



## Defence Sub-Committee

### Oral evidence: Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life, HC 1047

Thursday 4 March 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sarah Atherton (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mr Tobias Ellwood; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-67

#### Witnesses

**I:** Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Diane Allen, author of "Forewarned", and Paula Edwards, Project Lead and Mental Health Therapist, Salute Her.

**II:** Maria Lyle, Director, RAF Families Federation and Anna Wright, CEO, Naval Families Federation.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Lieutenant-Colonel \(Retired\) Diane Allen](#)
- [Forward Assist, Salute Her](#)
- [Naval Families Federation](#)
- [RAF Families Federation](#)



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Diane Allen and Paula Edwards.

**Q1 Chair:** Welcome to the Defence Sub-Committee looking at the experiences faced by women in the Military and female veterans. Following yet another year when women were over-represented in the complaints procedure, we decided to undertake a review of the situation. While it is acknowledged that lots of women have fulfilling Military careers and recommend it to others, as do I, some experiences are negative, and that can have a detrimental effect on their life chances as a civilian. To gain insight into what is going on, we have undertaken data gathering via four routes: 4,106 serving personnel and veterans completed our survey; 76 serving personnel, veterans, academics and organisations have submitted written evidence; 12 serving personnel are due to partake in focus groups; and we have three oral evidence sessions, this being the first. Following evidence gathering, a report will be submitted to the Government around June, highlighting recommendations.

The interest in this Sub-Committee has been immense. I would like to thank each and every participant, female and male, for taking time to inform this inquiry—thank you. I would also like to thank the Secretary of State, Ben Wallace, for lifting the defence instruction notice, allowing us to speak to and receive evidence from female serving personnel, which has meant that 9% of women serving in the Regular Military today have contributed to this inquiry. I would also like to thank the charity Salute Her, of which I am a patron, for providing therapeutic support for participants for whom the process has proved difficult.

I wish to give reassurance that evidence has been anonymised where requested. However, I do ask that witnesses refrain from referring to individuals or ongoing service or legal cases. Thank you.

In our session today, we will set out the scene for exploring the experiences of serving personnel and veterans. We have, in panel one, Lieutenant-Colonel Diane Allen, retired, with over 30 years of service in the Army. She is representing 163 individuals who came to her over the past year since the launch of her book "Forewarned". We also have Paula Edwards, project lead and mental health therapist for the only female tri-service veterans' charity, Salute Her.

Following panel one, we will have representation from the RAF and Royal Navy families' federations with Maria Lyle, director of the RAF Families Federation, who has also served in the RAF, and Anna Wright, CEO of the Naval Families Federation, who served in the Navy. Welcome, all. Diane and Paula, would you like to introduce yourselves and explain your interests and who you represent?

**Diane Allen:** Thank you very much, Chair, for the opportunity. I would like to introduce myself. I actually commissioned as a teenager back in the



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'80s. I did not serve as a full-time Regular for very long—I found the Army at that stage quite sexist, but then so was society—it was very different. I then moved on to a very successful civilian career before rejoining as a Reserve, because I really missed the Military environment. I worked almost full time for the Military again from around 2012, though I found it then a much darker place—a very different environment. Although sexism was not the same—it was not so open—I found it had moved underground. It was much more covert and much darker, and some of the deep pockets of the Military were still deeply sexist.

At the end of that experience in 2017, having experienced my own challenges with sexism, I felt I needed to publish a book—I wrote it down initially as catharsis, but then I published a book. From that, I discovered so many other women were having the same problem. At that stage, I felt I needed to bring it to Parliament's attention, so I was delighted, Chair, with the opportunity you have given us to allow women to speak up. That is why I am here today. Thank you.

**Chair:** Thanks, Diane. Paula?

**Paula Edwards:** Thank you, Chair. My name is Paula Edwards and I feel really privileged to be here today and just to be able to represent the hundreds of women who access my service who have sustained trauma while working for the Military. I have 15 years' experience of working in community mental health teams, crisis assessment teams, in-patient units, research, and working with those who have complex mental health needs and their families. I specialise in suicide prevention and family therapy.

**Chair:** Thanks, Paula. Stuart, would you like to kick off, please?

Q2 **Stuart Anderson:** I would like to welcome you both. Thank you for your service and everything you have done within this community. I am also very saddened to hear of some of the experiences that I know we will touch on later. Diane, we want to set the scene for the rest the evidence session, so please could you give an overview? What was your general view of your years in the Army? You have very extensive service. What is your general feeling of your time within the forces?

**Diane Allen:** I certainly would not want to paint a completely negative picture. I served because I consider it an excellent thing to do. I think service gives women great opportunities. As I say, my position here today is perhaps to look at the darker areas of defence, but my experience in defence has actually been mostly a positive experience, but I feel we have this particular area where women, particularly—the most vulnerable areas of the group—are suffering quite badly. That is probably my experience.

Q3 **Stuart Anderson:** I know we are going to, as you say, go into some more of the negative points, but are you able to expand on some of the positive sides of your service—things that really stood out as great times?

**Diane Allen:** I think so. I think we can honestly say that there has been a huge change. When I joined in the '80s, women had to leave on marriage



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or if pregnant, and in many areas of defence it was not possible for women to have a difference. Women really felt very much separate in the Women's Royal Army Corps; it was a completely separate organisation. That has slowly improved over the years. I think there have indeed been very positive changes. I would not wish to paint it to the panel that serving in the Military is an entirely negative experience.

**Chair:** Thank you, Stuart. Tobias? You are on mute, Tobias. We are having some technical problems today. Can we move on to question 3 while we try to get Tobias back? I call Derek.

**Derek Twigg:** I think I have just about—

**Chair:** Question 3, please, Derek.

**Derek Twigg:** Hello?

**Chair:** Hello, Derek. Could you ask question 3? Okay, we have lost Tobias and Derek.

**Stuart Anderson:** Shall I follow on, Chair, with question 2?

**Chair:** Yes please, Stuart. You do 2, and if we do not get Derek back, I will do 3.

Q4 **Stuart Anderson:** Diane, you mentioned that there had been some progression since you joined up in the '80s. Could you highlight the progression that you have seen in the culture of being welcoming for women in the Armed Forces?

**Diane Allen:** Yes. Again, some of my best colleagues, both men and women, are very open and can see that men and women work well together, and that defence can do best by having a neurodiverse and a physically diverse audience. So I would say that, in the vast number of cases, leadership, but also the Military generally, is a very positive place, but again, my role today is perhaps to speak on where it is not such a positive place—the more dark pockets.

Q5 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you. Paula, you talked of extensive support that you have provided to women in the Armed Forces over a long period. What progression have you seen during that time?

**Paula Edwards:** I do not think that there has been a lot of progression. For 10 years, Forward Assist has been campaigning for gender-specific services for women veterans, and also to make sure that women veterans are assessed in a timely way and have access to the correct mental health treatment and support that they need to meet their needs. There are pockets of good practice throughout the country, but it is not consistent enough to make sure that all women veterans are given a service.

One issue that is holding back progression is talking about military sexual trauma. When I talk about military sexual trauma to different leaders, as I have done over the past three years, the response I get is that it is the Military way, that the Military do not talk about sex, and that it is the



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British way and that British people do not talk about sex. When I talk about military sexual trauma, I am not talking about the pleasurable side of sex; I am talking about the brutal rape of individuals within the Military. I think that there needs to be a change of culture in the words that we use and an acceptance of different types of trauma and that it does occur. By accepting those kinds of issues, we can create a service that is needs-led, and then we can do more preventative stuff to make sure that it does not happen in the future.

**Q6** **Stuart Anderson:** I just want to expand on that point on military sexual trauma. You have said that whenever you are trying to discuss it with Military leaders, it has been closed down. Is that opening up, or is it staying the same?

**Paula Edwards:** I think it is staying the same. I mean, the fact that I am here today talking about it is a huge step in the right direction, and there are leaders who are accepting of military sexual trauma and do want to work with us to make sure that the Military is a safe place for men and women to work. There are people who do accept military sexual trauma and do want to help, but then there are those who do not want to talk about it at all and give the excuses that I have just given.

**Q7** **Stuart Anderson:** Diane, in your opening comments, you mentioned that when you first joined, sexism was very open, and then it went underground. Can you expand on that, particularly when it has gone underground? How were you specifically treated? How did that impact you? If you can highlight that for the Committee, that would be brilliant.

