

Briefing 6. ‘Think Family’: Supporting Operational Capability in Defence

Prof J. Walker and Dr G Misca - *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* Research Team

Introduction to Briefing 6

Living in Our Shoes Revisited was designed as an iterative study in two interdependent phases: Briefings 1, 2, 3 and 4 provide background evidence for Phase One of the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* study.¹ Briefing 5 summarises the findings and recommendations from Phase One.²

Briefing 6 sets the context for Phase Two and describes the research focus and activities to be undertaken.

‘Think Family’: The Context for Phase Two

‘The whole of defence must change how it supports the Armed Forces as part of a more flexible policy response’.³

What Phase One Evidence Tells Us: Progress not Transformation

Phase One reviewed the progress made in meeting the needs of Armed Forces families highlighted in the 2020 *Living in Our Shoes* report,⁴ and the extent to which the recommendations had been implemented.

The review found that while meaningful progress has been made in a number of areas, many of the core challenges for families continue. These include potential disadvantage linked to mobility, childcare, education, partner careers, access to health care, housing, and inconsistent policies and variations in delivery across the nations of the UK and overseas.

Moreover, the evidence indicated that the current model of meeting the needs of Armed Forces families through a discrete Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032⁵ is not delivering the

¹ *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* <https://www.fim-trust.org/about/lios/>

² Walker, J., & Misca, G. (2026). *Living in Our Shoes Revisited: Phase One Report*. University of Birmingham. <https://doi.org/10.25500/pure.bham.283584888> ;

Walker, J., & Misca, G. (2026). *Living in Our Shoes Revisited: Summary of Phase One Report*. University of Birmingham. <https://doi.org/10.25500/pure.bham.288529520>

³ Strategic Defence Review 2025

⁴ Walker, J., Selous, A., and Misca, G., (2020) *Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the Needs of UK Armed Forces Families*, MOD

⁵ UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-armed-forces-families-strategy-2022-to-2032>

transformational change envisaged by the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) 2025⁶ and the requirements of more flexible, integrated war-readiness in Defence.

The Phase One policy review, system-level analysis and high-level stakeholder engagement provided the evidence for an over-arching recommendation to implement a fundamentally different 'Think Family' approach to meet the needs of the whole Armed Forces community: To be optimally effective, family considerations need to be embedded within all Defence people policies. The Phase One report lists 15 recommendations to support this over-arching recommendation and address ongoing concerns.

Why 'Think Family' Matters Now: Geopolitical Uncertainty

While 'Think Family' has gained traction among senior stakeholders, it is not yet operationalised at a time when current global geopolitical uncertainty demands continuous war-readiness and sustained high operational tempo, creating a qualitatively different set of pressures for Armed Forces families who may experience chronic uncertainty, short-notice tasking, reduced recovery time and frequent disruption to everyday life. The impacts are compounded for children and young people who may experience repeated emotional disruption and heightened anxiety. These may be disproportionately felt by children living in single-Serving parent households, with dual-Serving parents, or in families living remotely from informal support networks or military bases. Evidence suggests that it is unpredictability, rather than separation itself, that is most damaging to families' coping, resilience and wellbeing. Reduced opportunities for restorative family time can erode relationship quality, parenting capacity and overall wellbeing

There is currently no shared understanding of how a 'Think Family' approach should inform decision-making or how it should be applied consistently across policy, commands and delivery contexts. Nor is there sufficient empirical evidence aligned with the realities and diversity of contemporary Armed Forces families to inform its implementation. Moreover, the impacts of a heightened focus on war-readiness and a sustained demanding operational tempo on family life and relationships are not well researched. They nevertheless operate as cross-cutting risk factors, potentially generating cumulative disadvantage with direct implications for operational readiness and retention.

Operationalising 'Think Family' in Defence: Phase Two Research

Phase Two Aims

Phase Two of the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* study is designed to support operationalisation of the 'Think Family' approach within Defence people policy and practice. It focuses on undertaking new, in-depth empirical research, building directly on the findings and recommendations of Phase One and an understanding of geopolitical uncertainty, in order to:

- explore what "Think Family" means in practice across Defence people policy, Single services and organisations supporting Armed Forces families.
- generate new empirical evidence to underpin the translation of a "Think family" approach in policy and practice.
- explore emerging pressures on Armed Forces families linked to sustained high operational tempo.
- identify key family related retention risks and "crunch points" across family life-course and military career span.
- deliver actionable (co produced) recommendations.

⁶ The Strategic Defence Review 2025: Making Britain Safer, secure at home, strong abroad.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad>

Gathering Empirical Evidence: Call for Support from the Armed Forces Community and Stakeholders

Phase Two depends on the engagement of the Armed Forces community and its stakeholders. A **call for evidence** will seek to clarify what 'Think Family' means in practice, where retention and readiness risks arise, and the changes needed to better support military families of all shapes and sizes throughout different military careers.

During summer 2026 the invitation to participate will be shared through the Families Federations, the single Services and military charities, and is open to:

Armed Forces families: Serving personnel including single-Serving parents and dual-Serving couples; non-Serving partners and parents; and children and young people growing up in a military family.

Stakeholders and professionals: Senior personnel from the three Services and CSoc; Families Federations; chaplains; MOD people policy officials; relevant policy leads in other government departments, local authorities and devolved administrations; and third sector Armed Forces charities.

The aim is to achieve broad reach and capture variations in experiences and perspectives.

Data from the call for evidence will be supplemented as necessary with

- a small number of targeted interviews and/or focus groups to enable deeper exploration of lived experience to understand the impact of policy-reality gaps experienced by Armed Forces families
- secondary data analysis in collaboration with MOD officials and the single Services to triangulate evidence from other sources relating to reported pressures on family life
- Single-Service case studies examining how each Service is interpreting "Think Family" in practice, responding to current operational tempo
- the identification of transferable examples of good practice.

A rapid research and policy review will inform empirical data collection, interview guides and data analysis frameworks.

Tracking the Impact of Phase One and Building Policy Traction

Throughout Phase Two we will track the progress, barriers and emerging impacts of Phase One recommendations and ensure Phase Two evidence is connected to live policy processes and supports implementation of a 'Think Family' approach. Two structured research panels will be established to support and validate interpretations from the data; test the feasibility of Phase Two recommendations; and build policy traction and pathways to impact.

Synthesis and Reporting

During the final six months of Phase Two we will integrate the qualitative and quantitative evidence collected, triangulate the data to: validate the findings with MOD and reference groups; develop final recommendations in consultation with key stakeholders; and draft the final project report. The study aims to be completed in April 2027.

How to Contact the Research Team

We are keen to engage with as many members of the Armed Forces community as possible during Phase Two. The link to the online Call for Evidence will be posted on this website and shared with Families Federations, Cobseo, and Armed Forces charities. The research team can be contacted via email: lios-r@outlook.com

Cite as:

Walker, J., and Misca, G. (2026) *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* - Briefing 6: '*Think Family*': *Supporting Operational Capability in Defence*. DOI: <http://doi.org/lios-r/brief6>. Available: <https://www.fim-trust.org/about/lios/>

[Living in Our Shoes Revisited Project](#) is funded by FiMT. The views expressed are those of the authors