

## Briefing 5. The Impact of “Living in Our Shoes” Five Years On: Phase One Report

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

### Introduction to Briefing 5

*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.<sup>1</sup>

Briefing 5 provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations in the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* Phase One Report.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction to the *Living in Our Shoes Revisited* Phase One Report

In 2020 ‘*Living in Our Shoes*’<sup>3</sup> documented the lived experiences of men, women and children within the UK Armed Forces community, using their voices to understand and portray what it is like to be a Serving military family in the twenty-first century. The review highlighted the challenges for families in balancing military life with family life when operational effectiveness must be the number one priority, and made 110 recommendations to address them.

In autumn 2024 Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) funded ‘*Living in Our Shoes Revisited*’, to consider the progress made to resolve the concerns raised in 2020 and implement the recommendations (Phase One), and to generate robust up-to-date evidence which will assist policy-makers to meet the needs of Serving personnel such that they and their families feel valued and remain committed to serving the nation (Phase Two). The overall objective is to offer a constructive and timely contribution to the thinking that underpins the changes being embarked upon in a new era for Defence and the implementation of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) 2025.<sup>4</sup>

### Assessing Progress Since 2020

In 2020 the key concerns raised by families across all three Services, The Royal Navy, the British Army and the Royal Air Force related to:

---

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

<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> Walker, J., Selous, A., and Misca, G., (2020) *Living in Our Shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces Families*, MOD. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-our-shoes-understanding-the-needs-of-uk-armed-forces-families>; see *Living in Our Shoes-Revisited Briefings One, Two and Three*, <https://www.fim-trust.org/about/lios/>

<sup>4</sup> 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>

- the poor state of Service Family Accommodation (SFA) and, to a lesser extent, Single Living Accommodation (SLA)
- the high level of family mobility from one location to another, including overseas
- long deployments and the amount of time Serving personnel spend apart from their families
- the impact of mobility and deployments on: children and young people; the employment opportunities and careers of non-serving partners; personal relationships; and the health and well-being of Serving personnel and family members
- families not feeling valued for the sacrifices they make to support Serving personnel and operational readiness.

Many of these concerns were not new. For many years continuous attitude surveys<sup>5</sup> had drawn attention to them and indicated continuing dissatisfaction with Service life. The most common reason given for the decision to leave the military over many years is the impact of Service life on the quality of family life.

Following the publication of *Living in Our Shoes* and the government's response<sup>6</sup>, a new ambitious and comprehensive ten-year Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032 was developed with the aim of providing a vision and a structure to drive lasting change. Evidence in Phase One indicates that much has been achieved in the last five years, although assessing the impact of the changes is not straightforward.

### The Phase One Report:

- notes the current context within which the needs and expectations of Armed Forces families should be considered
- traces the historical development of policies in Defence which have impacted Armed Forces families
- details the progress made since 2020 to meet the identified needs of Armed Forces personnel and their families, with specific reference to the impacts of military life on children, non-serving partners, health and wellbeing, and family relationships
- considers the effectiveness of the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032 as a mechanism to drive change
- indicates the continuing challenges experienced by Armed Forces families
- outlines the opportunities for change heralded by Defence Reform and the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) 2025
- makes 16 recommendations in support of a 'think family' approach to people policy.

### Continuing Challenges

Many of the concerns identified in *Living in Our Shoes* continue to cause disadvantage, disappointment and concern, despite the commitment, goodwill and determination of all those seeking to improve the experience of being a military family. A number of key issues need to be resolved if satisfaction with Service life is to be increased and the negative impacts on family life are to be reduced. These include:

---

<sup>5</sup> Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS) and Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FamCAS)

<sup>6</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>

**Children’s education:** concerns remain in relation to how school moves are managed, and the potential for educational disadvantage for children growing up in Armed Forces families, especially those with additional educational needs.

**Housing:** frustration about delays in delivering the long-promised new approach to the allocation of SFA, coupled with the failure of existing policies to encourage a substantial and enduring increase in home ownership rates.

**Recognising modern relationships:** although changes in family living arrangements have been recognised, Defence people policies have not been updated to reflect the reality of modern relationships, including extending entitlement to couples in long-term relationships in respect of allocation of SFA.

