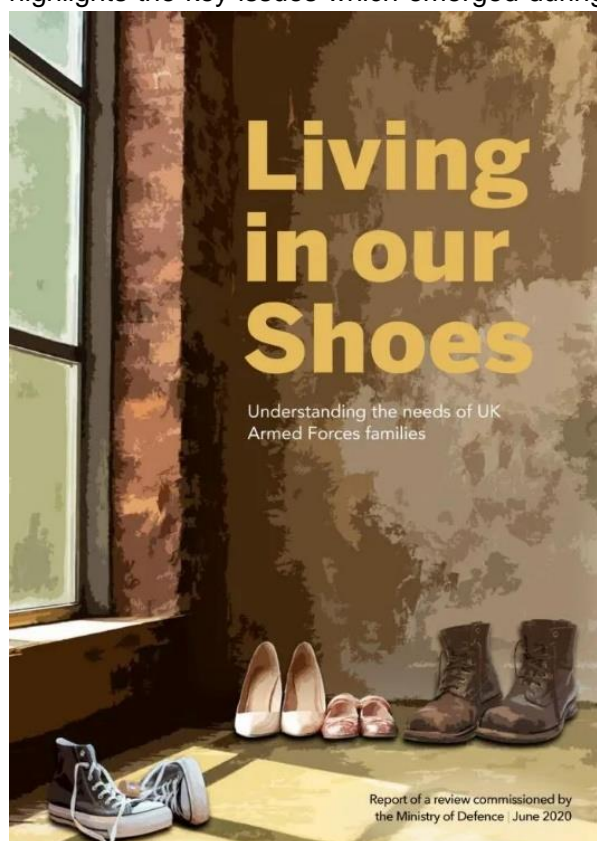


Briefing 3. *Living in Our Shoes*: Supporting Armed Forces Families

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Introduction to the briefing

This is the third in a series of three Briefings summarising the key messages and recommendations reported in *Living in Our Shoes*.¹ Briefing One² summarised the context for the review of the needs of UK Armed Forces families commissioned by the Secretary of State for Defence in 2019. Briefing Two³ highlights the key issues which emerged during the review and the recommendations for change. This



third Briefing summarises the findings relating to the support that was available for Armed Forces families at that time and refers to the recommendations to enhance that support. These three Briefings aim to provide an aide memoire to the large body of evidence presented in *Living in Our Shoes* and highlight the Government response to the recommendations made in 2020.⁴ Together they provide the context for the current study, *Living in Our Shoes – Revisited*, which seeks to understand the progress made in the five years since the publication of *Living in Our Shoes*, which is funded by Forces in Mind Trust.⁵

The report of *Living in our Shoes* lists 110 recommendations and the government response refers to each recommendation in turn, indicating whether the recommendation was accepted in full, accepted in part, or rejected. Of the 110 recommendations, 86 were accepted in full, 20 were accepted in part, three were not accepted, and one was directed at the charitable sector and did not require a government response. A commentary about the reasons for the decision was provided for each recommendation along with an indication of the work being undertaken and planned. This detail is not

included in these Briefings. Instead, attention is drawn to the substance of the recommendations made and the actions that the government indicated they would be take.

This briefing focuses on the duty of care held by the three single Services, the support provided by the military charities, and the culture in which support is given. It also refers briefly to transition out of the Armed Forces.

¹ Walker, J., Selous, A., and Misca, G., (2020) [Living in Our Shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces Families](#), MOD.

² Walker, J., Misca, G. and Davis, P. (2025) *Living in Our Shoes Revisited*. Briefing 1. DOI: <http://doi.org/lios-r/brief1>; Available: [Living in Our Shoes Revisited - Forces in Mind Trust](#)

³ Walker, J., Misca, G. and Davis, P. (2025) *Living in Our Shoes Revisited*. Briefing 2. DOI: <http://doi.org/lios-r/brief1>; Available: [Living in Our Shoes Revisited - Forces in Mind Trust](#)

⁴ Op. cit.