**Diane Allen:** Yes, I can, and actually I would really like to read out some of the common themes from those other stories. It is not just my own story that I am here to represent today, in terms of that, and I have submitted the report. Chair, I apologise that it has not yet gone public—it was slightly challenging to get consent from all the people who took part—but I just would like to read out some of the common themes of how we were treated, which very much reflects my own story, and I think that is important to get across. There were five common themes identified in nearly all of the stories, which I think is really important to do. It is these issues that show a very hostile environment for any of those who do find themselves in a vulnerable position.

You asked how it was for me in the past. I actually found that when it was going well, everything is very good and it is a wonderful place to work, but when it starts going wrong, that is when you are vulnerable and when the problems really start. I do not like to report it, but I feel that the system has corrupted to the point where it now bullies the good servicepeople to keep quiet, and that is the bit I find the most distressing: that we are actually asking our good people to keep quiet and turn a blind eye to problems occurring. In modern parlance, one could even call it a cancel culture of our own people, in that we are asking people not to speak up when they do see things going wrong. That is probably my main point that I want to make on this at the moment.



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Q8 **Stuart Anderson:** One final point before I hand back to the Chair. It is very clear that you have had a hard time. You have witnessed some horrific scenes that I know you will expand on—none are acceptable. Would you recommend a career in the Armed Forces for women?

**Diane Allen:** I called my book “Forewarned” for a reason; I didn’t call it “Don’t Join”. I still think service is a good thing for men and women, and I think most people who serve feel very rewarded and grateful for having served. I would recommend a career, but I think women are paying an unnecessarily high price for serving, which is the bit where I can hopefully get these points over to the panel. The challenges to women’s confidence, their trust, and how their careers progress are not being addressed in the current system so, in that respect, we are still failing.

**Stuart Anderson:** Thank you. You are getting your points across, and I am looking forward to the rest of the session.

Q9 **Chair:** Paula, can I just ask: the MoD do not recognise the term “female sexual military trauma”. Why do you think that is?

**Paula Edwards:** I am not sure. Everywhere else in the world, “military sexual trauma” is recognised and used, and it helps veterans to be able to identify that they have suffered trauma. It puts a name to it, and then people can access help. In this country, there is a reason why people can identify with anxiety, and it is because there are leaflets out there in GPs’ practices. It is the same with a lot of other mental health disorders. In this country, military sexual trauma is not recognised. If it could be recognised, that would be a gamechanger for veterans, because then they would understand what had happened to them and would be able to seek help.

Q10 **Chair:** Do you think it is the term—the phraseology—that the MoD do not like?

**Paula Edwards:** I think it’s the term and I think it is maybe because the MoD do not know how to manage women’s unique needs or the challenges that they will face around military sexual trauma, around reporting service complaints and what they do about it. It is a really complex issue and it needs further discussion.

Q11 **Chair:** What support did the women you represent, who have come to you having experienced female sexual military trauma, receive while serving?

**Paula Edwards:** None, for the women who I see. I am sure other women might have different stories, but for the hundreds of women who come to our service, they don’t get any support. They don’t get sexual assault screening. When they do make a complaint, it is often to a perpetrator or to somebody who victim-blames and makes that woman feel like she is to blame, like she was asking for it, which, of course, makes that woman have significant mental health problems, and it goes round in circles. A lot of the women do not get any support. The investigation isn’t fair or just and it has poor outcomes for women in the Military.



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**Chair:** Thanks, Paula. Tobias, did you want to come in on anything there?

- Q12 **Mr Ellwood:** I think Stuart stole all my sandwiches, but that is okay. First, as Chair of the Defence Committee, I would just say thank you to Sarah for putting this important study together. The feedback and response that has come from the Armed Forces has been quite incredible. It shows what an important issue this is. Thank you very much indeed.

I remember hearing successive Defence Secretaries making the statement that not a single role is now denied to any female wanting to join all three of the services, but I recall, when I went to Sandhurst myself, many of my friends in the Officer Training Corps, the females, ended up migrating to the Signals regiment, mostly, or to the Logistics and so forth—the WRAC. Looking at it now, is it really fair to say that every single position is open, or are there still barriers to competing with males? To Diane, first.

**Diane Allen:** I think in terms of diversity the Military has advanced a lot and the roles are indeed, on paper, open to all women. I think in terms of inclusion, this is a much more difficult space. There are quite a number of stories where women, particularly those who are first into post and those who are going to more male-dominated roles, the infantry being a good example, are reporting sometimes really overt comments, such as they are informed that they will never be allowed to join—they may have passed selection, but they are not going to be allowed to join their regiment. There are quite overt comments that are constraining women from feeling a sense of belonging. Inclusion is an important part that we need to get to the bottom of.

That extends as well to other areas where the women are pushing forward into these new roles. There is both the culture and the attitude—this sense of not being welcomed in. There are stories of initiation ceremonies that are designed to embarrass women. It is completely unacceptable.

Then there are the more tangible and physical aspects—the equipment. Equipment is still designed for men and simply resized for women. I ask the male Members on this panel to think about if they were asked to wear women's clothing and still give their best performance in a high area, how would they feel if that women's equipment was just adapted for them? This is still a significant problem—that equipment does not fit.

My final point on that is on training. Imagine being an elite athlete. Elite athletes do not train in the same way if they are men and women—they are different and the training regimes are different. At the moment the training regimes are designed by men for men, and therefore women do not always get the best performance. All these issues combine to still not make it fully open to women to spread out across the Military Service.

- Q13 **Mr Ellwood:** Thank you, Diane. I think the police force also experience something very similar to do with the equipment, so there are discrepancies there, too. Paula, did you have anything to add to that?

**Paula Edwards:** Yes, if that's all right. A lot of the women talk about issues starting at basic training. As soon as they enter the Military, the



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structure can be traumatic and demeaning for them. They feel like they are competing with men and that they are undervalued and unappreciated. They don't feel that they get the same opportunities that men get. They feel like they under a microscope and that they are micromanaged. And they feel like they are not protected and not recognised for their service.

- Q14 **Mr Ellwood:** Very quickly, with your indulgence, Chair, is there a NATO country—the Israelis did a lot of studies on how to ensure operational effectiveness, but allowing absolute parity between men and women. Are there any great examples of studies or progress that has been made that we could learn from?

**Diane Allen:** I will try and pick up that point first. I am sure Paula will say the same. The research on women in defence is still quite woeful, so there are not perfect examples. Canada has done a lot of work, and I spent some time talking to Canadian colleagues. The point is about equity. It is not about saying that defence needs a 50:50 and the world should be all about giving women proportional representation. That would be the wrong direction of travel for the Military. It is about equity of opportunity and saying that a modernised workforce does not just need the physical strength. It needs a much more diverse defence people capability. The role should be very clear as to what the requirements are, and then we should compete. We should all compete to get the best defence force that we need. So I don't think the research is there, but I do think we need to make sure that it is about equity of opportunity and not just proportional representation.

- Q15 **Mr Ellwood:** Paula, do you have any observations that you have seen from outside the UK or that we could learn from?

**Paula Edwards:** I am just going to mirror what Diane said. In other countries there is so much research around women veterans and women who are serving in the Military, and in this country it is sparse. There is a lot of great research on the Military, but it is predominantly about males. Women do get added on, but it seems to be a few numbers that do not actually represent anything. It does not tell us anything, either, so I think that in this country we need to explore more research into women.

**Mr Ellwood:** Absolutely. That is an important challenge for us to move forward. Chair, I will hand back to you. Thank you.

**Chair:** Thank you, Tobias. We are going to pick up on equipment and training later. Derek, are you back with us?

**Derek Twigg:** I am, Chair. Can you hear me okay?

**Chair:** Yes, thanks. Go ahead, Derek.

- Q16 **Derek Twigg:** My question is to Lieutenant-Colonel Diane Allen. Your evidence gives the impression of a cultural problem of unacceptable behaviours in the Military. Why do you suggest that progress has been stalled on tackling these behaviours?





