

Briefing 4. Tracing the Approach to Armed Forces Families Policy in Defence

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Introduction to the Briefing

Briefings 1, 2 and 3 described the context for the original *Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces Families*² review, summarised its recommendations and reflected on the support available to Armed Forces families in 2020. Given that the current study, *Living in Our Shoes Revisited*,³ will consider the policy response by government to the original review,⁴ it is helpful to understand how government's approach to Armed Forces families policy has developed over time. This Briefing traces the emergence of families policy within the single Services and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) from its origins in the 20th Century through to the present day, culminating in a description of the mechanisms that the MOD developed to respond to the issues highlighted by the original *Living in Our Shoes* review.

The Current Defence People Framework

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) was created in 1946 under an operating model that originally allowed the single Services considerable autonomy. Full integration of the War Office, The Admiralty and the Air Ministry followed in 1964. Reforms introduced in the 1980s led to more effective civilian oversight of the Armed Forces, including a strengthening of the central policy function supporting Ministers. These reforms formed the foundation for further changes during the 1990s and 2000s, aimed in part at strengthening centralised and joint⁵ functions and breaking down single Service silos.

The current Defence governance model for Service personnel was affirmed by Lord Levene in his report on Defence Reform in 2011.⁶ This model aims to strike a balance between the Services' responsibility for managing their people and the need for effective corporate policy. Within this framework the MOD sets overall people policy, including Terms and Conditions of Service and remuneration policy, while the single Services are responsible for personnel planning and career management, including recruitment.

¹ The history of MOD Families Policy has been compiled by Peter Davis, member of the LiOS-R research team. Peter was a Civil Servant in the MOD for over 39 years, including a secondment to NATO and two operational deployments. He worked in the Adjutant General's secretariat in 2003-05, the Army secretariat in 2007-10 and was part of the project team that worked on Army command restructuring in 2011. In 2012-13 he was Deputy Chief Executive of the Service Children's Education Agency and in 2021-23 led the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team in the MOD.

² Walker, J., Selous, A., and Misca, G., (2020) *Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the Needs of UK Armed Forces Families*, MOD.

³ *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* <https://www.fim-trust.org/about/lios/>

⁴ Op.cit.

⁵ i.e. organisations and activities that are conducted by the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force together

⁶ *Defence Reform - an independent report into the structure and management of the Ministry of Defence*, June 2011,

In 2013 the post of *Chief of Defence People* (CDP)⁷ was created within the MOD, partly to give greater weight and focus to the centralised element of this framework, and partly with a view to exploring further opportunities to create a consistent approach to policies and procedures between the Services (for example by driving greater uniformity in transition arrangements and through the creation of a common skills framework).

It is important to emphasise that under this model the single Service Chiefs - the First Sea Lord, the Chief of the General Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff - continue to be responsible for developing and delivering policies related to those personnel matters which continue to be reserved to them. The Service Chiefs also have significant influence on the development of tri-Service personnel policy, partly through their staffs' involvement in the Defence People Leadership Team and through their own presence on the Chiefs of Staff Committee. This influence means, in effect, that no major new policies impacting significantly on single Service interests are likely to be approved without their support.

At the present time the relationship between the single Services and the MOD Head Office is under review once again as part of the current Defence Reform programme.

The Defence Approach to Families Policy

Prior to the early 21st Century, UK Government support to Armed Forces families was confined largely to the emergence and development of the single Service welfare organisations and to the widening network of government-owned schools dedicated to the education of Service children in overseas locations. This began to change in the early 21st Century, partly as a result of the increasing centralisation mentioned above, but also, more specifically, in relation to two separate developments that led to Armed Forces families being recognised as a group deserving of greater consideration in their own right by policy makers: first, the *Every Child Matters*⁸ agenda; and second, developing thinking around the *Armed Forces Covenant*.

