



army families federation

Report on Geographically Dispersed Families 2013

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AFF has long been concerned about how little is known of the experience of families choosing not to live in SFA. As an organisation we try hard to reach this community through our website and Army & You and we continue to broaden our reach.

The families interviewed in this report had all made the move from SFA and therefore were ideally placed to assess and compare the support available. In addition they were able to provide useful insight into what level of assistance should be available to them.

This report has proven that it is not right to assume that all those who have left SFA have actively chosen to withdraw from the military community. Their needs might not be the same as those in SFA but families clearly still desire to be able to access good support when it is needed and to feel part of the military community. How and when that support is delivered appears to vary between individuals with some wanting a higher level of involvement of the military in their lives than others.

From this report AFF makes the following recommendations:

- JPA provides an opt in/out box so that families can choose if they wish the Army to contact them or not
- That on leaving the SFA system the family are provided with options of support
- To develop an online welfare hub that allows the family to navigate access to impartial welfare support and information.

Catherine Spencer
Chief Executive
Army Families Federation

‘We really are forgotten about’

Transition: the challenges and dilemmas of moving out of Service Family Accommodation into own home whilst still serving.

This report draws upon interviews with 11 military spouses who, with their families, had made the decision to move out of SFA and buy their own property and serve unaccompanied. In-depth interviews were conducted with the spouses and, following analysis, a number of themes were identified. This report makes the following key conclusions:

Loss of identity: It was observed that participants moved out of SFA hoping to gain constancy in their children’s education, familial stability, financial benefits and progression in their own careers. However, in doing so they made themselves vulnerable to a loss of identity as members of the military community.

Parenting role: Living off-base often meant that there was a temporary absence of participant’s service spouse living at home, usually during the working week. This led to some participants feeling under-resourced as though they were single parents during this time. This scenario also had erosive consequences on the family unit.

Adaptive strategies: It was observed that adaptive strategies were adopted by the families. These included, buying a house near where it was hoped the serving spouse might be posted, a positive evaluation of their marital relationship, and autonomy in the new home environment. The strain on the family unit was buffered by the fact that participants recognised the choice they had made in leaving SFA.

Exclusion and stigma: Participants felt excluded from the military community and reported that communication was poor and they lacked key information during deployment. They felt that the unique stress of being military spouses was not something civilian friends could fully understand. As a consequence of both of these factors they experienced the weakened support of two vital social networks: both the military and civilian communities.

The report makes the following recommendations:

Contact Pack: The MOD should consider developing a ‘Contact Pack’ which could routinely be sent to each newly housed military spouse/family. This pack would include a letter of acknowledgement from the serving spouse’s Regiment, emergency contact details, signposts to local services, relevant military organisations and social networks (e.g. military parent and toddler groups).

Communication: Every effort should be made by units to communicate information about the welfare of the deployed spouse. Participants also felt that they would like more communication with the unit and would like to be sent invitations for events on base.

Online Resources: When accessing online resources for the purpose of keeping up to date with Regimental news and socialising, participants favoured informal mechanisms, e.g. Facebook. It could be of benefit to any services seeking to reach unaccompanied spouses via the internet to recognise the behavioural patterns and preferences of online help-seeking before commissioning new online support.

Standardised Welfare Support: There were degrees of stigma, concerns about confidentiality and experiences of a lack of uniform service, attached to engaging with unit welfare. This was sometimes a barrier to seeking help from this service. It could be of benefit to endorse a standardised welfare support system, so as to make redundant any fears about confidentiality and stigma.

Introduction

The Army Families Federation (AFF) is keen to understand more about the reasons Army families choose to live unaccompanied in their own home and the resulting challenges and benefits. With the possibility of the Army becoming more stable, the AFF wants to understand what support networks families need in place in order to settle into a civilian community and to ensure that the Army puts appropriate systems in place.

52% of Army personnel are married/in civil partnership (72% of officers and 49% of other ranks). 43% of Army personnel live in SFA or Substitute SFA and 11% of Army personnel live in their own home/privately rented accommodation (UK National Statistics, 2014).