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**Diane Allen:** I have heard a lot of stories of laddish culture and of blaming individuals. My own belief is that this is very much a senior leadership problem, and it is giving very mixed messages about what is acceptable behaviour. On paper, it is very clear. The values and standards of the British Armed Forces are clearly laid out. In terms of what actually happens, I don't think it is as clear. As to why we have stalled, I believe we have a leadership, particularly at the senior levels, that looks up at its own careers and does not look down at what is happening to its people below.

If I may make a second point, there is very mixed messaging with the complaints system at commanding officer level, so unit levels are encouraged to turn a blind eye and actually discourage people from reporting problems. This has come up as a common theme from many women. The reason the culture is stalling is that leadership is giving very poor messaging on how to enact the values and standards.

Q17 **Derek Twigg:** To follow on from that answer, is it fair to say that the MoD already has the right policies for promoting diversity and inclusion but faces challenges in implementing them consistently—for instance, for individual units? What I am saying is that if they have the policies, they are just not making sure that they are adhered to and implemented all the way down to individual unit level. Is that where you see the problem?

**Diane Allen:** Yes, I do. The systems are archaic. I think I heard our own service chief say that our grandparents would recognise some of the systems that are still used by the MoD, but our policies as a whole are good. The policies are in place, and on paper we have diversity and inclusion, but the leadership is where our problems are. We need to look to our leaders to set the standards and deliver on them, and I don't believe we are doing that.

Q18 **Derek Twigg:** Could you give us some sort of view on this? How could the leadership ensure that this is implemented all the way down to individual units and becomes embedded? What can they do differently that they are not doing now?

**Diane Allen:** That is an excellent question. My own view is that it is almost impossible for an organisation to investigate itself and to ask its untrained command structure to do sometimes quite complex human resources issues. I believe it is the only UK public body that has no equivalent to Ofsted—it has no body that is independent and can look into defence. Defence marks its own homework, and this is the biggest issue. Although it is possible to change that culture, it has not happened. We have not seen the leadership at unit level change. We are still hearing stories that where problems occur, COs are turning a blind eye. Worse, they are actively coercing women to withhold information, and witnesses do not feel able to come forward. My own view is that we need an independent body to challenge defence and challenge defence leadership.

Q19 **Derek Twigg:** This is my final point. From the women you have spoken to, can you put in a nutshell what the single biggest problem faced by



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women in the Military is today?

**Diane Allen:** That is difficult to put in a nutshell. I think their ability to speak out openly without damage to their careers, and to actually nip things in the bud—to address things quickly when problems arise and speak outside the chain of command. An example is that it took a lot of effort to get the gagging order lifted off women serving in order to be able to speak up, even to their own parliamentary representatives.

**Derek Twigg:** Thank you.

**Chair:** Thank you, Derek. That leads us nicely on to the chain of command. Martin Docherty-Hughes.

Q20 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Thank you, Chair. First, can I join Tobias in thanking you for making sure that this Sub-Committee has come forward? Some of the evidence has been quite striking. Can I go first to Diane? In some extreme cases, individual leaders in the chain of command—evidence suggests both men and women—are failing to call out unacceptable behaviours or are even engaging in them. One piece of evidence submitted by a male officer basically says, “The ranks do not actually understand why anyone would be discriminated against on the basis of race or gender. It’s a foreign idea to them.” Quite frankly, reading the vast majority of the evidence, that seems not to be the truth. How do you think it can be better handled?

**Diane Allen:** Thank you for the question. Perhaps the bit where I am most reflective is that toxic behaviour is not limited to men. This is not a problem about men specifically; it is a problem about toxic leadership. There are reports that some of the senior women’s leadership is equally toxic, which is an important point to register. In terms of leadership, my own belief is that Military leaders are being placed in an almost impossible moral dilemma, in that their careers are being judged on how many complaints they have. This means, of course, that it is in their career interest to quell any dissent and to quell any actual complaints. That is their career requirement, but of course their values and standards require them to deal with the issues going on in their unit. I have sat there as a CO myself and had that moral dilemma: which way do you go? Do you follow your values and standards, as you were taught as an officer, or do you follow your career needs and keep quiet and carry on? An issue that we really need to get to the heart of is that mixed messaging from the very senior leadership that people will be judged positively if they quell all complaints, rather than being judged positively for making sure that any toxic behaviour is investigated and dealt with quickly. I do not believe we will fix this problem at unit level unless we actually fix that mixed messaging from the senior leadership.

Q21 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** In your evidence, Diane, you spoke of several problems with the service complaints system. What changes, if any, would you like to see here, or to the wider service justice system?

**Diane Allen:** Yes, thank you for that question. When I started, my belief was that the heart of the problem is the service complaints system. Its



own ombudsman called it failing, ineffective, inefficient and unfair for the last five years, and it replaced a system that had failed. Any organisation that has a complaints system that fundamentally does not work will struggle to improve the situation for those who are most vulnerable. I have been through it myself. It is great to have the lived experience. It is the most perverse, toxic and unpleasant experience, quite frankly—you can hear that in my voice. The current complaints system is truly damaging to people's mental health. I fundamentally recommended reform of this system. I do not believe that can be done by the Military itself; it really needs an independent body. It is damaging.

The service justice system is equally toxic. We have a large proportion, for a very small Armed Forces, of Military Police—three separate services, all investigating incidents that could mostly be dealt with by the civilian police. I believe this is also perverse, and these two issues are causing deep harm to vulnerable people, including the women we are representing today.

- Q22 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Can I tease that out further? You mentioned earlier a modernised workforce. I do not know if you will agree, given some of the evidence, but is it not time that this modernised workforce is recognised as a workforce and, like the vast majority of our NATO allies, is allowed to have an Armed Forces representative body, similar to the Police Federation, in which there could be confidence in the system, and which could work with the MoD to make sure that these changes are more robust and effective?

**Diane Allen:** Martin, thank you for that question. Yes, I absolutely believe that that is the way forward. I am not a fan of full unionisation. I do not think that that is necessary, and the evidence does not support that for Armed Forces. However, a representative body, independent of the Military chain of command, is exactly the solution. It is not a silver bullet, but I believe it is a pretty shiny bronze one and would give us a strong way forward to actually challenge the chain of command. So yes, I believe an independent representative body is exactly what we need.

- Q23 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Forgive me, Chair. May I ask Paula whether, in your experience, most of the female service personnel and veterans that you deal with are from the ranks and not the officer corps?

**Paula Edwards:** There is a mixture. There is a higher percentage of women who are from lower ranks, but I have some women from higher ranks as well, but that percentage is far smaller.

- Q24 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** In terms of what you said earlier on the system of complaints and so on, would you consider that an Armed Forces representative body, independent of the MoD, similar to the Police Federation, could be a force for good, especially for women in the forces?

**Paula Edwards:** Yes, absolutely. A lot of the women I work with who made a service complaint or reported a criminal act against them feel that, throughout the investigation, support was non-existent, that there were negative consequences for their career, they did not feel safe, they feel



blamed and they really lost trust in the Military—they did not feel it was a safe place any more. I think that, if that investigation was taken up by civilian police, those women would feel more supported, and civilian police have more training to deal with traumatic incidents, whereas Military Police do not have that.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I thank you both. Back to you, Chair.

Q25 **Chair:** Can I pick up on the chain of command? The evidence suggests that six out of 10 complaints aren't pursued by complainants because of the chain of command. Diane, in your evidence you said that most women are encouraged to withdraw or to change their complaints by their chain of command. How extensive is that problem? Does that problem occur when women then leave the Military but have ongoing complaints? Do they still have that element of coercion when they are in civvy street?

**Diane Allen:** First, on the serving, this problem seems almost endemic. I alluded to the fact that mixed messaging from senior leadership is the problem; it is requiring the unit level, who deal with the first level of complaints, to have fewer complaints, rather than have a happier group of individuals. Yes, I think it is a significant problem.

In terms of the veterans' world, there is less representation—there simply isn't the command structure to do that. I have less personal experience and Paula is perhaps a better person to answer, but all the stories I am hearing are that the veterans' world leadership, particularly in the larger organisations, is populated by the same individuals as the current Military system and therefore they are having the same difficulty if they have problems in bringing it forward. I am less familiar on the veterans' space, but I think it is a very large problem in the current service. I do believe women are consistently reporting that they are being coerced to withdraw stories and to change their evidence; they are generally being almost gaslighted to withdraw a story and not take it forward, because of the risk of damaging other people's careers.