Political Developments 2008-2011

In response to growing public interest in and concern for the lives of Service personnel and veterans following four years of counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, in 2007 the then Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, commissioned work with aim of ensuring the fair treatment of Service personnel, their families and veterans. This resulted in a Command Paper entitled *The Nation's Commitment: Cross-Government Support to our Armed Forces, their Families and Veterans*⁹ being presented to Parliament in July 2008. This paper was produced by a team of Service personnel and civil servants. The foreword was co-signed by the then Defence Secretary, Des Browne, and the then Armed Forces Minister, Bob Ainsworth and explains that all government departments had been asked to help determine "*what more could and should be done to demonstrate our commitment to the Armed Forces and our gratitude for their service and sacrifice*". The two ministers go on to describe the objectives of the paper in the following terms:

"First, it is designed to end any disadvantage that armed service imposes on our people, their families, or our veterans. It specifically seeks to counter the difficulties that follow from being required to move around the country or the world, and identifies those areas where

⁷ Originally labelled Chief of Defence Personnel, this post was filled for the first time through competition by Gen Sir Richard Nugee in 2015.

⁸ HM Treasury. (2003) *Every Child Matters*. Cm 5860.

⁹ [The Nation's Commitment: Cross-Government Support to our Armed Forces, their Families and Veterans](#) Cmd7424 July 2008

special treatment is needed to achieve this. Second, the Paper sets out how we can better support and recognise those who have been wounded in the service of their country”.

The paper covered considerable ground. In relation to the families of serving members of the Armed Forces the issues it identified are recognisable today and included access to dental services, retaining places on NHS waiting lists, identifying disadvantage in educational attainment among Service children, ensuring SEN support for children is uninterrupted when families move, closing gaps in the supply of childcare, eliminating disadvantage for foreign and commonwealth (non-UK) families, support for service family members seeking paid employment and communicating better with Armed Forces families.

Production of the paper was assisted by an External Reference Group consisting of representatives from academia, the principal Service charities and the three families federations. The paper envisaged the role of this group continuing into implementation and for its membership to be expanded to include representatives from government. To help ensure delivery, the group was expected to provide annual reports of progress to the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary. These reports were to be made public. In addition, every five years all Government departments and the Devolved Administrations were to undertake a full review of progress. This review was to have been reported to the External Reference Group, the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the leaders of the Devolved Administrations and to be made public.

A year after the Command Paper was produced the MOD issued a consultation paper containing ideas on how to respond to the issues it raised.¹⁰ In the paper’s foreword, the then Defence Secretary, Bob Ainsworth, express the intention to ‘ensure the principles of no disadvantage and special treatment where appropriate are recognised, understood and upheld at all levels of administration, from policy formation right through to service delivery. The paper introduced four main ideas:

- Imposing a legal duty on Government to conduct the 5-year review committed to in the original command paper
- Establishing a legal duty on public bodies to address disadvantage
- Establishing a charter for the Armed Forces community
- Introducing a Customer Service Excellence standard to ensure public bodies adopt the principles set out in the original Command Paper

The MOD committed to providing a response to the comments it received following this consultation exercise by January 2010, although there is no record of them doing so. The External Reference Group did produce its first and only annual report, in November 2009.¹¹ This paper recorded progress towards implementing the commitments in the original Command Paper, emphasised: the importance of developing mechanisms to assess the impact of the changes introduced, the desirability of considering the scope for further measures, and the need to complete the MOD’s consultation exercise.

At around the same time as the Government was publishing its Command Paper, the Conservative Party established what it called the *Military Covenant Commission*. The resultant report¹² covered similar ground to the Government’s Command Paper and led to the Conservative Party’s 2010 Manifesto commitment to ‘repair the Military Covenant’.

¹⁰ [The Nation’s Commitment to the Armed Forces Community: Consistent and Enduring Support](#) Cm7674, July 2009

¹¹ [The Nation’s Commitment Cross-Government Support to our Armed Forces, their Families and Veterans](#) External Reference Group Annual Report 2009

¹² [The Health of the Covenant - an interim paper from the Military Covenant Commission](#), undated

The Emergence of Armed Forces Covenant

The idea of a Covenant between the nation and those who risk their lives to defend it was not new. Reference to the Military Covenant can be found in Queen's Regulations for the Army at least as early as 1996. A more expansive description of the Covenant as a 'mutual obligation' between the nation and the Army appeared four years later in *Army Doctrine Publication Volume 5: Soldiering*.¹³ The Military Covenant Commission recommended that this should be written into tri-Service doctrine and be expanded to explicitly cover veterans.