⁵ <https://www.fim-trust.org/about/lios/launch-event/>

Duty of Care and Moral Responsibility: Supporting Service Families

Balancing Service life with family life

Military personnel in all three Services stressed that the pressures of Service life could be very demanding for families. The nature of military life and the repeated separations could exacerbate stress in relationships, and non-operational separations could have a negative effect on spouses/partners' employment, family functioning, and their health and wellbeing. Repeated transitions for couples with children from being a two-parent to a one-parent household could be difficult for everyone and could 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 returned home: including resentment; problems adjusting to changing roles; disappointment; and, in some cases, episodes of domestic abuse. Dual-serving couples faced additional pressures in managing their family life and relationships around deployments and Service demands on them both.

Domestic abuse

Welfare staff indicated that incidences of domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence appeared to be increasing, despite insufficient data on domestic violence within the Armed Forces and a lack of information about its extent. However, risk factors in the military community were known to show a correlation with domestic abuse and barriers to disclosing abuse and seeking support. The Ministry of Defence Domestic Abuse Strategy 2018-2023 promised to develop a culture of support that would not tolerate domestic abuse and would ensure access to high quality services.

Loneliness

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 and the inability to plan family holidays and special occasions; and a lack of a peer group support locally all have a cumulative impact which could add to feelings of loneliness and social isolation for the partner left at home. Partners were keen to explain that loneliness and isolation could lead to ill-health and relationship breakdown and vice versa. The sense of social isolation was more evident in all three Services among families who were living away from a base. Moreover, the Armed Forces culture clearly promoted self-sufficiency which in itself could mitigate against Serving and non-serving partners admitting to feeling lonely or isolated and seeking appropriate help and support.

Welfare support

When families were well-cared for in the military community, Serving personnel were more likely to concentrate on their jobs when deployed or away from their families, and more likely to stay in the Armed Forces. The provision of welfare support was considered to be core Armed Forces business. While the Tri-Service Welfare Policy set out important principles and provided guidance for Commanding Officers and welfare specialists across all three Services, each of the three Services had its own way of delivering welfare support to Serving personnel and to their families. Whatever the model of welfare provision offered by each Service, a recurring theme throughout the *Living in Our Shoes* review was the reticence of both Serving personnel and their partners to seek support for personal issues, especially if it meant going through the Chain of Command. Stigma appeared to be a large barrier to seeking help for loneliness and social isolation in both the general population and in the military community. Many Service families believed that they should cope on their own

and be self-sufficient. Furthermore, 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 was that engaging with welfare staff would reflect negatively on the Serving person and may negatively influence decisions about promotion.

The review team heard a mixed response to the quality of welfare services being provided. Non-serving partners living away from military bases were particularly critical of the lack of support they received. There was general agreement that an integrated model of welfare provision and support for families which brought together the military and public services, voluntary groups, schools and businesses in the local community, was essential and by far the best way forward. This was expected to increase the sense of belonging and reduce the isolation that families could feel. Welfare officers accepted that the military needed to be smarter in ensuring greater mental health awareness and training for as many people as possible so that they understood the signs of mental ill-health and encouraged people to seek help early.

New models of welfare support

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 said that they would welcome a more pro-active approach to support.

The review suggested that 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. It was suggested that traditional models of welfare might not be fit for purpose in future, and a more professional, inclusive and tailored set of support services would need to be available if families were to feel valued, protected and willing to stay in the military. The changing nature of family life and relationships and the expectations of modern families suggested that a more coherent model of welfare support across the Armed Forces was necessary. The Tri-Service Specialist Welfare Agreement endorsed the ability for welfare to be provided across the Armed Forces.

Living in Our Shoes Recommendations relating to the duty of care

The review made nine recommendations relating to the provision of support for military families. In the short term these included:

- taking a pro-active approach to supporting families and preventing relationship breakdown, ensuring early intervention for all families
- giving every family information about the potential stressors on family relationships before, during and after deployment, and about the support available
- aiding the retention of dual-serving couples, and ensuring liaison between career managers to manage work requirements and deployments to minimise relationship stress
- setting up a confidential helpline for children and young people in military families
- increasing awareness in the Chain of Command of factors which increase loneliness and social isolation

The Government Response to these recommendations

Government accepted six recommendations in full and three in part.