**Paula Edwards:** For a lot of the women I work with who are in the civilian world now and have left the Military, but still have service complaints open, as soon as they leave, they feel like their service complaint is almost forgotten about. They feel that they are not listened to. When they get an assisting officer, they feel like a lot of their evidence goes missing and things aren't done properly. It takes such a long time. The women feel like they are not being believed. They are being gaslighted, almost to them feeling like they are going mad and they have done something to deserve the act, so a lot of them end up retracting the service complaint and not going forward because it is so distressing. The system isn't easy for anyone to deal with, from a mental health point of view.

**Chair:** Thank you. I would like to go on to career progression and retention.

Q26 **Mr Jones:** I thank both witnesses for their evidence. Before I go on to my



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question, can I pick up on something that Martin just said? Diane, you said that the process in terms of an officer was basically to make sure they have as low a level of complaints as possible. I have just served on the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill Committee. One of the issues from that was investigations—how long they took and how people gave up when they didn't get any progress. In some cases, very minor issues that should have been dealt with at a unit level seemed to go on for several years, without any resolution, which didn't help that individual, and in some cases resulted in them leaving. Can you comment on the effectiveness of the way in which investigations on complaints are dealt with?

**Diane Allen:** I believe that this is a huge problem. Just using my own example of a complaint, having been through the experience, with three years in the system, well, if that was by policy, we would ask whether the policy was right, but the policy is that it should take 12 weeks. The vast majority of people are slowly worn down to withdraw their complaint because of the length of time that it takes. So it is a very common complaint with the service complaints system that it is dragged out and made into a legal process when by definition it is really an HR process. While a lot of very small niggly complaints could be dealt with at unit level, COs find that they are obliged by policy to get legal advice, when actually they know perfectly well how to look after their own people. In many cases, they are not even allowed to do that themselves, and it gets drawn out into this long case.

I cannot give full examples, but there was a young lady who had what I would describe as a fairly cut-and-dried case where an incident occurred and there were witnesses. Over a year later, people have been posted, and the Service Police have still not investigated it due to what they describe as an overload of cases. But by then the trail has effectively gone cold. I believe it is a very consistent problem that the system is taking way too long. Justice delayed is often justice denied.

**Mr Jones:** Paula, do you have any comments?

**Paula Edwards:** I will just mirror what Diane says about the length of time for complaints. I have some women who have made a service complaint but it has then run out of time and they have had to start from the beginning again. Those women feel like they have no hope in the system and they do not trust the system, so they do not follow up with the second service complaint. Then they are denied justice.

Q27 **Mr Jones:** Diane, you have already referred to the Service Police and their effectiveness. Are you a supporter of transferring serious cases like rape and others to the civilian police?

**Diane Allen:** Yes. It is almost a one-word answer on that, and the answer is yes. I cannot see why on the UK mainland we still allow our Service Police to do this. It seems perverse and it is not working. So yes, I think we need to change that.

Q28 **Mr Jones:** Turning to career progression, if we look at women in our



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senior leadership compared with our international comparators, we do not come out very well. Diane, in your experience, what are the barriers to women progressing in the Armed Forces?

**Diane Allen:** That is an excellent question. We do seem to set very low standards for career progression for women and we are failing to achieve those, certainly compared to our allies. The barriers are many. I know even that defence is trying to look at this and it has a volunteer group looking at it this at the moment, so I do commend them for starting to recognise this.

My own belief is that it is a number of issues. One is that the boarding systems and promotion systems are all closed shops. It is not actually possible to find out the results and how people are selected. I myself have tried to find out and have been basically told, "Because we do unconscious bias training in senior officers, you need to accept that their decisions are right." I think we need a more robust system on that. We need an independent ability to double-check a proportion of those.

It is deeper than that. The job descriptions are also designed and written to favour men. These job descriptions will often require you to have experience that most women could not possibly have achieved, so those job descriptions are also out of date. They also currently do not have career break opportunities in there, so if a woman has taken time out, that may be held against her, even though she has caught up and done all the courses to achieve equality and parity.

Most women do keep reporting the same, which is that they feel they are doing far more and delivering at a far higher level. A common reason on my notes for why they leave is that they see people who, in their opinions, are not as talented and have not achieved the same qualifications actually being the ones who get promoted.

Q29 **Mr Jones:** Can I come on to the reasons for leaving the Armed Forces? What are the main reasons for women leaving?

**Diane Allen:** This one is more difficult. I think a lot of the reasons why women leave are the same reasons why men do: lack of feeling of career progression or just having felt they have served their time and it is time to move on to something else. But there is this darker group who, with the service complaints system, simply leave because they know that they won't get justice. They have chosen to leave because something has gone wrong, but they simply walk away rather than deal with it, because they can't wait.

For women, it is often more complicated, in terms of needing flexibility in career. Again, I know the Military is trying to look at more flexible options for careers at the moment, which would favour women, but also men, in that many men want a career break too, to go and achieve other ambitions and then maybe come back.

Why people leave is a complicated picture, but my concern is that it is our top cohort—our best Military people—who are leaving at the moment,



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leaving a much more plodding middle third, sometimes called the frozen middle in the Armed Forces, who are seen as perhaps now the top cohort, because the cream have moved on. I think we should be concerned about whether or not we are retaining the best of our people in the Armed Forces and whether that is part of our issues with leadership, in that our best have already left.

**Q30 Mr Jones:** You talked earlier on about the lack of research. Do you think, for example, introducing post-leaving interviews for women to identify the reasons for leaving would be helpful?

**Diane Allen:** Yes, I think that would be an excellent idea. One of the darker pockets—one of the more toxic pockets—is that people are required to give a reason for leaving when they do sign off. When any member of the forces leaves, they give a reason. There are far too many stories—I have witnessed it myself in my own time as command—that when a woman gives a reason for leaving as sexist behaviour or harassment or bullying, they are coerced to change it, by being told that they won't be allowed to leave early if they don't withdraw that evidence. That in itself is a shameful statistic.

**Q31 Mr Jones:** So, again, that type of research needs to be done outside of the chain of command, separately.

**Diane Allen:** I fundamentally believe we need an independent body and we need to get professional researchers in that body, to give us clarity about what is happening—a clearer picture, that is not just coming from the chain of command.

**Q32 Mr Jones:** Paula, can I ask you the question on reasons people leaving? What is your experience?

**Paula Edwards:** It is a complex picture to paint. For a lot of the women that I work with, they have suffered ACEs—adverse childhood experiences. That means they might have been a victim of sexual abuse, bullying, or physical abuse as a child. They join the Military because they feel like it is a safe place to be, they are going to have an amazing career and are going to be taught skills they would never get in the civilian world, and they like the standards, the morals and the values.

They have already sustained one trauma. They join the Military, and everything is fine in the beginning. When I am doing timeline work with women, everything seems fine for a couple of months and the Military do a great job at containing that childhood trauma. And then, further trauma occurs when they are in the Military. That can be bullying, sexual assault, physical assault. That woman has now experienced two types of trauma.

The illusion is then shattered. The Military is no longer this safe place anymore. It is not what that woman thought it was going to be. She feels alone. She feels frightened. She feels like she has got nobody to talk to. Her unit is turning against her. Then, usually, that woman needs mental health support and ends up either leaving, naturally, or she is medically discharged.



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It seems to be more about women leaving because of the multiple traumas they have sustained and no professional support—no safe support, and no ability to talk to somebody outside of the Military. A lot of the women I work with get told categorically, “You will not talk to anyone outside of the Military about what has happened from a trauma perspective, and if you do, A, B or C will happen to you.” So, they are really fearful that it is going to have an impact on their career. They have all of this stress and anxiety. From a psychological point of view, they just can’t take it anymore and their psychology fractures.

**Mr Jones:** Thank you very much. Back to you, Chair.

**Chair:** Thank you. Seventy-seven per cent. of the respondents to our survey said they had problems with kit and equipment, so I would like to pick up on that. Richard Drax.

Q33 **Richard Drax:** Welcome, and thank you for giving evidence on a difficult topic. Interestingly, talking to the police here in Dorset, one of the issues that has come up is the extra weight now on police belts, which apparently is particularly affecting women, whereas in the Army, as you know—I am an ex-soldier, so let me declare an interest there—you have your pack over your shoulders, and your shoulders are the strongest part of your body. My question is on the kit, and we have touched on this already in this session. Uniform facilities and equipment are not always appropriate. Could you perhaps help us—I’ll start with you, Diane—by explaining what bits of kit or clothing are causing the issues?

