

## Briefing 1. *Living in Our Shoes*: setting the context

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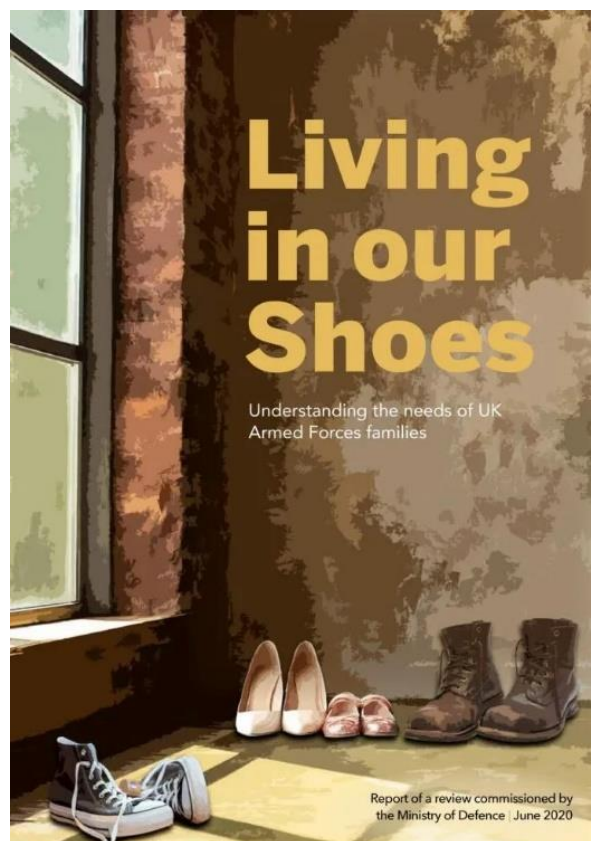
### Introduction to the Briefing

This is the first of three Briefings to provide an introduction to the *Living in Our Shoes* review which was conducted between 2019 and 2020, and sets the scene for a discussion of the evidence which emerged relating to the lived experiences of Armed Forces personnel and their families.

Briefings 2 and 3 summarise the evidence presented in *Living in Our Shoes* relating to each of several key themes, outline the recommendations for change and the government response to those recommendations. Together, these initial Briefings provide the background to the first phase of the current '*Living in Our Shoes – Revisited*' project some five years on, the assessment of the policy and practice changes that have occurred, and the extent to which the recommendations made and accepted have been implemented.

### Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families

The review of the needs of the UK Armed Forces families was commissioned by the then Secretary of State for Defence in January 2019 to understand the impact of the current and likely future structures in the modern day Armed Forces, and to assess if Defence was equipped to respond to their needs. The review team<sup>1</sup> had no fixed agenda and made no assumptions about the themes that might emerge. During 2019, the team gathered evidence to inform the study in a number of ways, including: an open call for evidence, international research review and knowledge mobilization, visits to thirteen military bases in England, Scotland and Wales; visits to schools with large numbers of Service children; meetings with key military personnel and stakeholders; and conversations with Serving personnel of all ranks in all three single Services, their spouses/partners and their children, about their lived experiences of life in the Armed Forces. Conversations also included members of the UK Armed Forces community from Commonwealth countries who were based in the UK.



<sup>1</sup> The review team comprised: Andrew Selous MP, Lead Reviewer; Professor Janet Walker, Lead adviser; and Dr Gabriela Misca, Research Adviser

The review explored a range of issues raised by Service personnel and their families, many of which were echoed across all three single Services, and some of which had more resonance for one or other of the Services due to their varying recruitment patterns and modus operandi. The review report<sup>2</sup>:

- considered the context in which Serving personnel and their families were living, including changes in civilian life
- offered insights to assist the work already taking place to support military families
- encouraged scrutiny and evaluation of new initiatives being developed
- suggested changes that could be made to strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant
- strengthened the resolve to promote and foster resilient, thriving Service families who are treated fairly, have increased choice and are valued by the Nation.

## Understanding the Context in 2020

To set the context for the *Living in Our Shoes* study, the review team referred to the main social and economic changes in civilian life in the UK since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the challenges faced by military families in the light of expectations placed on them.