This piece of work specifically focuses on the 11% who have chosen to move out of SFA and move into their own homes. What do we know about their experiences of moving away from their partner's place of work? What are their experiences of living in a civilian community? Is there anything that could be done to improve the experience?

Our Armed Forces are going through a tremendous period of change as the government seeks to implement its defence reform agenda. These reforms not only affect serving personnel, but also impact on their families and dependants.

As more service families chose to move out of service accommodation and into the civilian community there is a growing interest in the challenges that are posed by 'family transition'. It has long been recognised that family wellbeing has an impact on the performance of Service personnel and family issues are often cited as a reason for premature discharge of both trained personnel and those undertaking basic training. The Adjutant General, Lieutenant General Gerry Berragan CB has stated, 'the Army understands the unique demands that Service life places on Army families. We recognise that family support impacts directly on soldiers' operational effectiveness and are therefore fully committed to supporting our families. This includes those families who are geographically separated from where our personnel serve. The support of military families is fundamental.'

This brief report¹, commissioned by AFF, synthesises recent research on military spouses moving from Service Family Accommodation (SFA) with a thematic review of the academic and policy literature. The report makes a number of observations and recommendations that are important in informing the wider debate on supporting service families through the challenges of a transition into the civilian community.

Background

Over the centuries, families have been tolerated and disapproved of in equal measure by the British military and women have followed armies as wives, cooks, concubines and in many other guises (Venning, 2005, Neuberg, 1989). The practice of following armies into battle ceased in the 19th Century and now there are not as many occasions where families are stationed with troops abroad, the notable exceptions being Germany and Cyprus - although these numbers will decrease significantly as the Army goes through a further period of restructuring and the size of the standing contingent of UK forces abroad is reduced.

In the 21st Century, when troops are deployed on training or active service, families are left behind and therefore the choice of suitable accommodation is of great importance. This report explores the challenges faced by families who choose to move out of SFA into the civilian community.

The experiences of families of UK Service personnel are under-researched and not fully understood. This may lead to policy and practice decisions being based on anecdotal or apocryphal commentary rather than evidence. The MOD does undertake an annual survey of the attitudes of service families, the most current (FAMCAS, Ministry of Defence, 2013) considered the views of 5,369 spouses and civil partners of Service personnel (of which 2,223 were from the Army). The survey highlighted both the positive and negative bearings of service life. These included the negative impact of separation, the detrimental effect on spouses' careers, and the emotional impact of a military life on military children. However, job security, support from other military families, housing, and opportunities for travel were reasons to feel positive. A similar survey conducted exclusively for the Army (AFCAS, Ministry of Defence, 2013) revealed that the impact of Service life on family and personal life was still the first reason why personnel would leave the Armed Forces. It found that half of all personnel are dissatisfied with the effect of Service life on their spouse/partner's career.

Attempts are being made by the Government to improve conditions for service families, especially during this period of considerable upheaval. The New Employment Model (NEM, Ministry of Defence, 2013) is a thorough review of conditions for Service personnel. It intends to better balance the demands on personnel and their families, and hopes to provide greater domestic stability while meeting the requirements for mobility and maximised operational capacity. It is recognised that the NEM needs to address the impact of Service life on families and on the careers of spouses and civil partners.

Housing and home ownership have been identified by the Government as key factors in retention for the Army. In the Government's Response to the Committee meeting on The Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) in Action (Parliamentary Publications, 2012-2013) it was noted that home ownership can lead to increased familial separation putting Service personnel under pressure from their families to leave the Armed Forces. However, there is currently no conclusive research on the relationship between Premature Voluntary Release (PVR) and home ownership. At the time of writing a study is being commissioned to consider any impact.

The MOD also drew attention to the fact that the NEM (Ministry of Defence, 2013) is not planning to advocate unaccompanied service. The Government was also advised to forewarn Armed Forces personnel much earlier in their careers regarding the reality of the housing market.