**Diane Allen:** This is the more slightly emotional one, because your actual day-to-day clothing does not fit. I gave an example: imagine, as a man, being asked to wear women’s clothing, but just in a different size. You would probably not feel a sense of belonging. That may just affect your performance at the top level, but it is not an absolutely critical issue. It simply reduces that top 5% or 10% of performance. The bigger issues are—

Q34 **Richard Drax:** Could I be very rude and interrupt there? Exactly what item of clothing? I have seen women soldiers wearing skirts, for example. What exactly are you referring to when you say women are having to wear men’s clothes?

**Diane Allen:** The day-to-day clothing for most serving personnel is what they call the combat dress. You have seen it; it is sometimes called combat pyjamas. It is the camouflage pyjamas that you see people wear. Although people dress up into the barrack dress, which is more gender specific—women wear skirts, and men wear trousers—the general attire for most Military units is the combat pyjamas or combat outfit. That is designed for men, to fit men.

On the specialist equipment, you can look at things on operations, such as body armour. A common complaint from women is that although it does not fit men particularly well, it definitely doesn’t fit women. I have had problems over the years with trying to get a helmet to fit. Imagine trying





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to be in a combat situation and the helmet falls forward over your eyes, so that you cannot see—that is a significant problem.

You mentioned carrying weight. There are roles in which women will struggle with the weight, but it is not helped if the webbing and the backpacks do not fit on the female frame. They sit completely differently on the hips and across the shoulders. Therefore, that weight is not being distributed in the same way. The weight distribution works for the male frame, but it works very poorly for the female frame. You are disadvantaging the woman in being able to carry the weight, because it does not fit and it is uncomfortable.

**Q35 Richard Drax:** Diane, you mentioned helmets and chest armour. I think it is fair to say that women probably have generally thicker hair and obviously certain physical anatomy in front of them. Those are the problems. How do you think we resolve them?

**Diane Allen:** I believe in some forces—Mr Ellwood mentioned the Israeli Defence Forces—it is possible to get equipment designed for the women's shape. Many other industries have done that; it is just that defence hasn't. There is perfectly good safety equipment available that is designed for the female frame. We just haven't invested in it in the MoD.

**Richard Drax:** Paula, do you want to add anything to Diane's comment?

**Diane Allen:** No, I don't. Thank you.

**Q36 Chair:** I just want to pick up on equipment and some of the evidence we collected. Going back to attire—combat pyjamas—some of the evidence we collected said that it can take six months to order a pair of three-layer gloves for a woman with small hands, which is no use if you are going on deployment in three weeks. We have also heard that body armour does not fit correctly; it rises up. One woman complained that when she was on deployment, she was unable to get into a crouch-to-fire position with an SA80. While gloves are an inconvenience, operational effectiveness is now compromised because she cannot get into an adequate firing position. What does that say for her personal safety? The message I got from our evidence was that the MoD need to get their basics correct first, but I am aware that the MoD are looking at this.

Also, the issue of sanitary products on deployment came up quite highly and frequently in our survey. Unfortunately, one woman said that when she was on deployment she could not get hold of sanitary products and had to use a sock. A lot of women said they had to tear up clothing to use as well. I know the MoD are looking at this, but have either of you got any experience of the women you represent having difficulties around these areas?

**Paula Edwards:** Yes, I can answer that, Chair. Quite a few women I work with talk about being on tour and getting a period, not factoring it in and being caught unaware, and those women do not have anything to use in the way of sanitary towels or tampons, so they use socks or bits of paper. They go to the chain of command or someone of a higher rank to ask for



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help and they are made to feel stupid and embarrassed about the situation, so they say nothing. Then of course, that woman loses confidence. Other people then start bullying her and saying that she smells. Then, as well, there are health needs that we need to consider. A lot of the women who use socks or bits of paper get infections, which causes health problems, and they can't seek attention for those health problems because they feel so embarrassed.

**Chair:** Thank you. Let's hope the MoD are listening. They give factor 50 and insect repellent, so let's hope that they are listening in. I suspect they are. Martin next.

Q37 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I am seeking a particular clarification. Are we saying that the Armed Forces or the MoD do not provide sanitary products for women as a matter of course, and that these female members of the services need to purchase those essential products themselves before, for example, going on duty overseas?

**Diane Allen:** I believe that is true. I wouldn't say that nothing has changed since I left, but I believe that that is true. It is, as you say, a problem of operations, going overseas on tours. Women are pretty resilient and can handle their own physiology, but if you take them out of the normal infrastructure of the UK, some things clearly need to be provided by the chain of command when you are out on a fast-tempo operation overseas. I don't believe, unless this has changed, that they are provided at all by the MoD. I could be wrong, but I don't think they are.

Q38 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I take it that the assumption is that that is not even a matter for consideration by the Ministry? They might make it more accessible, but probably do not want to provide it as a basic element of the kit for female members of the forces.

**Diane Allen:** No, exactly. It is the double thing. It is not whether or not they should fund it and provide it. It is certainly an issue and certainly a question we should consider, but it is also the fact that you cannot even get it. It is unavailable in operational theatres sometimes. There is not even a supply chain for it. There is a supply chain, as was just mentioned, for factor sun cream. The women cannot even get access to it, even if they have to fund it themselves.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I find that extraordinary, Chair. Thank you.

Q39 **John Spellar:** We have mentioned those who have left the forces and their difficulties with continuing with claims. Apart from that, how well are the needs and situations of female veterans in the UK understood? That is addressed to Paula.

**Paula Edwards:** In my opinion, they are not understood at all. When I started this job in 2017, I did a mapping exercise to see what kind of services were out there. I did not want to replicate and duplicate because I don't think that's very helpful to veterans. When I looked around, there were no gender-specific services at all. Although women were not excluded, the majority of the charities were accessed by men, run by men



and were very male-centric. From a research point of view, I could not find any services. I then started looking at the literature that was out there for any evidence on the needs of women veterans, so that I could create a service that was needs-led, and I could not find any research either, so I do not think that the needs of women veterans are understood. It is a complex issue, and there needs to be more work done to understand the issues that they face.

**Q40 John Spellar:** You have previously said that the UK is falling behind its international partners in this respect. Why do you think that is? Mention has been made of Canada. Who do you think is doing this well?

**Paula Edwards:** In 2019, I travelled to America and visited quite a lot of services that were specific to women veterans. I was really shocked. In America, they have sexual health clinics for women, trauma clinics, positive parenting classes—everything you would expect to see, you see it in America, and it is all run by women. That is clearly an area of good practice. They are engaging with women and it is needs-led. Canada is the same. They really recognise that women veterans have unique needs different from the rest of the Military population. I am not sure why that has not been adopted in this country, to answer the other question.

**John Spellar:** I think that will lead to some interesting points for our report, Chair.

**Q41 Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Paula, are available veterans' services meeting the needs of female veterans? I have to surmise from what you have said so far that they are not, because you have spoken of the need for better recognition of the problems of military sexual trauma. What would you like to see change?

**Paula Edwards:** Services need staff who are professionally qualified and can deal with women veterans' trauma and not cause further harm. Services need to accept and respond to the differences between male veterans' experience versus a woman veteran's experience, and to really meet with women and ask them: what would meet your needs, and how can we help? At the minute, these questions are not being asked, apart from by our service.

**Q42 Martin Docherty-Hughes:** What would you say are the most common problems that women veterans have to deal with in their transition to civilian life after leaving the Military? Is there a difference in those transitions for the other ranks, as opposed to the officers?

**Paula Edwards:** Among the lower ranks, the women who leave suffer from significant mental health problems—emotional dysregulation, chaotic behaviour, risky behaviour. They struggle with parenting. A lot of them do not know how to cook nutritious meals or how to communicate. If you looked at this from the point of view of the nine life domains, they struggle with every part of life that a human could possibly struggle with.