**Partner careers:** despite efforts to provide information about employment opportunities, continuing barriers exist for non-serving partners seeking to build careers and sustain rewarding and fulfilling employment, especially in overseas locations.

**Childcare:** despite progress, there is no comprehensive and joined up approach across Defence to supporting the childcare needs of Armed Forces families.

**Healthcare and dental services:** families continue to find it difficult to register with GPs and dentists and ensure access to continued healthcare when they are required to move location.

**Variations in policies and service provision:** moving between the nations of the UK and to and from overseas can be stressful because of the variations in policies and service provision.

**Communication with families:** communicating directly with family members continues to be a key challenge.

**Joined up working:** closer working between the MOD and Front Line Commands, bringing in the third sector when needed, is needed to agree priorities for action and develop effective policies where MOD has the power to act.

**Cross government collaboration:** the paucity of effective mechanisms, in particular at senior levels, to determine and agree the necessary actions across central, devolved and local government in those aspects of policy delivery where MOD has limited or no agency is a serious impediment to change.

## **Integrating Families Policy: The Need for Change**

Despite the far-reaching vision and good intentions of the Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022 - 2032 the resources and agency to drive the changes needed were often lacking. The evidence indicates that the original model for delivery of families policy via a discrete families strategy team has proved to be extremely challenging and unable to generate the necessary conditions for transformational change. Nor is it likely to be the most appropriate vehicle to respond effectively to the demands of a new era for Defence in which integration, joined up thinking and considering the Defence community as a whole are central tenets, alongside new career options. The evidence indicates that the time is right for a different approach.

All those contributing to the review made strong pleas for a more integrated approach to policy and a better understanding of the whole Armed Forces community within a framework which supports modern families of all shapes and sizes. There is broad agreement that investing in military families is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity.

The vision within the SDR 2025 offers the blueprint for a new approach which acknowledges that:

‘people are fundamental to UK Defence and to delivering the transformation set out in this review.’<sup>7</sup>

To achieve the vision, integration will need to be at the heart of transformation, ensuring families considerations are central to a joined-up approach to people policy development, involving the MOD Department of State and Front Line Commands, and sharing best practice.

Breaking down barriers between the individual Services, between the military and the private sector, and between the Armed Forces and society requires refocusing and strengthening the application of the Armed Forces Covenant, increasing understanding of the role of the military in keeping the nation safe, and building bridges between the Armed Forces community and wider society. Increasing integration, reducing duplication, improving delivery means moving away from a siloed approach to policy implementation, towards increasing integration and cooperation to address the continuing concerns expressed by families, and greater collaboration with and between the third sector in the provision of support.

In summary, the whole of Defence must change how it supports the Armed Forces as part of a more flexible people policy response. An integrated ‘think family’ approach is needed to drive transformational change. A number of questions need to be investigated. These include:

1. Who will be defined as being a family member and how might this definition alter in different contexts?
2. What needs will families experience as career structures change and the scope of the Armed Forces community expands?
3. How will families’ needs vary at different stages in military careers, at different life stages, and in different Services and occupations?
4. What are the tipping points/crunch times for military families in the different Services, at different life stages, and how can they be mitigated?
5. What are the greatest family-related risks to retention across the whole Armed Forces community within the new era for Defence?
6. Having identified the risks, how are they best addressed?
  - Which risks does Defence have the agency to mitigate?
  - Which risks require Defence to work with partners to provide mitigation?
  - Which risks are best addressed by others, including the third sector?
  - How will actions to mitigate all the risks be coordinated?

---

<sup>7</sup> SDR (2025) p64

7. What will be the push and pull factors associated with retention across the whole Armed Forces community and how will these change as a result of new career structures?
8. What mechanisms and processes will be needed to ensure that families concerns are effectively integrated into people policy development to support families and retention?
9. How will responsibility be apportioned for designing these mechanisms and processes and implementing and sustaining them effectively?
10. How will the Department of State and Front Line Commands collaborate to drive integrated Defence people policy?
11. What further evidence is needed to establish a robust link between an integrated people policy and retention, drive change to improve support for families at all stages of a military career and encourage long-term commitment to service in the Armed Forces?