With the election of the Coalition Government in May 2008 political attention appears to have moved away from the mechanisms established by the previous Government, including the work of the External Reference Group. Some of the same ideas were, however, retained. The *Armed Forces Act 2011* included an obligation on the Defence Secretary to produce an annual report on the Armed Forces Covenant, which must pay particular regard to the '*principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for service people from membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces*'.

The *Armed Forces Covenant* was first published in May 2011¹⁴. In addition to covering 'those who have served in the past' it explicitly recognises the role that families play in supporting operational effectiveness.

'The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfil that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty.'

Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families. They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment. Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved

*This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.'*¹⁵

The Armed Forces Covenant has continued to be a key document defining the principle of 'no disadvantage' and providing a blueprint for ensuring fair treatment of the Armed Forces and their families. 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.

¹³ [Soldiering - The military covenant: ADP Volume 5 , February 2000](#)

¹⁴ [The Armed Forces Covenant](#) May 2011

¹⁵ *ibid* p1

Every Child Matters and the Creation of a Director of Children and Young People (DCYP)

The *Every Child Matters* initiative was launched by the Blair government in 2003 mainly in response to the death of Victoria Climbié. Every Child Matters aimed to improve the overall well-being of children and led to various local authority governance reforms, including the creation of a Director of Children's Services post in every local authority in England to provide a single focus of accountability for education and children's social services. This became a legal requirement in England in 2005, following the Children Act 2004.

At this time, the leadership and management of MOD schools in overseas locations was the responsibility of the *Service Children's Education agency*¹⁶ (SCE). Although SCE supported all three Services, as well as the children of MOD civilians posted abroad, for largely historical reasons, SCE was managed by the Army under what is known as a 'lead service' arrangement, and, in organisational terms, was 'owned' by the *Adjutant General* (AG). SCE was headquartered in Germany, where the majority of MOD schools were located at that time.

Being an arm of central government, Defence did not fall within the scope of the Children Act. However, the 2008 Command Paper committed the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)¹⁷ to:

'continue to work together to ensure the basis of England's Every Child Matters agenda is delivered for Service families.'

In light of this, in 2009 the then AG, Lt Gen Mark Mans, concluded that in respect of its responsibilities to the children of Armed Forces personnel being educated within its overseas schools, Defence and, more particularly, the Army, had responsibilities that were analogous to those of a local authority. In view of this, Lt Gen Mans concluded that the Army should follow the spirit of Every Child Matters by creating a Director of Children's Services post to provide a focus for risk management and a single point of accountability.

This new post in Defence was designated the *Director of Children and Young People* (DCYP) and its terms of reference included the responsibilities of the Chief Executive of SCE. The post came into being in 2011 and was filled initially by a person with extensive experience of the delivery of children's services within local authorities, supported by a small staff based in Andover. In 2013 SCE was disestablished as an executive agency and all MOD schools were brought under the direct management of DCYP, based at Upavon in Wiltshire.

In the following years the DCYP post evolved significantly in terms of scope and ambition. The absorption of former SCE headquarters elements – which eventually relocated to Upavon following the closure of the majority of MOD schools in Germany – provided some additional capacity. New teams were also created, most notably to provide a focus for children's safeguarding, to provide for effective engagement and advocacy across government in support of the interests of Service children throughout the UK and, latterly, to provide the capacity and expertise to respond to growing political interest in creating Defence-wide policies to help meet the childcare needs of Armed Forces families.

¹⁶ Executive agencies are governmental organisations, established with a degree of independence from their owning departments in order to encourage innovation and the development excellence in service delivery, free from unnecessary and excessive interference.

