accept without a comparable raise in pay. The pay freeze, below-inflation pay rises combined with year-on-year accommodation charge rises has seen the standard of living for most families decline.

The aspiration of the NEM is to significantly increase home-ownership among the Armed Forces and provide more stability through less mobility but this may only be achievable with an increase in soldiers' pay and better access to childcare to provide an income which makes home purchase affordable.

Forces Help 2 Buy is a welcome scheme to enable more personnel to afford home purchase. However, the need for a decent second-income is imperative for a mortgage and house maintenance to be affordable.

AFF asks:

- A significant pay rise to accommodate the increase in SFA charges and more fairly compensate those living in their own homes
- Careful consideration and timely communication for those living in rebasing areas and for families moving back from Germany
- Soldiers who have joint custody of their children to be entitled to SFA to enable better access
- Local connection for divorced spouses. Army personnel are able to claim 'local connection', but divorcing spouses are disadvantaged by local authorities when applying for local authority housing due to their lack of local connection due to constant moves.
- Appropriate housing for the children of divorced personnel with joint custody arrangements to enable regular home contact - at present serving personnel experience severe difficulties accessing accommodation
- The work of the Corporate Covenant to be maximised to reduce the impact of mobility and Service life on mortgage applications.
- Investment in garrison town centres to significantly improve the built environment and retail facilities
- SFA is removed from Crown tenancy so families of lower paid soldiers in top rate SFA may be able to get housing benefit

Employment and training

Accessing decent employment and training has long proved difficult for Forces partners - usually due to frequent moving if the family serve accompanied and as they are solely responsible for childcare.

AFF asks:

- that employers recognise that the re-basing of troops from Germany should provide greater stability, ensuring that the Forces partner can offer many years of employment
- that Armed Forces Champions in Job Centres work more pro actively with Forces families
- that funding for the University of Wolverhampton 'Business Start-Up Course' is continued
- that partners be allowed to apply to join the Civil Service when on overseas postings
- that the Civil Service automatically offers a career break as an option to Service partners when the soldier is posted
- that the current work on employer engagement is extended to include spousal employment, particularly focusing on extending opportunities overseas
- that there be online access to employment advice for Forces spouses

Health and additional needs

Access to health and provision for family members with additional needs is problematic for mobile families. Recent work to create a process for making adaptations to properties, when necessary due to a medical condition, should make a significant improvement for families.

AFF asks:

- for better training for health care professionals to aid early identification of mental health issues in Army families
- for better access and more consistent provision of face-to-face mental health therapy, recognising that Forces families may be deeply affected by mobility and/or the soldier's active Service
- for families to be able to continue to transfer their place on a waiting list on posting between NHS England authorities

Overseas

Overseas postings pose additional issues for Forces families. Lack of a second income, career progression and pension credits, education, training and distance from family are among the reasons why today's Army family are less likely to choose to serve overseas.

AFF asks:

- for Army families living in Germany are given clear communication on provision of education and healthcare
- for a grant to assist training/studying when overseas
- for access to low-cost loans to aid access to training and studying
- for an increase in School Children's Visits flights, from three return flights to six return flights, to recognise that modern boarders see their parents more frequently and that our overseas population are significantly disadvantaged by location
- For the rebate of council tax for families posted in Northern Ireland and overseas to continue
- for the Contribution in Lieu of Council Tax to be significantly reduced, recognising that families overseas do not have access to the same provision from a local authority as in the UK
- for flights for children of divorced soldiers to enable the child to visit the parent posted overseas
- for an increase in flights for children at university (up to the age of 22) to enable contact with family and to recognise that accommodation is not available for many students outside of term time

Foreign & Commonwealth

Foreign & commonwealth personnel and their families have faced significant problems obtaining visas.

AFF asks:

- for soldiers to be exempt from the new minimum income requirement as it prevents families of soldiers from joining them in the UK. Families who rely on support will not be able to have family members from their country of origin visit them to provide help when the soldier is deployed.
- that the Home Office recognises the English qualifications that soldiers take within the military for the purposes of applications for Citizenship. Soldiers are currently having to spend £150-£200 to prove their language abilities.
- for children born on overseas assignments to be given automatic British citizenship. The Army is currently spending more money paying for visas for children born overseas than it would cost to provide automatic citizenship - as would be available to children of soldiers born in the UK.

In summary, the Armed Forces Covenant has removed some disadvantages but there are still areas where change could improve life for Army families. The over-used phrase ‘recruit the soldier, retain the family’ will grow in popularity as the economy improves and retention and recruitment become more problematic. It is vital that the whole package, financial and access to private and public services, is strong to ensure that Army families continue to embrace being a forces family. A combination of Armed Forces Covenant, Community Covenant and Corporate Covenant with a decent financial package is required to ensure that our Service personnel and families believe that their service is recognised. Additionally, judging whether the aspirations of the New Employment Model and changes required by the Army 2020 plan really deliver positive change and adjusting if evidence demonstrates that the plans are not effective or not working is key to ensuring that Army families will continue to support their soldier remaining in the Army and that the Army remains an attractive prospect for new recruits.

AFF is the voice of the Army family

It empowers, acts as an advocate and an expert witness to promote a quality of life, which reflects the Armed Forces Covenant

AFF
Ramillies Building
Marlborough Lines
Andover
Hants SP11 8HJ

Telephone: 01264 382324
Email: us@aff.org.uk
www.aff.org.uk

Registered charity number 291202