### Changes in family life

The changes which shape life in the twenty-first century include the changing nature and variety of couple relationships; increases in family separation, divorce and step-family formation; changing gender roles; and changing technologies which impact on working patterns and family relationships. Although married couples constituted the main type of adult couple relationship in the UK in 2020, choice about the nature of adult partnerships had greatly increased. Since 2004, the countries of the United Kingdom had progressively legalised same-sex marriages and civil partnerships, first for same-sex couples and then for heterosexual couples. For most couples, moving in and setting up home together marked an important step in the formation of a couple relationship. Long-term cohabitation had increased substantially, not just as a prelude to marriage but as a lifestyle choice, and in 2020 it was the fastest growing family type in the UK.

The Armed Forces had recognised the changes in marriage and civil partnerships, and 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 were derived from self-reports it was almost certainly an under-estimate. Since 2019, the Armed Forces had also recognised long-term cohabiting partnerships if specific evidence could be produced, but there were significant issues in how to define and prove what was meant by 'long-term'. In 2020 there were scant data available about the number of Serving personnel in cohabiting relationships, and there was a significant disconnect between the ways in which all forms of couple relationship were recognised in civilian life and their recognition within the military.

Over the past 60 years, increasing numbers of marriages have ended in divorce such that many children experience the remarriage or re-partnering of one or both of their parents, and the consequent multiple transitions in family living arrangements. In 2020 there were no accurate UK statistics about the number of Service personnel who were separated, divorced, or re-partnered or the number of children in military families who had experienced their parents' separation.

<sup>2</sup>Walker, J., Selous, A., and Misca, G., (2020) [Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces Families](#), MOD.

The review noted the significant shift in gender roles since the Second World War - in the twenty-first century, both men and women in all kinds of relationships were likely to seek meaningful employment outside the home to boost the family income and to share child care responsibilities.

### Specific challenges for military families

Military families constitute a diverse population and the socio-demographic and cultural profiles of each of the three single Services varied considerably. Military families face all the challenges and transitions that civilian families face and they also experience a range of unique stressors. 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 and spousal/partner employment
- cope with tensions in balancing family life with the demands of Service life.

The review recognised that military life also 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 could 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. Nevertheless, in 2020 the impact of Service life on family and personal life was the top factor influencing decisions about whether to leave the military.

Within a changed socio-economic context, many of the key themes which emerged during the review about the additional challenges experienced by military families were regarded as detrimental to modern family life and relationships. These themes included:

- the state of Service Family Accommodation (SFA)
- mobility
- deployment
- the impact of Service life on military children and young people
- the employment and careers of non-Serving spouses and partners
- the health and well-being of Serving personnel and family members
- the impact of Service life on personal relationships.

It was clear that all these challenges could create tensions in balancing family life with the demands of Service life. In the *Living in Our Shoes* report, each theme is discussed in detail, primarily through the voices of those who gave evidence. Briefing Two discusses the findings and recommendations relating to:

- military accommodation
- growing up in the Armed Forces
- employment challenges and opportunities for non-Serving partners
- the health and wellbeing of military families.

Briefing Three summarises the evidence relating to the support that was available in 2020 and the recommendations made in *Living in Our Shoes* to enhance the support which would better meet the needs of UK Armed Forces families.

## **The Nation's Commitment to Supporting Military Families**

At the time of the *Living in Our Shoes* review, considerable work had already taken place, or was ongoing, within the charity sector and within government to ensure increased support for military families. The many initiatives were discussed in detail in the report. Furthermore, *Living in Our Shoes* was underpinned by an understanding and knowledge in 2020 of wider societal, cultural and economic issues relating to all families in the UK, and by research undertaken in the UK and elsewhere on the support needs of military families and the ways in which these were being met.

Of particular importance in government were the Armed Forces Covenant and the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016 - 2020.

### **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, His 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 recognises 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. Nevertheless, the Covenant 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.

Considerable progress had been made since the Covenant was introduced to encourage organisations and those working with military families to sign up to the values and promises enshrined within it. A myriad of initiatives had been established to support the Armed Forces community across the UK. The Government had committed to incorporating the Armed Forces Covenant into law and to continuing to remove disadvantage faced by the Armed Forces community.

### **The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016-2020**

The Armed Forces Families' Strategy 2016-2020 developed the commitment articulated in the Covenant. It acknowledged 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 were responsible for policy development in the areas that constituted the 'offer' to Service families. The intent was 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, key targets and timelines for achieving them. These priorities were considered carefully during the review, and in making recommendations.

## **Living in Our Shoes - Developing Recommendations**

Serving in the Armed Forces requires discipline, professionalism, flexibility, devotion to duty, bravery, personal sacrifice, compassion and a commitment to serving the nation. These requirements are enhanced by strong family support, and family members play an important role in meeting the need for operational effectiveness. *Living in Our Shoes* provided a comprehensive analysis of the needs of UK Armed Forces families at the time of its publication in 2020. It recognised that 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.