¹⁷ The equivalent of today's Department for Education

The Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015

The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review of 2015¹⁸ included a commitment to *'ensure that a career in the Armed Forces can be balanced better with family life'* and to *'make the changes necessary to enable our Armed Forces to work flexibly, reflecting the realities of modern life'*. The Strategy also included a commitment to develop a new accommodation offer to help more Service personnel live in private accommodation and meet their aspirations for home ownership. These commitments influenced policy making for years to come, in particular in relation to accommodation, where it led to the creation of what became the *'Future Accommodation Model'* project (later renamed as the *Modernised Accommodation Offer*) and to policy initiatives such as *Forces Help to Buy*. Accommodation policy was also the first area where a commitment was made to broaden entitlement to reflect the increasing societal trend away from marriage and civil partnerships and towards long-term cohabitation as the relationship of choice. This commitment was subsequently formalised in the *Defence Accommodation Strategy 2022*.¹⁹

The Review also committed the MOD to *'launching the first comprehensive families strategy for the Armed Forces, doing more on spousal employment, healthcare and children's education'*.

Developments in the Defence People Team and the First Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016-2020

The developments in the Covenant required the MOD to engage with other parts of the UK government, the devolved administrations, and the principal Service charities to co-ordinate actions aimed at removing disadvantage to serving personnel, veterans and their families. This co-ordination task fell to the *Armed Forces People Support* team within *CDP's Defence People Team*, as did the task of developing and publishing the new strategy for Armed Forces families

The purpose of the *Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016-2020*²⁰ was to provide direction to policy officials who would develop a supporting Action Plan, convene the necessary coordinating bodies, and oversee a communications plan to inform Service families about actions taken. The Strategy avoided a single definition of the Service 'family' but indicated that it should extend beyond those family members formally recognised through entitlement. A subsequent Action Plan set out the priorities for 2018-2020 and key targets and timelines for achieving them. The strategy recognised and valued 'the essential contribution' that Service families make to Defence, and talked about developing an 'accessible and flexible' offer specifically to families, underpinned by a clear vision:

*'Resilient, empowered, thriving Service families, who are treated fairly, have increased choice, and who are valued by the Nation.'*²¹

At this point, DCYP remained pre-eminent in policy relating to children's education and childcare and, as such, played a significant supporting role in activity related to both the Covenant and Families Strategy implementation. When in late 2019 the then Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, asked for options for improving support for Armed Forces parents with pre-school age children, it was therefore DCYP which led on this work and which subsequently established a team to develop the chosen option of wraparound childcare.

¹⁸ National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom, November 2015 - ISBN 9781474125956

¹⁹ Ministry of Defence (2015) *UK Armed Forces Defence Accommodation Strategy* - ISBN 978-1-5286-3192-1

²⁰ [UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016](#)

²¹ *ibid* p2

The “*Living in Our Shoes*” Review 2019-2020

In January 2019, the then Defence Secretary, The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE MP, commissioned Andrew Selous MP to conduct an independent review to consider the diverse needs of Service families, assess whether the current support offer is meeting these needs, and make recommendations accordingly. The review team delivered their report on 30 June 2020 under the title ‘*Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the needs of Armed Forces Families*’.²² Over the previous 18 months, the team had consulted widely with the MOD and other government departments, the devolved administrations, the three single Services, the Third Sector, schools, and other agencies delivering support for Service families, as well as Serving personnel and their families, including children and young people.

The full report provided detailed discussion of the areas of military life which have the greatest impact on families: accommodation; the employment of non-serving partners; the education and wellbeing of children growing up in a military family; health and social care for family members; and the tensions between Service life and family life and relationships. The report also considered the level of support that was currently available for Armed Forces families via the government, the single services and the charitable sector, highlighting the gaps and challenges in provision.

The review team were committed to developing constructive recommendations that could influence and guide changes in policy and practice in order to meet the identified needs of Armed Forces families. To that end, the team indicated to the MOD the recommendations they intended to develop as the evidence was being assembled in summer 2019. In the subsequent months, as the report was written, close engagement with the MOD, other government departments and the devolved administrations, ensured factual accuracy and, as the recommendations were refined, that they were presented in a way that would be helpful and immediately relevant for policy-makers and for practitioners supporting Armed Forces families. *Living in Our Shoes* contained over 250 pages of evidence and 110 recommendations – 82 for the MOD and the Armed Forces, 16 for other parts of government, one for the charitable sector and one specifically for the Prime Minister. The government published its response to the review in 2021, accepting the vast majority of the recommendations.²³

Living in Our Shoes was and remains the most comprehensive study into the needs of UK Armed Forces families conducted in the UK. Its publication coincided with the ‘expiry’ of the original Armed Forces Families Strategy and provided the opportunity to inject fresh energy into families policy by constructing a more ambitious and evidence led strategy.