There was a commitment to take actions that would:

- refresh the Families Strategy in order to:
 - ensure the provision of timely information and support
 - consider options to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, with input from external experts
 - improve coherence and greater integration of support and the use of technology
 - ensure greater awareness of loneliness and isolation, and

Living in Our Shoes Recommendations relating to the duty of care

and pro-actively reaching out to families who are especially vulnerable

- ensuring Serving personnel and their partners are aware of the confidential support available for those experiencing intimate-partner violence, domestic abuse and stalking
- ensuring there are no gaps in welfare support when families relocate, irrespective of whether they live on the patch or are dispersed
- breaking down barriers and reducing stigma to seeking help
- undertaking research to better understand the incidence and nature of intimate-partner violence and domestic abuse in Serving military families.

In the medium term, recommendations related to:

- integrating specialist welfare support with deployed units and providing better coordinated support across the Armed Forces community
- refreshing the Tri-Service Welfare Policy to encourage a more integrated and pro-active approach to include prevention, early-intervention and specialist support, establishing a more coherent, consistent Tri-Service offer of support
- realising the benefits of greater harmony across the three single Services and a Defence-wide approach to specialist welfare provision

In the longer term a recommendation was made to:

- establish a Defence Case Management Information System to ensure continued support for all military personnel and their families across a military career.

The Government Response to these recommendations

enable grants from the new Armed Forces Covenant Fund programme

- improve career management and liaison between the three Services, and recommend joint career reviews for dual-serving couples
- develop a whole Service approach to domestic abuse, and review training requirements
- offer welfare support to all families, break down stigma, use technology as business as usual, and proactively engage with families
- explore early options to establish a Defence Case Management Information System across the three Services
- conduct research to understand domestic abuse within the military context.

Small Acts of Kindness

Throughout the *Living in Our Shoes* report examples of good practice and innovative projects to support the Armed Forces community in the UK and in other countries were highlighted and described in detail. Nevertheless, despite the plethora of provision for Serving personnel and families, much of it offered by external partners, the review noted considerable confusion and ignorance among military families about the help on offer and where and how to seek it.

The role of the charitable sector

In 2014 some 2,200 Armed Forces charities existed in the UK. In 2020 in the UK, some 400 Armed Forces charities were still providing welfare support. With such a broad range of charities, collaboration and co-ordination was clearly a challenge. Many of these charities did not offer a nationwide service, some were very specific to one of the single Services, and many had overlapping remits. For example, some 76 Armed Forces charities were providing support for mental health issues, 43 charities offered support for depression and anxiety, and 33 supported those suffering from substance misuse. During the review the team looked closely at the support offered by some of the charities and described this in detail in the report. While the Confederation of Service Charities (COBSEO) provided a single point of contact with government and the devolved

administrations, it seemed to be virtually impossible for Serving personnel and their families to be fully cognisant of the charities and organisations that were available to help them.

The review highlighted the variation in provision between the three single Services and concluded that collaboration should be a key principle of best practice and, through greater cross-sector collaboration, Armed Forces charities could benefit from shared resources and knowledge, and could significantly improve referral pathways for military families.

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT) was established in 2015. By the end of March 2020 it had distributed £50m, supporting a range of programmes throughout the military community, many directed specifically at support for veterans, but with limited evaluations having been conducted as to the outcomes, effectiveness and sustainability. In the early years of the Fund there was no systematic way for the learning from the projects to be disseminated and best practice identified. At the time of the review, an Outcomes Measurement Framework developed in the US for work with veterans had been introduced with considerable work required to develop a comprehensive evaluation toolkit for the future. The review suggested that through increased collaborative inter-country research a greater understanding of ‘what works’ to support Service families would be forthcoming, and that the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust should play a pivotal role in funding innovative interventions and in coordinating support throughout the Armed Forces.