Over recent years, successive governments have taken great strides to raise issues and challenges across Whitehall relating to Service personnel and veterans (Ministry of Defence, 2008) and the Coalition Government has enshrined in law a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the recently constructed AFC (Parliamentary Publications, 2012-2013). The AFC is an important move forward in the delivery of equitable services for our Armed Forces, veterans and their families (Fossey, 2011). The AFC recognises the, 'benefits of stability and home ownership amongst members of the Armed Forces where this is practicable' (Ministry of Defence, 2013). It aims to facilitate support for the families of Service personnel and to, 'take into account the effects of postings to remote locations, often away from family connections' (Ministry of Defence, 2013).

In light of the pledges of the AFC, which highlight the role of the family in supporting operational effectiveness, understanding the needs of unaccompanied military spouses and their families is vital. This is particularly important as the current policy direction and development of the UK Armed Forces will inevitably lead to more families moving into the civilian community.

There is a considerable amount of American literature on the impact of deployment on spouses' emotional health, coping strategies (Meis et al., 2010, Renshaw et al., 2008, Ruger et al., 2002) and domestic abuse (Rentz et al., 2006, Raiha and Soma, 1997), with much less research being conducted in these important areas in the UK (De Burgh et al., 2011, White et al., 2011, Williamson and Price, 2009, Williamson, 2011). In the UK context there is also a paucity of literature considering the impact that accommodation has on the wellbeing of spouses and the quality of life of their dependants. What role, if any, does accommodation play in mediating the effects of the cycle deployment? This report makes a number of observations and recommendations based on an analysis of a sample of Army spouses.

Methodology

This report qualitatively analyses the experiences of 11 Army spouses who have moved out of SFA (2 months to 5 years ago). There were 14 responses to the invitation to participate, of which 3 did not meet the criteria threshold for the study. The main avenues for recruitment were the AFF website, email and word of mouth.

A high proportion of the participants were drawn from senior NCO and officers families, which might be due to the fact that more junior ranks are not in the housing market to as great a degree. The number of participants was small, as is often the case in qualitative research, and promotes a clear and in-depth analysis of data. Qualitative methods are most useful for theory construction in the early stages of theory development, to reveal the nature of an issue, and to explore a subject where little information already exists on it. Little research seems to exist on unaccompanied spouses, who have lived in SFA, and so a qualitative approach was the appropriate technique in this case.

Table 1: Basic Demographics

Name ¹	Age	Employed?	Children?	How many years living in your own home?	Unaccompanied?	How frequently do you see your partner? ²	Distance?/Miles	Rank
Tallulah	26-35	N	Y	2	Y	WE	242	Private up to Corporal
Serena	36-45	N	Y	4	Y	WE	100	Senior NCO Sgt & above
Susan	36-45	Y	Y	0.5	Y	WE	190	Officer 2nd Lt to Lt Col
Polly	36-45	N	Y	0.17	Y	WE	150	Officer 2nd Lt to Lt Col
Eve	36-45	Y	Y	2.5	Y	WE	160	Senior NCO Sgt & above
Lina	36-45	Y	Y	5	Y	WE	120	Officer 2nd Lt to Lt Col
Sally	18-25	Y	N	1.5	Y	WE	140	Private up to Corporal
Sophie	36-45	Y	Y	2	Y	WE	240	Senior NCO Sgt & above
Alice	26-35	Y	Y	1.5	Y	WE	257	Senior NCO Sgt & above
Charlotte	26-35	Y	Y	5	N	D	9	Officer 2nd Lt to Lt Col
Becky	26-35	Y	Y	1	Y	WE	200	Senior NCO Sgt & above

¹These are not the real names of participants
²WE=weekends; D= daily

This data represents a small, but useful sample of Service spouses. Spouses had moved out of SFA on average 2 ¼ years ago. The average distance lived away from home was 164 miles. Only one spouse described herself as ‘accompanied’ at the time of interview and this participant was still included in the study as she had lived unaccompanied before and was due to live unaccompanied again, a few weeks after interview. The sample was made up women and they were all married.

Participants were encouraged to apply for the study using an advertisement on the AFF website. Each participant was asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire. This enabled sifting of inappropriate applicants and ensured fidelity to the research criteria:

- Living in privately owned home for a minimum of 2 months
- Unaccompanied spouse who had previously lived in SFA

The interviews were administered using semi-structured in-depth interviews. These had a planned schedule but were flexible enough to include additional comments from the participant. The interviews were conducted either face to face or via Skype.