Trauma is trauma—it does not matter what rank you are; if you have sustained trauma, you will have issues—but the higher up the ranks you



go, those women seem to have better opportunities when they transition to get further employment or further education, and they might be more financially secure. However, that does not detract from the point that they still have significant mental health problems and need support. It is just that women who are lower down the ranks need more service input.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

**Chair:** Paula, Diane, thank you so much for your contributions. If you want to stay on and listen in, that is fine. Thank you.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Maria Lyle and Anna Wright.

Q43 **Chair:** We come to our second panel, with Maria Lyle of the RAF Families Federation and Anna Wright, CEO of the Naval Families Federation. Maria, would you like to introduce yourself?

**Maria Lyle:** Good morning everyone. My name is Maria Lyle. I have been the director of the RAF Families Federation for the past two and a half years. I am an ex-serving RAF officer, and my husband is still serving, so we are an RAF family. The Families Federation is a slightly misleading title, in that we represent single serving personnel as well. We have a really keen interest in this inquiry. We are delighted it is happening, and I have been nodding in recognition of some of the points that have come up already, so thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

**Anna Wright:** Hello, I am Anna Wright. I have been CEO of the Naval Families Federation for just coming up to six years now. I, too, was an officer: I served in the Royal Navy for about 12 years. I retrained as a teacher, following the flag, with my husband also still serving. I have recognised a lot of what has been said. I loved my time in the Navy, but actually waved a white flag when my husband was away, and I was serving and had two small children. I had had my fourth course of antibiotics and just could not keep all the balls in the air, so had to admit defeat and reluctantly left the service. I am very interested in supporting families and dual-serving couples.

**Chair:** Anna, I think we will probably pick up on your themes as we go forward. John, first question, please.

Q44 **John Spellar:** That is where we start, which is really a scene-setting question: how do you feel about your years in the forces?

**Anna Wright:** I absolutely loved my time. I am happy to say that I had a very positive experience. I had one very minor experience of sexual harassment at the time: it was an officer. I was very, very junior, and it was an officer who was four ranks senior to me, and I just thought, "What an idiot." I am sure, as has been discussed, there are very many more serious issues. I did not say anything to anybody—it just never occurred to me that that was something that I could do—but my time was an overwhelmingly positive experience, and I was very sorry to leave.



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I think it is a shame that the experience gained during 12 years is lost to the service because of something like not being able to manage a family. The service is a very demanding employer, so if you have two family members working for that employer, I would like to see some mitigation to allow you to get over the bumps, particularly when children are very small, and manage that so that you can keep both serving people, whom you have invested in, for a long career.

**Q45 John Spellar:** From that, it sounds as though you would recommend a career in the Military for women.

**Anna Wright:** Absolutely, yes. I might have still been there had I managed to keep all those balls in the air.

**John Spellar:** Maria?

**Maria Lyle:** Like Anna, my experience was almost wholly positive, and I would recommend a career in the Military for women. Having said that, it is fascinating to read some of the written, published evidence from the Committee on the importance of reflecting the impact on veterans of their careers, and how effective that can be in helping the people who are currently serving put things into perspective about what is appropriate and what is not. Those people who have moved on and experienced other environments can potentially see the impact of what is going on around them that they have normalised. I think that is a really important point, and some of your research and survey responses may help bring it out.

What I would be really keen not to do as part of this inquiry, in terms of the findings and recommendations, is further put off women from entering the Military. It is not representative of society as it is. We want to encourage more women to join and to stay, so that it becomes more representative, and I would want this inquiry to support that process, rather than scare women into thinking that it is not the environment for them. There has been positive change; there needs to be more, but it offers massive opportunities. I left because I was pulled by those opportunities, rather than pushed by the situation I was in. I was still enjoying my service; I hadn't got children at that stage, and I went on to do some fantastic things out in the private sector because of companies that were really keen to employ ex-serving people. That is a quick summary of my position.

**Q46 John Spellar:** Not wishing to encourage inter-service rivalry, but it is certainly the case that the RAF has the highest representation of women, both in the Regulars and in the Reserves. Any explanation?

**Maria Lyle:** The RAF is the youngest of the three services, and possibly the culture might reflect that. Until recently, it had a higher percentage of branches that were available to women: the RAF Regiment, which is quite a small section of the RAF, was the last to open up, but that is open now. I think that has reflected the women joining. Also, the roles over time have tended to be more technologically based rather than physical, and again, that might be less off-putting to women, who feel that they are going to be physically able to keep up. I am sure Anna will go on to make the point



that what the RAF does not have is lengthy deployments at sea—it can have deployments, but not lengthy ones—and all those things, I would say, go to encourage more women to join. I would say that we still have a lower percentage in the RAF than in the other forces I would compare us to—the US, Canada and Australia—so there is still more work to do.

- Q47 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you to both of you. It is very good to hear your experiences from the time you served and after. I will come to you both on the respective services you have served in, but I would like to know the strengths and weaknesses of the current service support, particularly around personnel with family responsibilities. Can I come to you first, Anna, on the Navy?

**Anna Wright:** If I may, I would like to take up that last point. Maria and I have discussed at length the differences, and obviously the statistics are helpful in telling a story. Women are 9.8% of the Navy Regulars—it is 14.9% in the RAF—and 14.7% of the Navy Reserves. I think this tells its own story and it is about work-life balance—we refer to it as harmony. The Navy are expected to be away for 660 days in a three-year period; that is 60% of the time. In the Army, it is 498 days in a three-year period, and in the RAF 465 days in a three-year period. That is 60% for the Navy, 48% for the Army and 42% for the RAF. For me, that disparity is absolutely key with respect to why there are not more women in the service.

I think this is putting off men and women from serving and from being retained, and I believe that the Navy would wish to address the issue. It is an issue of resource and being able to have an operating model that allows less time at sea. We have research that shows this issue is damaging to parental relationships, partner relationships and mental health, so I think addressing the harmony issue would go a long way to helping to attract and retain women.

- Q48 **Stuart Anderson:** I am going to expand that question for Maria. I know you have both touched on this and you have both experienced it. What are the particular challenges for women in dual-serving couples?

**Maria Lyle:** The excellent “Living in our Shoes” report produced last year—the Selous report—has a great phrase: it refers to the Military as a “greedy institution”. It is not the only institution of that type—there are big law firms that demand an awful lot from partners—but if you have an institution that expects people to be able to work away from home, work long hours and work unexpectedly, and a couple are both doing that, that obviously places a significant strain on a family unit. If those people are employed in different branches of the Military, there tends to be very little conversation between those two branches about how they will manage that challenge. Within a single service—if you are both serving in the RAF—it is tough enough, but there can be conversations had between career managers of those people to try to map out a way to make it work and maintain a family unit. If one is in the Army and one in the Navy, for example, that is particularly tough. Little research or thinking has been done on how that could work, but there are a number of couples in that situation.



Now, I do not mean to make it sound all negative, because in the past two or three years lots of thought has gone into packages that may improve the situation over time. It is too early—the research is not out there yet—to see whether it is working, but things like flexible service and flexible working should be, in theory, a significant help on this. My challenge on those is that I would like to see men taking those options up as well as women. The assumption should not be that it will be the female partner who accesses this much-needed flexibility.

**Q49 Stuart Anderson:** I think that is a great challenge and it should be championed.

Anna, as you have mentioned, it is not a normal 9-to-5 role. There is deployment and time away, which can be hard for any couple trying to juggle a family. What are the specific demands that limit service families that you would not get with non-service families, that allow support around family provision?

**Anna Wright:** There is a massive difference between having children and not having children. If you are a dual-serving couple, the demands are great and you are pulled in different directions. You might struggle to see each other, but you can actually function. The complicating factor is when you have children, in any of the three services, because the nature of service life is that you have to be able to adapt and respond to short-notice changes to programmes and you need childcare that is very flexible and adaptable. Because of the mobile nature of service life, you do not necessarily have extended family living around you that you can just hand your children off to. If you are Foreign and Commonwealth, you absolutely do not have any of that support around you.

The nature of service life means that having children is really quite difficult. Something that is really unhelpful is the culture—we feel that we have to be apologetic about the fact that we have children. I look with envy at Scandinavia, where it seems to be much more matter of fact that children are a fact of life, and it is a responsibility for men and women, employer and employee, and everyone just seems to get on with it, as opposed to it being something that is the individual's problem that you have got to try to sort out without putting your head above the parapet and showing weakness to the chain of command. In the last couple of weeks, we have been approached by somebody who is on a course, has a young child, partner away, and is really struggling with short-notice programme changes, because her childcare is just not adaptable.