Making a difference

Small acts of kindness can make a significant positive difference in the lives of Armed Forces families. Ensuring a welcoming letter when a family move location, reaching out to ensure families are not isolated, making sure that families are invited to ceremonies and included in military events wherever possible, and simply saying ‘thank you’ to family members for their support and sacrifices, were hugely appreciated. Most of these small acts of kindness did not require significant financial investment, but a change of culture within the military community to recognise and value families in as many ways as possible. The greater public acknowledgment of the importance of military families and gratitude expressed for those in the Armed Forces was highlighted by those who had served abroad, especially in the US and Australia.

Living in Our Shoes Recommendations to offer greater support

The report made seven recommendations. In the short term, these included actions 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 help-seeking
- encourage greater coordination of support services and the long-term sustainability of effective interventions
- encourage greater support for military children and strengthen the delivery of the Defence Youth Offer
- ensure that children can access specialist, confidential counselling
- promote small acts of kindness to ensure that Armed Forces personnel and their families feel valued.

In the medium term, the review recommended actions:

The Government response to recommendations for greater support

The Government accepted 4 recommendations in full and 2 in part.

The recommendation aimed at third sector organisations to cooperate, collaborate and share resources was referred to the charity sector.

The commitment from government was to take actions to:

- continue to foster good relationships with the charitable sector in the provision of through life support, underpinned by the Service Charities Board, COBSEO and the AFCFT

Living in Our Shoes Recommendations to offer greater support

- promoting pro-active support to enhance wellbeing through a family centre/family hub on every military base
- developing support through webinars and Apps
- breaking down barriers to help-seeking by reaching out to families and making it acceptable to ask for help
- encouraging charities and organisations to collaborate reduce complexity; and ensure clear referral pathways to provide better coordinated support
- establishing a separate dedicated Serving Families Gateway

The review also made recommendations about the need for further research and appropriate evaluation:

- the AFCFT to support the use of robust, validated and appropriate evaluation tools to measure outcomes, benefits and the effectiveness attributable to each project; ensure learning and best practice are widely disseminated; build a directory of evidence as to 'what works' in supporting military families
- encourage research into the effectiveness of early intervention programmes which aim to enhance wellbeing and prevent relationship breakdown
- encourage international research to build the evidence base of 'what works' in providing welfare support and learn from effective welfare approaches elsewhere

The Government response to recommendations for greater support

- improve evaluation of initiatives supported by the AFCFT and share best practice
- learn from welfare support elsewhere and through the Five Eyes partners
- strengthen the Defence Youth Offer through the Defence Children and Young People Plan, develop youth voice forums and hear the voices of young people at all levels, and ensure the three Services continue to provide support to children and young people
- encourage small acts of kindness
- consider ways to help families feel valued, through the Families Action Plan
- develop the Hives to act as a Service Families Gateway

Recruit the Person and Retain the Family

A matter of balance

The *Living in Our Shoes* review concluded that military life offers numerous opportunities as well as specific challenges. Benefiting from these opportunities 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.

Military personnel and their families told the review that the impact of Service life on family and personal life was the top factor influencing decisions about whether to leave the military. While military families fully appreciated that they had to make sacrifices, occasionally the pressures could have unacceptable negative and cumulative impacts on personal relationships and the health and well-being of everyone involved. All military families expected the Serving partner to spend time on deployment, but the length of some deployments, coupled with the uncertainty about when the serving partner would be coming home, all added to family stress. When the balance between the demands of the military and the demands of the family becomes too difficult to sustain, it could result in the family breaking up or leaving the military in order to reduce the strain.

The review concluded that to sustain operational efficiency there must be a national commitment to ensuring that Service families are appropriately valued and supported. The Serving personnel who responded to the review stressed their love for their work, a sentiment endorsed by their spouses/partners and children. Yet their pride in military service could be challenged by the stresses and strains they experienced. It was clear that living in poorly maintained property affected

relationships, the quality of family life and, ultimately, the quality of the work undertaken by the Serving partner. There needed to be more investment to bring the habitable estate up to an acceptable standard, and a serious conversation about just how much Defence accommodation would be required in future.