The open-ended questions asked in the interviews were developed following a number of meetings with AFF. AFF had identified spouses in private accommodation as being particularly hard to reach. The subsequent interview schedule asked whether the participants felt more or less supported and integrated since moving out of SFA, if there had been any changes in their relationships, an exploration of experiences of transition from SFA and whether they had an awareness of the AFC and support mechanisms, including online resources such as The Big White Wall.

The responses to the interviews were analysed using a Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis is a method used to analyse interview material through transcription, re-reading, coding the data and sorting it into reoccurring themes. Thematic Analysis was preferred partly because it is not restricted to any particular theoretical paradigms.

Four important themes were identified:

- Family: structure, roles and relationships
- A place called home: control, autonomy and choice
- Community: inclusion and exclusion
- Welfare provision (Army Welfare Service (AWS) and Unit Welfare Officers (UWO))

Analysis of the Interview Responses

In this section the report focuses on the real experiences of spouses who have moved out service accommodation. Their experiences are captured in a series of anonymous statements that help to illustrate the themes identified in the analysis.

The analysis is divided into the four themes detailed above. Additionally a number of sub-themes have also been identified under each heading.

1.0 Family: structure, roles and relationships

1.1 'We' and 'Him': the erosion of a single familial identity

The familial identity shifted over time, from 'us', when all members were living together, to 'we' (me and the kids) and 'him' (serving spouse) when the family lived apart, 'so, his job dictates what we do, but for me and the kids now, we can do what we want' (Becky).

One of the reasons participants liked living in SFA was because they were able to live with their spouse, which felt 'normal' and allowed them to share parental responsibilities.

'It was how it should be... he was home every night... It was normal every day to day family life, really... Let's say it just felt normal. That's how we felt married life should be' (Serena).

This emotionally straining change in family structure was undergone by the serving spouses too, 'I think it can make the husbands feel very not a part of it. Sometimes, he'll say, I feel you've got, 'you and the kids, and me'... I think that can be hard, and that can be a challenge, that can be hard, keeping things feeling like a complete family unit' (Eve).

1.2 Solo Parenting: emotional strain on spouses

Participants' partners were sent on postings around the UK this meant that participants felt they were operating as single parents during the week, 'being both parents during the week... because I'm on my own... that's where it's been a struggle' (Susan). Spouses found it hard to cope being the main source of childcare, 'their behaviour is sometimes very challenging, when you're the only one who has to deal with it, when you don't get any support... It's all of the roles, you are everything. That's the problem' (Lina). Living in a privately owned house could create a situation where parental responsibilities were shouldered by one parent during the week.

Weekly routines became strenuous, 'whereas before, when my husband was around, he was there to share that burden and I haven't got that anymore' (Susan). Participants tended to rely more on their extended family for childcare support in their new homes.

1.3 Constancy in education

Participants sought to promote the constancy of their children's education,

'I didn't want to put my children into boarding school because I couldn't bear being away from them, so it was either keep going the way we were going or buy a house. We knew that we wanted to settle, so that the boys would stay constant in education, but the thought of not being with my husband and him not being with the boys was really quite distressing.' (Susan)

For most participants there was a preference not to send their children to boarding school, but the emotional strain that they observed on their children moving day schools multiple times encouraged their decision to live somewhere permanently,

‘I think the only stress was when we moved and when they had to move schools, we did that twice and that’s when we bought our own house and we could see the stresses on them, it was either we buy our own house, or they go to boarding school, so yeah we bought our own house’ (Charlotte).

Prioritising the educational constancy of children came at a relational cost because living out of SFA meant that there was a risk of not being able to live with their spouse, ‘We’ve done it for the kids really. Um, it’s not ideal, it’s not great living unaccompanied, you have to put the kids first at some point’ (Becky).