The 2019 Review of DCYP and its Ramifications

In 2019, while the *Living in Our Shoes* review was taking place, the then Commander Home Command (CHC)²⁴, Lt Gen Tyrone Urch, became concerned that he was not in a position to effectively manage certain risks arising from his responsibilities for Defence children and young people. He therefore asked the MOD to commission and oversee a review to examine the governance arrangements for children and young people issues across Defence as a whole. This review recommended that DCYP should no longer be responsible for policy issues relating to children and young people on the grounds that this was a MOD function that conflicted with

²² Walker, Selous and Misca, op.cit.

²³ See Briefings 1,2 and 3 <https://www.fim-trust.org/about/lios/briefings/>

²⁴ In 2015 the Adjutant General post was removed and its responsibilities were absorbed into the new post of Commander Personnel and Support Command. This later became Commander Home Command.

DCYP's responsibilities for service delivery through MOD schools. Subsequently, on 1 April 2021, DCYP's policy responsibilities were transferred, along with around 20 posts, to the Defence People Team, where they joined existing families policy staff to form the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team.²⁵ The scope of this new team included:

- Responsibility for developing a new Armed Forces Families Strategy and overseeing its implementation
- Direct responsibility for the children and childcare agendas it inherited from DCYP
- Responsibility for the overall co-ordination of the families policy agenda, including aspects of policy led by other staff within CDP's area, and those areas of policy where the single Services remained in the lead
- The implied task of resourcing those areas of families policy flagged by *Living in Our Shoes* that had received scant previous attention from policy makers (for example policies relating to dual-serving couples).

The Integrated Review of 2021

Service families were again explicitly referenced in the Defence Command Paper, '*Defence in a Competitive Age*', published on 22 March 2021²⁶ as the MOD's contribution to the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy of that year. This review described Service families as being '*at the very heart of the Armed Forces community*' and announced the intention as part of '*a revised Families Strategy*', to '*introduce measures to ease the burden for parents who might be deployed at short notice*', including a commitment to implement the Wraparound Childcare project.²⁷ In practice, work on the new Families Strategy was already well under way within the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding team. Following extensive consultation the strategy was published in January 2022.

The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032

In line with its predecessor, the Armed Forces Strategy 2022-2032 was created with the intention of providing a clear sense of ambition and establishing a robust mechanism for driving activity to achieve this vision within the strategy's 10-year timeframe. Under the strategy, eight work streams were established within a defined governance framework. The work streams conformed broadly to the themes of the *Living in Our Shoes* report. A named official was subsequently appointed to lead each work stream, with the following responsibilities:

- Shaping their element of the Armed Force Families Plan so that it delivers the outcome described in the Strategy and supports the achievement of the overall Strategy vision
- Ensuring timely delivery of supporting actions
- Establishing and maintaining effective collaboration to deliver these actions, with stakeholders across central government, in the devolved administrations and in the charitable sector, as appropriate
- Establishing an effective framework for measuring success in achieving the outcome ascribed to the work stream
- Ensuring that work stream initiatives are communicated effectively to families.

²⁵ The remainder of DCYP remained within the Army and was retitled Defence Children's Services

²⁶ Ministry of Defence (2021), *Defence in a competitive age*; ISBN 978-1-5286-2462-6

²⁷ Thus honouring a Conservative Party Manifesto commitment from 2019

The leaders were given wide discretion over how they organised their work stream and were encouraged to use existing work structures and measures of success, where these already existed. Their letter of appointment explained that they were accountable for the delivery of their work stream outputs to the Head of the Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding Team, who was in turn accountable for the delivery of the Strategy to the senior leadership group in the Defence People Team and to Ministers, to whom regular reports would be made. Progress on the implementation of the Strategy was to be reported to Parliament as part of the Covenant Annual Report.²⁸ In a further strengthening of governance the MOD subsequently invited two co-authors of the *Living in Our Shoes* report (Walker and Misca) to act as advisers to implementation.