Feeling valued

The importance of valuing families is central to the purpose of the Armed Forces Covenant. The review indicated that the Armed Forces Covenant 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, recognises the role they play, and the commitment they and their families make to the security of the nation. To reach its potential as a promise to the Armed Forces community, the Covenant needed to be much better understood by everyone in society, and indeed within the Armed Forces community. Furthermore, *Living in Our Shoes* suggested that to be effective the Covenant needed 'more teeth'.

In 2020, Serving personnel frequently referred to a culture in the Armed Forces which did not value its people. If people do not feel valued then they are more likely to leave the military. The review urged that more should be done to bring about a shift in social attitudes in the UK. The respect for veterans had undoubtedly increased but respect for active duty military personnel and their families had a way to go.

Personnel from the Commonwealth and overseas nations

The Armed Forces in the UK have recruited personnel from the Commonwealth and from other countries throughout the last century. These families indicated that they experienced additional challenges, including language difficulties, restricted employment issues for spouses/partners, and social isolation. Moreover, issues relating to immigration, settlement and visas had a profound impact on the individuals concerned. Concerns were regularly expressed about the cost of visas, which could be a significant financial undertaking, and a lack of understanding about the immigration requirements.

There were clear perceptions of unfairness among non-UK Serving personnel, and it was suggested that other issues such as debt, employment, housing and family breakdown could emanate from the pressures of immigration. 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 created. The review understood that Commonwealth families had a low take-up of welfare support, and a more pro-active approach was needed.

Communication

A key aspect of military life that caused immense frustration for Service families, the Chain of Command and welfare staff was the apparent inability of the Armed Forces to communicate directly with family members. Relying on the Service person to pass on messages and information was not only ineffective, because many Serving personnel forgot to do this or the information had become diluted or scrambled when it was delivered but, also, it was disempowering and belittling for spouses/partners to have to receive information from and be 'dependent' on the Serving person. It was clear that this unsatisfactory situation in an era of sophisticated social media and technology needed to be reviewed as a matter of urgency. Families wanted to receive communications directly, and to be treated as independent adults not 'dependents'. The culture and the language needed to change.

Culture change

The review concluded that 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 *Living in Our Shoes* would be addressed constructively and the quality of military family life improved. The Armed Forces were asked to consider carefully whether the operational tempo as it was in 2019/20 was sustainable in the twenty-first century and whether there were better models which would provide greater stability, involve fewer transitions, and still retain operational capability.

The review recommended substantive changes including:

- 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

<i>Living in Our Shoes Recommendations relating to culture change</i>	<i>The Government Response to the recommendations</i>
<p>The review offered fourteen recommendations.</p> <p>In the short term, policy recommendations included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that families are recognised and thanked for their service and commitment whenever possible • fully embracing a range of family structures and removing any disadvantage • applying the government's Family Test and actively considering the impact of all policies on Service families • addressing improvements in communication with families as a key priority • reinvigorating and strengthening the Armed Forces Covenant through legislation, actively promoting it and holding signatories to account, and eliminating real and perceived discrimination • ensuring that children and young people are not disadvantaged in pursuing sport and leisure activities due to frequent relocations • implementing Tri-Service recommendations with an Action Plan to improve information, support and allowances for non-UK personnel <p>In the medium term, policy changes should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • removing the use of demeaning and disempowering terminology, particularly references to non-serving partners/spouses as 'dependents' • reviewing policies about mobility and facilitating greater stability and choice for military families while maintaining operational effectiveness 	<p>Government accepted ten recommendations in full, and four in part, including actions to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore how to ensure families are thanked through a variety of ways • considering how to apply the Family Test to supplement the Families Strategy • improving communications with families as a top priority to improve coherence and be more proactive • amending terminology where possible to reflect modern, inclusive values • placing more focus on building experience and skills in addition to traditional career pathways in the military, balancing stability and career progression where possible • looking further at Harmony Guidelines and easing the pressure and developing a more adaptable workforce model • improving understanding about the offer to Service families and identifying gaps in knowledge • improving support for non-UK Service personnel and their families; reviewing the operation of the Minimum Income