Constancy in education was thought to provide the necessary foundation for developing social networks for children, ‘I would put, stability, of education, but in terms of the children’s friends they build stronger bonds with people, that hopefully might take them into their later teens and adulthood’ (Eve). There was some concern about the way in which funding for military children was being distributed by schools in the area (Service Pupil Premium, SPP). Though most participants had been successful in securing the school of their choice, some participants had needed to highlight their military identity, using the AFC, to gain this access.

2.0 A place called home: control, autonomy and choice

2.1 The UK posting system: having to relinquish control

Participants sometimes experienced a lack of choice when they were introduced to new SFA housing and a private home allowed for greater control.

‘I do think you are better able to cope, because I think you feel that there is a bit more of a sense of being in control, I think because it is your house You can’t be so frustrated with the system because actually you’ve chosen your house, and you are living here, it’s your sort of sanctuary’ (Charlotte).

Choice was an integral part of being able to cope with the erosive effects of not living together as a family, ‘so when I’m doing every tea time every bath time, that kind of thing, then I know we chose that, if I thought the army were forcing us into that position, I just don’t think it’d be sustainable, I’d be too cross about it’ (Polly). Participants recognised that they had made a decision, ‘I think you are sort of left out on a limb, but at the end of the day, it was our decision’ (Lina). Recognising that they had made this choice to move out of SFA helped to quell feelings of frustration as participants tried to manage daily life in their own homes.

2.2 Location

Participants could not control where their serving partner was posted to, ‘it does control us in a way, because he is not here... We’re just hoping that his last posting is closer to here, so he can commute’ (Becky). Participants tried to protect their familial relationships by buying a house near a location where their serving spouse might be posted, ‘a lot of the Army are in this area, so the chances of having jobs here is quite high’ (Charlotte).

Buying a house near to an Army base had the additional benefit of allowing the spouse to be near a group of military spouses, 'knowing the battalion is so close if you will. So we planned for the best of both worlds' (Sophie). To live near a community of military spouses while also having the privacy of a home was a strategy for resilience. Frequently, participants bought houses in light of their spouse's forthcoming exit from the Army, evidence of the foresight which was typical of this sample.

2.3 Regaining control via decorating

Though seemingly superficial, decorating was an action through which spouses could demonstrate a renewed sense of ownership and control in their new houses, 'I think it's just that ownership of having your own home... I can do what I want here. I can paint the hall fluorescent pink here if I want, it doesn't really matter!' (Alice). Decorating represented a tangible way in which participants could regain control over their home environment having moved out of SFA. Reclaiming mastery over the home environment cultivated participants' self-efficacy which had been limited previously by military standards.

'I am going to be in charge of my own destiny for once, which was, yes, very exciting, I could paint any colour and I could put as many pictures on the wall as I wanted. I could plant the garden up and not have to leave it behind two years later' (Charlotte).

On-going employment, which was often enhanced by living in a private house, strengthened personal and interpersonal relationships.

2.4 Spouses' relationship with their career

Participants were keen to demonstrate that their work identity was distinct from their spouse's career identity, 'my husband does his job and that's his job and I do my job and that's my job' (Alice). Developing a career made participants less reliant on the military community, 'it has been easier for me to separate myself from it... it's my husband's job, and it is a way of life, but I didn't want it' (Becky). This sample represents those spouses who predominantly did not want to be defined by their serving partner's careers.

Living in a private home enabled those participants who wanted to, to invest in their careers, 'now I can put my heart and soul into my job now' (Becky). Not being able to establish a stable career in SFA had been a source of interpersonal conflict in some cases and was one of the benefits of home ownership,

'We argued a lot. I think it's because I gave up um, quite a good job and stuff, to move there... It's just, I wanted my own life... You have to give up a lot of your own identity when you move, and I didn't like it. I wanted my life back really... I trained as a teacher before' (Alice).

3.0 Community: inclusion and exclusion

3.1 'We were all in the same boat': the importance of shared experience

High levels of shared experience amongst military spouses in SFA often felt supportive, 'it's really good at times of stress to have your friends there, definitely' (Tallulah). This was the case, even for those spouses who weren't particularly immersed in the military culture in SFA, 'that's what I miss I think, from living on a patch. The sense of camaraderie, that you get from all the wives because all your husbands, they are all in the same boat as you' (Charlotte). Recognition of the unique stresses that they faced acted as a buffer against stress levels during times of deployment.