**Q50 Stuart Anderson:** This is a slight diversion, but I worked away for many years when I was in the Military and after and I have five children. How big is the detrimental impact on the children of alternate parents being away?

**Anna Wright:** I would say it is huge. I have talked to couples where they are both warfare branch, so one goes away and the other one comes back. It is very hard on their relationship, because they never see each other, but it is also very difficult for children. There is some research that is just



about to be published by SCISS—Service Children in State Schools—which has identified that the biggest issue for service children presenting is parental separation and not the issues of mobility, as was previously thought.

- Q51 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you. Maria, I like how you opened up about encouraging more women into the forces. How would we try and do that with what we have spoken about with families? We have identified gaps or problems. How do we fix that? Is it flexible service? Shared parental leave? Other provisions? What would be your top three things that could help solve this problem?

**Maria Lyle:** The first one is around representation and communication—the “you can only be it if you can see it” approach. I reflected on that in another meeting yesterday. We were talking about how veterans are perceived. There is this worry about veterans being perceived as mad, bad and sad. Well, female veterans are not perceived at all. People do not see it as a career and even less as a career with families. It is about putting out those examples and using those examples of people who are living it at the moment.

The second one is around culture, which builds on Anna’s point about it being acceptable to serve in the Military, have a family and for that family to take precedence at times—not having the presenteeism of being at your computer, at your desk, for 12 or 14 hours a day and senior leaders setting that example and expecting it from others. Yes, people are there for a life of service and they should be expected to work hard and deliver, but I know from examples of places that I have worked since I left the Military that those things can be done completely compatibly—it is not exclusively one or the other.

I have seen some really great examples in the RAF. There is a commitment from the senior leadership to make the RAF more inclusive in the way it works and in the way it deals with these issues, but culture change is a massive process. There is still a long way to go on that.

Finally, the programmes that are there at the moment—we have flexible working in service, and the RAF have reasonable numbers in taking those up. The wraparound childcare pilot, which the MoD announced last year, is really welcome. I believe over 250 families have taken up the pilot from an RAF base perspective, which is a significant number of families, so there is a desire to engage in that. What I would say is that it is a pilot and we need to see more of it. As Anna says, that ability to use family as childcare, which all the research from Coram and ONS tells us is what people do if they are non-Military—if you are non-Military and you are in a demanding job, one of the routes to staying in the workplace is by using family childcare. That is simply not available to the vast majority of Military families, so people leave. The people who are leaving are those, generally, at junior ranks—that is where it becomes impossible financially to make things work, because childcare is expensive.

- Q52 **Chair:** Before I bring in Tobias, can I ask Anna about how covid has





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affected childcare, with school closures and obviously not having access to an extended family? Do you have any evidence or anything you can discuss about how serving parents have got on over the last year?

**Anna Wright:** Yes, I think the situation with childcare has been incredibly difficult for everybody in the country. What has been interesting is that, in the past, the serving person's career tended to always dominate and be the most important on the whole. Because of covid, quite a lot of partners are key workers—teachers, doctors and nurses. Those careers have had more prominence, so sometimes the serving person has been the child carer, to allow their partner to work. Where people are key workers and have had access to schools, that has been fine. The more difficult issue has been younger children and childcare, and it has been incredibly stressful for people, male and female, who are trying to work from home and manage young children. It has been really difficult. I have to say that the Navy has really been helpful with this, and it has been managed on a local commander basis, looking at individual needs. They have managed it as well as they possibly could.

Q53 **Mr Ellwood:** Thank you very much; it is great to see you both again. I remember working very closely with you when I was Veterans Minister. The statistics on harmony guidelines are quite profound, specifically for the Navy. What is your perspective on the operational functionality of taking people away for such lengths of time? Is there not a better system that could be adopted? We see this with other countries, where you do not have to remain with the ship for the entire duration of the ship's departure, but you could do three months on, three months off, and be rotated in and out simply by moving people to the nearest port. You could rotate the ship's personnel through that means, reducing the harmony guidelines. Would you agree? Is that something that could possibly be done?

**Anna Wright:** I am delighted to say that is already happening. There are some forward-based ships, there are crew rotations and there is an aspiration to have dual crewing. In order to generate this additional manpower, the issue is getting rid of shore posts. That will potentially have a knock-on effect for men and women who have families and who would like to have those shore posts interspersed with going to sea, so that they can have a little bit of substantial time at home. I would like to see the Navy have more resource, so that they do not have to give up all the shore posts in order to have dual crewing and forward-basing, which I think is absolutely fantastic. I agree with you that it is the way ahead.

Q54 **Mr Ellwood:** For the benefit of the Committee's report on this, just explain the shore posting challenge of jobs being replaced by other entities and so forth. What is happening on that front? Why has that made such a difference?

**Anna Wright:** To have dual crewing, you need more people able to go to sea. In order to generate that, it means deleting shore posts, which allow somebody to work at home for a year or two years. Typically, the branches that attract most women in the Navy are logistics, with 27%,



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and medics, with 45%. They are the least deployed. There is a bit of a correlation there, and I think that moving towards having more people at sea for more of the time will possibly be less attractive for women.

- Q55 **Mr Ellwood:** My final question, if I may, Chair, deals with some of the jobs that might be similar in all three services. If you are a chef, for example, or in certain kinds of engineering, you could almost do a sabbatical from one service to another. I know that that has been looked at, but it never really got off the ground. Do you think that that could provide more opportunity and give people an interesting change of scene, if you like, and allow you to fill the gaps in some of the jobs that are required?

**Anna Wright:** I think it might be appealing to some of the Navy to have different harmony rules—perhaps working for the RAF.

- Q56 **Derek Twigg:** To what extent do female Reservists with children face unique challenges, and how much will these be resolved by the planned roll-out of the flexible service to the Reservists?

**Anna Wright:** It is my understanding that Reservists have much more control over whether they accept a job or not and whether they go to sea or not. We have 14.7% women in the Reserves, and we have a lot of women in full-time Reserve posts, because of the very fact that they have more control and know that they will not be away at sea for a long time, so it is very attractive to women with children. You do not get the X factor if you are FTRS—full-time Reserve service—but that is a small price to pay for having that stability and control over your career.

**Maria Lyle:** My observation on this would be that it will be a very interesting cultural question about whether we get more and more women moving into these full-time Reservist posts. While in some ways that is a positive thing, because they are not a loss to the Military altogether, I would not want to see that being used as a way of almost claiming that female representation is there but actually moving women to jobs that are effectively lower paid, because of the flexibility it offers, and not looking at how Regular Military service can accommodate the needs of all personnel. Yes, FTRS and a number of Reservist roles give excellent opportunities for women, and the RAF stats show that as well—something like 25% are female—but I just caution that we need to keep an eye on the way that those are used, who they attract and whether it is a healthy balance.

- Q57 **Derek Twigg:** Turning to career progression and retention of female service personnel, can you tell me how women can be supported to progress to the senior ranks of the Armed Forces? You have touched on that, in terms of the barriers that prevent women from being promoted and the specific help they need with children and so on. I do not know who wants to take that first.

**Maria Lyle:** Anna, I am happy to start and cover this off. You are right: we have some covered some of these areas—the representation, the flexible service, the cultural change required. All those are absolutely key. Childcare is another one. Childcare is a universal issue, not just an issue

for female serving personnel. The other thing, which was touched on extensively by your earlier witnesses, is that there is not yet, I do not think, a solid evidence base that we can make all our recommendations on. I hope that your survey and some of your findings will support that, but I think there is a clear need for further independent research around the reasons that women are choosing to leave and around the lived experience that could be blocking women's progress. At the moment, if that research exists and there are exit interviews done by the forces, it is either redacted or not public. Therefore, anything that is put into place is based, certainly from an external perspective, on a set of assumptions around why women might leave rather than an actual independent piece of research that has looked at those reasons. There is a lot of information out there, but I do not think there is a cohesive piece of research to make sure that policies are being based on correct evidence.