The Prominence of Service Families in Defence Strategy Today

At the beginning of 2022 the Government commissioned a review of the incentivisation of UK Armed Forces personnel. The resultant report²⁹ was published June 2023 and has become known as the *Haythornthwaite Review into Armed Forces Incentivisation (HRAFI)*. HRAFI had much to say about families including that *'there should be more explicit consideration of the family unit within the overall offer'*. A dedicated section on families contained recommendations on accommodation policy, flexible working, support to Service partners working overseas, creating a system for *'conversations that matter'* and encourage more action around key family moments. The report also commented on single Service posting mechanisms that drive people to move jobs at short notice which can damage families and job satisfaction, leaving the Armed Forces Covenant and family policies to try to recover that damage rather than reduce or stop it in the first place.

The MOD's formal response to HRAFI is still awaited and its status within the MOD remains unclear, although a public commitment has been made to implementing two of its major recommendations concerning reward and career design.

The latest Defence People Strategy³⁰ (2024) refers briefly to the Armed Forces Families Strategy as a mechanism for supporting *'fair access for the Armed Forces community to accommodation, education, employment and healthcare'*. It also lists the families strategy as a key line of transformational activity supporting a strategic objective to deliver attractive and affordable offers. It is unclear what prominence, if any, will be afforded to Service families in the people related aspects of the current Strategic Defence Review due to be published in 2025. Nor is it clear what impact the latest Defence reform initiative will have on the relationship between the single Services and the MOD Head Office, and on responsibilities for the development and co-ordination of Defence people policies in general.

The Proposal to Establish the Post of Armed Forces Commissioner

The Labour Party pledged in its 2024 general election manifesto to establish an independent *Armed Forces Commissioner* to 'improve service life'. Introducing the legislation in the 2024 King's Speech, the government cited record lows in morale and a crisis in recruitment and retention as driving the need for a 'strong, independent voice' to represent the needs of service personnel and their families.

²⁸ Annual Covenant Reports have been published each year but progress on the implementation of the strategy ceased to be included in 2024.

²⁹ Haythornthwaite, R., (2023) [Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era A review of UK Armed Forces Incentivisation](#)

³⁰ MOD (2024) Defence People Strategy 2024 – Internal document

The Government has indicated that the Commissioner will be a direct point of contact for Serving personnel and their families, who will be able to raise concerns that may impact on their service lives and their ability to serve, including medical care, childcare and support for non-serving partners in work. The Bill to establish this new role is currently going through Parliament. Although the Bill is light on detail its potential to add agency to families in terms of their ability to raise concerns in a direct and visible way, with the expectation that these will be addressed, is significant. We will pay close attention to the proposed role of the Commissioner and how this will ensure appropriate support for Armed Forces families during the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* review.

Concluding Comments

Over the last 17 years or more, the importance of considering the needs of Armed Forces families has lodged itself into both the political and Defence consciousness. Since 2008, successive Governments have committed to doing more to meet these needs. Some of these commitments have endured and others have not.

Serving families feature prominently in the still developing Armed Forces Covenant agenda and have been highlighted in two successive strategic reviews of Defence. Over the years, the MOD has produced two Armed Forces Families Strategies, has created a discrete families policy development capacity within its Defence People Team, and its current Defence People Strategy recognises explicitly the connection between families' concerns, the challenge of balancing family life with the demands of service life and the mantra of 'duty first', and retention.

Over time, many explicit recommendations have been made to encourage changes in policy, practice and culture which would offer some remedies to the challenges identified. Partly in response to these suggestions, a considerable number of changes have been introduced. While these can be named and counted, their impact on the lives of Armed Forces families is harder to measure and feedback from Armed Forces personnel and their families via the annual continuous attitude surveys³¹ continues to indicate that there is more work to be done.

This is a complex area of policy that straddles various elements of central, devolved and local government, and has to take account of the varying cultures and long-held traditions of the three single Services. How governments have responded to the challenge of effective policy making in this context and the extent to which they have lived up to their own public commitments in this regard is a central consideration of *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* at a time of increased geo-political uncertainty.

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³¹ AFCAS and FamCAS