It was important for participants, even those with low levels of immersion in the military culture, that their children retained a sense of belonging with other military children, 'it's nice to keep her in a little bit... recognising daddy does this and it's special' (Alice). Participants wanted to offer their children the chance to have friendships with other children who had parents with military careers.

3.2 'Civvies don't quite get it': the distinctive experience of a military spouse in a non-military context

Participants felt that civilians could not empathise with the complex ways in which cycles of deployment affected a military spouse and her children in their new social context.

'Even my mum and dad, they know all about my husband's job, still wouldn't fully understand, and I still, I'd find it really difficult to talk to friends like I would do other friends in the military circle' (Susan).

It was exasperating for participants when their civilian friends tried to make their experiences equivalent to the deployment cycle.

'One of my friends, the first time was like, 'Oh it's like he's on holiday!' It's not f-cking like he's on holiday, he might get bombed. You don't get bombed on your holidays! ... None of my friends from home really had any concept of it, you can't really explain to them' (Sally).

Having a mixture of civilian and military friends was one way of lessening the effects of not feeling understood within a civilian community, and contributed to the resilience of spouses in their social contexts.

'I think it was also nice to have a balance between the army and my civilian friends... they just got on with life normally, which was kind of nice sometimes, a bit frustrating sometimes as well, that they didn't really understand, but then you had your Army friends that do understand, so, a bit of normality fits in with army life' (Charlotte).

3.3 'We're an Army wife wherever we may be': the enduring identity of a military spouse

Spouses felt excluded from the military community after they had exited SFA, and this was distressing for those who had had high levels of immersion in the military.

'To say that you've been a part of that for 15 years and actually having quite a big hand in it as well... to go to not anybody having anything to do with you, or even remotely interested from the Army circle, I do struggle with that... They don't seem to take much of an interest, unless you are living in SFA' (Susan).

The way that they felt perceived by the military community jarred with their internalised identity as a military spouse, which felt legitimate regardless of their context. Some participants wanted to remain distinct from an identity as a military spouse, 'I'm not somebody's wife, I'm not the person at work, we're just a family who lives in this house' (Lina). This desire was made ambiguous by the fact that the same participant also wanted support and recognition for unaccompanied spouses.

'I just think they are not supported, I think they are missed completely, and I think they just completely miss them off the radar. An unaccompanied spouse is pretty much non-existent in their eyes and I think it needs to change, we are still an army wife wherever we may be' (Lina).

There were exceptions who felt that their spouse's Regiment had made efforts to include them in their new home. It depended on the Welfare Officers as to how effective this welcome was, heralding concerns about the uniformity of the Unit Welfare Officer System.

3.4 Efforts for inclusion: a welcome pack and information-sharing

Information regarding the well-being of spouses during deployment acted as a buffer against distress. This resource was felt not to be accessible in a private house, 'not being on site, we're left out of the loop, no letters, nothing' (Becky).

Participants suggested a 'welcome pack' sent to their new house; signposting to relevant military contacts would engender feelings of acknowledgement and greater levels of resilience, 'I think, like you say, like an information pack, if you're out of SFA, battalion's got a list on JPA' (Alice).

'That you would maybe get contact then, 'we are now your Welfare Office, if you need us, this is our contact', and maybe that's all it needs to be, just something like that... 'Even though you are married unaccompanied... Remember that our services are here, if you need us, here is our contact number'' (Eve).

Sensitivity to spouses' newly found privacy was important,

'I don't necessarily want someone to phone me or knock on my door, but it would be nice... that they acknowledge that you do exist, even just a standardised letter, 'this is our contact, this is what is available to you'' (Lina).

Acknowledgement of group membership by the military community, invitations to social events and sharing of relevant information would increase the resilience of spouses. Online services and the ability to subscribe to relevant resources promoted the autonomy and independence of participants, and enabled them to connect with the products and information they wanted,

'When you live in an SFA you get it [AFF Journal] through your front door, but when you're in your own house you don't get it any more, unless your husband brings it home, which he is never going to do, so I went online and subscribed, which you didn't used to be able to do, but you can now, so I do get it' (Charlotte).