## Phase One High-Level Recommendations

To address the continuing challenges and develop a more integrated approach to families policy, the Phase One report makes a number of high-level recommendations for a ‘think family’ approach to people policy.

### Overarching Recommendation

**Acknowledge the vital role families play at the heart of the Armed Forces Community and apply the principles of the One Defence concept, oversee a fresh approach to addressing their needs and concerns by building family considerations more firmly into decision making, policy development, and cross- government engagement, and accelerate timely implementation.**

### Supporting Recommendations

1. Shift the emphasis away from pursuing family-oriented change through thematically organised specialist work streams within a discrete families strategy and incorporate families’ considerations systematically into all new and refreshed Armed Forces people policies.
2. To support this shift, and as a step towards removing siloed thinking, produce a clear statement, endorsed and championed at the highest levels of Defence People leadership, committing to the delivery of Principal Policy Objectives for all areas of Armed Forces people policy development, including in relation to families, and consider a portfolio approach to policy development.
3. Resolve the inequalities generated by the differing approaches to devolved policy matters impacting Armed Forces families, and ensure no disadvantage accrues from military service in a particular location

### Recommendations Addressing Continuing Concerns

#### *Children and Young People*

4. Work with the Department of Education and the devolved administrations to fundamentally understand the nature and scale of the disadvantage being faced by Service children in education in the UK, in particular those with special educational needs and disabilities, jointly agree the required mitigating actions, and determine MOD’s future contribution to this work.

5. Resolve the position of Defence Children Services in the Defence organisation and its relationship with the MOD Department of State, and provide it with a clear mandate and appropriate resources.

### ***Childcare***

6. Engage with the Front Line Commands to agree Defence’s priority actions in respect of childcare, and devise and implement a consistent and workable approach to the governance of childcare settings on the Defence Estate.

### ***Non-serving Partner Careers and Employment***

7. Engage with the Front Line Commands and the three Service Families Federations to agree Defence’s priority actions in respect of partner employment, and work at pace across MOD organisational boundaries to resolve the legal constraints for non-serving partners who wish to develop and maintain their careers and take paid employment while accompanying Serving personnel to Defence locations abroad.

### ***Health and Wellbeing***

8. Work with Defence Medical Services and the Front Line Commands to consider how families’ needs can be incorporated into a remodelled Defence Health and Wellbeing Strategy and an Action Plan to support the whole Armed Forces community.

### ***Addressing Disadvantage***

9. Identify and share best practice in the four nations of the UK to raise standards and address all areas of disadvantage affecting Armed Forces families.
10. Continue to work across policy team boundaries to identify and resolve unintended policy outcomes which disadvantage dual-serving couples and single Serving parents.
11. Remodel and revitalise the MOD’s strategies for engagement with cross-government stakeholders on Armed Forces Covenant issues, including at senior official and Ministerial levels, and promote awareness of and compliance with the Covenant to remove disadvantage encountered by families across the Armed Forces community.

### ***Communication with Families***

12. **Build on the Families Hub Information Portal and work at pace with the Families Federations and Front Line Commands to identify and implement best practice in establishing direct two-way communications with family members, so that they are better informed, especially about policies that affect them, and to enable their views to be incorporated routinely into the policy development process.**

### ***Research Evidence***

13. Maximise the impact and value delivered by programmes funded by the Armed Forces Families Fund by targeting areas of identified need, employing a rigorous approach to evaluation, and ensuring consistency between programme design and declared Principal Policy Objectives.
14. Ensure that all data collected by the MOD relates to an identified requirement and is appropriately analysed and used to inform policy and practice.
15. Develop and instigate as routine a robust evidence-based approach to people policy making.

Phase Two will explore in more depth the evidence from Phase One, working collaboratively with MOD, MinVP, the three single Services, the three Families Federations and other key stakeholders. Briefing 6 describes the aims, objectives and the activities planned.

Cite as:

Walker, J., and Misca, G. (2026) *Living in Our Shoes* - Briefing 5: The Impact of “Living in Our Shoes” Five Years On: Phase One Report. DOI: <http://doi.org/lios-r/brief5>. 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