The issues identified in *Living in Our Shoes* were already known about, if not necessarily fully understood or acted upon, but the review shone a uniquely bright light on the key concerns that Armed Forces families were facing and presented them for the first time in a single, clear, authoritative and well researched review. The review made 110 evidence-based recommendations on how Defence, in partnership with other government departments, the devolved administrations and the third sector, could improve support for Service families relating to the key themes identified.

The *Living in Our Shoes* recommendations were targeted primarily at actions for the MOD and the three single Services, but some had implications for other government departments and local authorities in England, the Devolved Governments of the UK, and a range of organisations in the statutory, private and charitable sectors. The review recognised that responsibility for supporting Service families went well beyond the Armed Forces themselves and the MOD, and would require joined-up support and a commitment to promote change from across central and local government, the Devolved Governments, military charities, businesses and employers, and society in general. To assist in the task, the recommendations were prioritised into three groups: those that should be actioned in the short-term; others that would take longer and should be considered in the medium-term; and those that would take considerable thought, collaboration and investment were noted as longer-term goals.

The review team were not asked to consider the financial investment/resource costs of implementing the recommendations, nor the mechanisms for implementation, but the team recognised that some of the recommendations would require financial investment and a willingness to review long-established and traditional ways of working. Nevertheless, there were many recommendations in the report which the team considered could be implemented fairly easily and speedily if there was a will to do so, recognising that the breadth, depth and sheer number of recommendations inevitably provided a challenge for Government and the single Services.

The Armed Forces Covenant and a renewed Armed Forces Families Strategy were considered as key vehicles for establishing the appropriate conditions to drive the changes recommended.

## **The Government Response**



The vast majority of the recommendations were accepted either in full or in part by the Government, including detailed commentary on the ways in which they would be taken forward and whose responsibility it would be for implementing them. The Government's published response<sup>3</sup> was itself the product of a consultation exercise over many months involving central and devolved government up to ministerial level, as well as the single Services. The commentary which accompanied the Government response assists in enabling a review of progress since 2020 in respect of the implementation of the recommendations and the delivery of change. Not only did the response indicate the steps that would be taken to meet the needs of military families but also pointed to the relevant work that had been undertaken already.

It was very clear from the evidence in *Living in Our Shoes* that support for military personnel and their families should be high on the wider agendas of the UK government and the devolved administrations. In its response to the report, the government noted that 'Since the June 2020 publication, the MOD has strengthened governance on activity to support Service families by creating a cross-sector Steering Group with representation from the Devolved Administrations, other key government departments and the charitable sector.' This forum had oversight of the development of the refreshed UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032. Alongside other research, the '*Living in Our Shoes*' report would inform the development of that Strategy which was to be published by the end of 2021.

The review had argued that the Ministry of Defence should establish a robust mechanism for an independent review of the recommendations in the report, monitoring their implementation every six months, noting the progress made, and ensuring public accountability. A refreshed Armed Forces Families Strategy<sup>4</sup> was to be underpinned by a two-year rolling Action Plan<sup>5</sup> setting out the timetable for delivering specific, measurable and improved support for families. The Steering Group would submit a six-monthly update to the Defence Secretary reporting on progress in delivering the Action Plan. Since 2022, two members of the original review team, Professor Walker and Dr Misca have acted as Independent Advisers to the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032 and have contributed to the Annual Armed Forces Covenant report.

Together with Peter Davis who led the Armed Forces Families Strategy until summer 2023, Dr Misca and Professor Walker form the team undertaking the current *Living in Our Shoes- Revisited* project. This project is the first substantive opportunity to revisit the findings reported in *Living in Our Shoes* and the subsequent recommendations, take stock of the progress made, highlighting good practice and effective change, as well as the barriers and challenges to implementation, and consider the priorities for supporting Armed Forces families into the future.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-our-shoes-understanding-the-needs-of-uk-armed-forces-families/living-in-our-shoes-understanding-the-needs-of-uk-armed-forces-families-government-response-accessible-version>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-armed-forces-families-strategy-2022-to-2032>

<sup>5</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/628f9eb7d3bf7f036750af9d/20220526-AF\\_Families\\_Plan-22-Final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/628f9eb7d3bf7f036750af9d/20220526-AF_Families_Plan-22-Final.pdf)