4.0 Welfare provision

4.1 The need for standardised Welfare provision

Participants had mixed experiences of welfare, depending on the Regiment they were with and the personnel who were in charge of it at the time, 'my experience of the support is going to be very different to what someone else gets, it very much depends on what unit you are with, and that probably is part of the problem, I think, it probably needs to be a little bit more across the board' (Eve).

Familiarity with the welfare team facilitated help-seeking and fostered levels of engagement, something that was particularly valuable during deployment, 'the families, they like repetition, they like to get to know someone to trust them' (Eve). It was therefore challenging for participants that, 'the Welfare team are constantly changing' (Sophie). Some participants relayed occasions where their trust in welfare providers had been severed and hard to recover. To prevent this from happening it was largely felt that, 'they really should look at who they are putting in, they should get people that actually want to do the job' (Tallulah).

4.2 External Welfare Hub

The idea of having an external, non-militarised Welfare Hub was cited among some participants. It was felt that perhaps such a service would feel more accessible and less stigmatised than the welfare services that the Army can provide. However, in order for such an agency to be effective it was felt that, 'it needs to be a mix, rather than one big new agency' and 'making sure that whoever is involved, understands the make-up of it as well' (Eve). It was evident that certain service provision becomes stigmatised, which can reduce the number of people who seek to use it.

'I probably would be more inclined with a problem, to go the AFF, or phone one of their people to do with the magazine, than I would be to go to the Welfare Office actually, maybe that's what the army needs to do is to fund the AFF to do more of that and so that you rely less on your local welfare office... I'd be much more inclined to phone the AFF to talk about a housing issue' (Polly).

Conclusion

It seems obvious, but nevertheless it's important to reiterate that, 'each couple or family must be viewed within their unique context so that interventions can be tailored to fit their particular needs' (Boss, 2006: 3) and the tailoring of services needs to be seen in the context of healthy social networks and feelings of inclusion contributing to levels of well-being for Service families (Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt & Spears, 2001; Louis & Taylor, 1999). The application of these basic tenets is very important if we want to achieve the best possible outcomes for Service families.

The sample in this study was made up of military spouses who chose to move out of SFA to live in private houses. The aspect of choice in this transition was observed to be a safeguard for spouses during times of stress, 'if I thought the Army were forcing us into that position, I just don't think it'd be sustainable, I'd be too cross about it' (Polly). It is therefore considered important that the MOD is mindful of the choices that military families make regarding their accommodation. The NEM seeks to enable personnel to balance their private and professional lives, so facilitating these choices is key.

We also observed that on leaving SFA participants felt increasingly excluded from military information networks and the military community, 'we really are forgotten about' (Lina). The MOD could consider new ways of including unaccompanied spouses that acknowledges their membership of the military community while respecting their newly found privacy.

A number of respondents suggested the development of a 'Contact Pack'. This could be developed specifically for unaccompanied spouses on arrival in their new homes. Ideally it would contain the details of relevant military and charitable organisations, including appropriate welfare providers. The pack is a potentially important component to facilitate inclusion. Through fostering better information links with units and garrisons, packs could be especially important during the difficult period of deployment.

A basic principle of the AFC is to honour and respect military families and, 'to minimise the impact of mobility caused by Service' (Parliamentary Publications, 2013: 8) - the development of a 'Contact Pack' would go some way to addressing this. There may also be great utility with the growing Reserve Force numbers that are expected over the next decade.

In the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS, 2013) 24% of personnel were dissatisfied, 42% positive and 34% neutral about the Welfare Service provided for their families. These figures highlight the need for research into the suitability and effectiveness of the current system and specifically UWOs as emotional confidants. Participants in this study found it hard to confide in UWOs for several reasons. There was a stigma that was attached to the seeking of help from them, which was partly due to fears around the impact this might have on their partner's career and also perceptions around a lack of confidentiality.