Living in Our Shoes Recommendations relating to culture change

- reviewing the length of deployments and associated training activities, ensuring that Ministry of Defence Harmony Guidelines are adhered to and breached only in unavoidable and exceptional circumstances
- introducing the Armed Forces Covenant in schools and colleges to increase awareness
- reviewing the cost of visas and the settlement process for Commonwealth Service personnel, and reviewing policies relating to the Minimum Income Threshold and settlement requirements
- promoting research to develop a greater understanding of 'what works' to aid recruitment and retention.

The Government Response to the recommendations

- Requirement; and reviewing the cost of visas and settlement processes
- reinvigorating and legislating for the Armed Forces Covenant; and establishing a panel to consider sanctions for those who breach the Covenant
- supporting information about the Covenant, monitoring awareness and setting targets through the Families Strategy
- explaining the role of the Armed Forces within society and developing materials for children.

Leaving the Military

The focus in *Living in Our Shoes* was on Serving personnel and their families. However, a number of families who contributed to the study were planning to leave the military or thinking about whether and when they might do so. The review examined the push and pull factors influencing decisions to leave, and highlighted the support which could render the transition less traumatic. The report argued for a more holistic approach to preparing Serving families for the time they will leave the military community, suggesting that Armed Forces families experience a number of transitions as a result of Service life, and retirement from Service was yet another in a series of transitions. The review highlighted a number of factors which were influencing the decision to leave. Push factors included:

- 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 included:

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

Usually, cumulative factors, all of which were placing stresses on family life and increasing the desire for family stability, had led to the decision to leave the military. For some people there was a cumulative impact of disappointments in respect of spousal/partner employment, the lack of educational stability for children, discontinuity of healthcare, frequent assignments which required moving around, and the multiple separations that were incompatible with a desire to create a stable family life. Family members described a range of emotions about leaving the military 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.

The review suggested that a refreshed Families Strategy could set the principles and objectives for a more holistic approach to transition out of the military which would include consideration of family wellbeing. Experience in other countries and studies elsewhere suggested that military families could be better supported 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; more detailed information about the issues veterans and their families might face; and clearer guidance as to how and where to seek support.

Living in Our Shoes Recommendations relating to transition out of the military

The review made two recommendations. In the short term for:

- transition and resettlement to always include family members to ensure a holistic approach to support before, during and after the Service Leaver has exited the military

And in the medium term for:

- The Ministry of Defence to continue to work with other government departments, local authorities, devolved administrations, 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.

The Government Response to the recommendations

The Government accepted both recommendations and indicated that:

- family inclusion is a central strand of transition policy, and work was ongoing on an engagement strategy that would enable reaching out to families directly, driving improvements in family support
- it would continue to work closely with the single Services, other departments and devolved administrations, and the third sector to ensure a seamless transition out of the military, offering clear pathways to appropriate support, and Life Skills packages to assist in preparation for civilian life.

Concluding Comments

The *Living in Our Shoes* review set out to understand the support needs of military families and to assess whether the current support available to them was meeting their needs. During the review, various aspects of military life that impact on the everyday lived experience of Serving personnel and their families in the three single Services were examined closely. The obligations inherent in military service which put operational efficiency and commitment to 'duty first' as the number one priority were seen to have a unique impact on Armed Forces families. Family stability, however, 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 who contributed to *Living in Our Shoes* experienced a level of mobility and repeated periods of separation that were unparalleled in civilian life, or indeed anywhere else in the public sector, and they lived with the knowledge that their loved ones may face the kind of danger which could 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 demonstrated day after day and their pride in the work they did for the nation was evident throughout the review.

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