It was also difficult for participants to seek help from Unit Welfare Officers as personnel were often changing and familiarity was experienced to be a key facilitator of seeking help from a Welfare Officer. There is scope for the development of an external Welfare Hub, which is constructed in such a way so as to reduce stigma surrounding their services by reducing the fears around confidentiality and impact on serving personnel's careers. Feedback suggested that Welfare Officers would have more motivation to do their jobs effectively if they personally wanted to be Welfare Officers, rather than as a compulsory part of their career progression.

One characteristic of the participants in this study is that they were conscious of their housing needs, the future career choices of their serving partner and the educational needs of their children. There may be families currently living in SFA who are not aware of, or prepared for, the challenges that purchasing a house may present, nor the psychosocial effects that they may encounter on the back of this decision. This concern was voiced by participants,

‘Prepare people in plenty of time, before they are getting out of the Army as well... a lot of people think about the here and now and don’t worry about where they are going to go’ (Becky).

In seeking to support and promote home ownership and in addition to its pre-existing, affordable housing schemes, the MOD could conduct awareness-raising for those families living in SFA which would highlight the benefits and limitations of both accommodation contexts. By forewarning military families considering such transitions of the dilemmatic decisions they may face, the MOD could bolster their resilience and increase their capacity for choice.

In seeking to promote the stability of service personnel and their families, through the development of long-term postings, the MOD needs to consider whether it is the length of postings that is key in promoting stability, or whether it is the geographical proximity of those postings to the unaccompanied spouse.

Recommendations

Contact Pack: The MOD should consider developing a ‘Contact Pack’ which could routinely be sent to each newly housed military spouse/family. This pack would include a letter of acknowledgement from the serving spouse’s Regiment, emergency contact details, signposts to local services, relevant military organisations and social networks (e.g. military parent and toddler groups).

Communication: Every effort should be made by units to communicate information about the welfare of the deployed spouse. Participants also felt that they would like more communication with the unit and would like to be sent invitations for events on base.

Online Resources: When accessing online resources for the purpose of keeping up to date with Regimental news and socialising, participants favoured informal communication mechanisms, (e.g. Facebook). It could be of benefit to any services seeking to reach unaccompanied spouses via the internet, to recognise the behavioural patterns and preferences of online help-seeking before commissioning new online support.

Standardised Welfare Support: There were degrees of stigma, concerns about confidentiality and experiences of a lack of uniform service, attached to engaging with unit welfare. This was sometimes a barrier to seeking help from this service. It could be of benefit to endorse a standardised welfare support system, so as to make redundant any fears about confidentiality and stigma.

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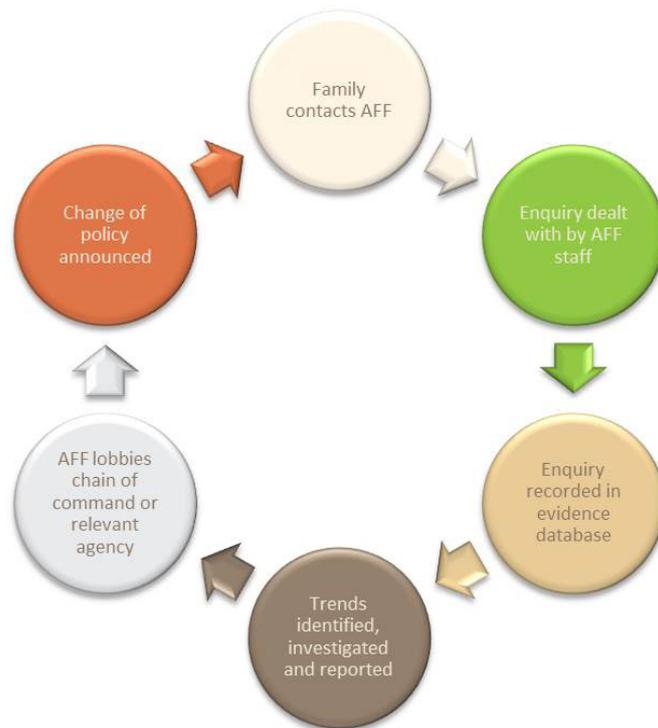
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AFF is the voice of the Army family.

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



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