**Anna Wright:** Something that really concerns me is the fact that in the Navy the highest female officer with children is OF-5, so captain rank, whereas in the Army it is two star and in the RAF three star. This bears looking at. What are the differences? Why is there a path for women to proceed in the other services to the highest ranks? I agree with Maria that we do not know enough about what those barriers are. The services are doing absolutely everything that they can in terms of diversity and inclusion and understanding, but it is a bit chicken and egg. Until you have senior women in positions where they have the lived experience and can challenge, it is very difficult to grow them. That is where we are the moment.

All the right things are being done, but we need to understand more about the barriers. Then there is the amount of time away for the Navy. I had a conversation with one of the most senior females with children recently, and the first thing she said to me was that it was the amount of time away from family that makes her consider leaving the service.

**Derek Twigg:** Okay. Thank you, Chair.

**Chair:** Thank you, Derek. I note here that NATO's average for women in senior ranks is 10.5%, but the UK average is 4.9%, so we have a long way to go. Perhaps we could look at other countries to see how to improve things.

I want to look at why women leave the Armed Forces, and I am going to bring in Emma to wind up the last few questions. Some 42% of women leave the Military within five years after having a family, so that is obviously an indicator of why women leave. Emma, do you want to pick up on the last few questions?

Q58 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thanks, Chair. Good morning, Maria and Anna. Thanks for being with us. To revisit some of the themes that you have touched on in this session, at the start you both spoke about your reasons for leaving the Armed Forces, but is there any more light that you can shed on why other women are leaving the Armed Forces? I am happy to take Anna first and then Maria.



**Anna Wright:** One of the challenges is the perception of women—that they cannot speak up about the challenges, so they will talk to us about the logistics. I am thinking of dual-serving couples. Typically when I speak to a dual-serving couple they talk to me about the logistics and how he is here and she is there, and how they actually manage when they need six months’ notice to decide who will have the children. If we move to a culture where it is okay for women to talk about the challenges of childcare and for men to lean in and also take equal responsibility for the childcare, I think we would be in a better place in terms of openness and the conversations that need to happen in the service to get rid of the barriers.

At the moment, what tends to happen is that women do all the juggling behind the scenes, but there comes a point, as it did for me, where they just think, “I can’t do this any more. I am exhausted and I can’t make it work”, whereas if there was openness and an opportunity to discuss it, we would be in a better place. The really difficult stage—this is my own perception—is where children are very small. Later on it gets easier—I think—to manage. If you could just manage that bit, and there was real discussion and understanding, you would be retaining women with experience that you have really invested in.

Q59 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thanks for that, Anna. You said there that there seems to be a bit of a block to speaking up about the challenges. Is that because there is a lads’ culture within the forces?

**Anna Wright:** It is the Military. The Navy has been around for hundreds of years—women were only integrated 30 years ago, and all the branches were only opened up two years ago. In terms of cultural change, we are still getting there.

Some of it is the perception of women that childcare is their responsibility and their problem and they can’t speak about it. Actually, good leaders would encourage them. Good leaders know all their people and would have conversations and work with whatever those barriers are to getting the most out of their people. There is a lot of opportunity there.

Some of it is the perception of the individual, but that is the culture of the organisation that needs to change. It is particularly difficult when it is a culture that is 90% men and very few women in the senior ranks. It is a lot to ask.

Q60 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Cultural change is always the hardest as well. It never comes easy. Maria, would you like to come in?

**Maria Lyle:** Building on Anna’s point, I think that the culture of an organisation in part reflects the society that it is drawn from. The Military is obviously quite different because of the nature of what it does, but it should be moving to reflect the society that it is drawn from.

There are definitely other workplaces that have similar challenges and have a male culture that is based on you being a main breadwinner, not bringing what are perceived to be your problems to work—that you put



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this façade on that you are dealing with everything that life throws at you and you are therefore going to be successful at work because your full self is devoted to work rather than anything domestic.

I have friends who have worked in senior roles in finance and car sales, interestingly, where they have experienced just as much of that attitude. It is not solely Military. However, that does not mean that the Military should not be changing in the same way that other places are.

What I would reflect is that those conversations around your wider domestic responsibilities become easier as you get more senior. You have more agency. You feel more comfortable about having those conversations and owning them. I can talk personally about when I went into senior roles with private sector firms. I said in the interview, "The way I expect to be able to work is the following," and I was able to dictate my terms, because I was quite senior. It is much harder to do that when you are more junior of rank or just less experienced. That is why it is so important, if we want to retain women and progress women, that those conversations are held from the earliest possible stage with both men and women, and that they are comfortable having those conversations at work.

Q61 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Is there any particular service that does better at this than the others, out of the three, or is it pretty much a culture across the board?

**Maria Lyle:** The stats tell us that more women serve for longer in the RAF. From my conversations with colleagues either in or representing the Army and Navy, the RAF has made a bit more progress. Equally, we have cases brought to us at the federation that show that there is still a lot of work to do. It is a bit of a continuum, I would say. While the RAF of the three in the UK is positive, it is not positive compared with its international comparators and that means it is very much a work in progress.

Q62 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** In terms of speaking up about challenges that are unique to women, how appropriate are the fitness tests and support available for women returning to the forces after pregnancy?

**Maria Lyle:** I'd like to give a shout-out to the RAF on that, because they have done a lot of work that is positive on that, hence winning an award last year. I would like them recognised as understanding those challenges and really working to overcome them.

Q63 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** What is it that they did?

**Maria Lyle:** The RAF has trained PTIs in specific antenatal and postnatal fitness, so women can access specialist training. I am not saying that is available at every unit all over the UK, but quite a large number of PTIs have taken up that training.

It is such a basic thing in some ways, but it is so important, because it is one of those challenges that can undermine people's confidence and feel like it all seems like too much, and it is actually easier just to step away. Being fit for service is important; as a woman, you do not want to feel that



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you are able to have a finger pointed at you for not being physically fit, and that extra step is really significant.

Q64 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thank you for that. Anna?

**Anna Wright:** Yes, I would agree. The Navy is excellent in terms of the provision, I think, and there is a staged return to work after you have had a baby, so that you will go for the odd day and then build it up. You are not just thrown back in at the deep end, which I think is really helpful. Also, when you are pregnant, you can go and have support and talk to other women, so I think it has come an awfully long way, certainly since I was having children in the Navy.

Q65 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Great. One of the final issues I want to explore with you is around support for women with menopause symptoms, and also support for women just with sanitary products in general.

In some of the research we have looked at, the MoD said they were assessing the provision of accessibility of sanitary products for women who are deployed, yet they have not shared the results of this, so we are kind of in the dark. The assessment they did was completed in January, but they never gave us any of the results of that; they are not in the public domain. I wonder if either one of you would like to touch on both of those issues for me.

**Anna Wright:** I have heard conversations about consideration for women going through menopause, and I know that is something that the Navy is looking at and looking at policies for. It is being examined, so I think that is very encouraging. I cannot comment on the provision of sanitary towels; I have not heard anything about that.

**Maria Lyle:** Interestingly, the only time that I have seen some promotion around support for menopause that has been done proactively and I have actually, visibly seen stuff has been in an Army headquarters down at Andover. I was really delighted to see that, but I think that further work is required there.

On the sanitary products, I completely agree with the points that were made earlier about accessing it in austere environments. I have not heard of issues with women in the UK just in general service accessing them, but in the austere environments, there is absolutely a case that should be made for ensuring that they are available. They cannot go to a corner shop, so they have to be available, and that is just one of the deaths by a thousand cuts that, along with things like poor equipment and so on, could be the difference between someone feeling accepted and not in a workplace.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thank you both very much for that. Chair?

Q66 **Chair:** Thank you. I think with the average length of service being between eight and 10 years, the menopause is perhaps not an obstacle we are yet used to, but hopefully as things progress, we will be talking about menopause in a few years.



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Can I just pick up on royal naval uniform when someone is pregnant? One of the witnesses who submitted evidence said that you have to change your uniform, and this uniform is not very flattering. It tells everyone that you are pregnant, even if you wanted to keep it quiet for a while, and there is no space on these uniforms for insignia. Is that correct? Are you aware of any concerns about naval uniforms when women are pregnant?

**Anna Wright:** We have not had people come to us with those issues, so I am glad that people have felt able to speak up about them. I was one of the first to be allowed to remain in the Navy when I was pregnant, and it took seven months to get my uniform, because they were in the early years of having them. I looked like a ship in sail with my uniform. Happily, these have changed, and I think they are much better than they used to be, but I can understand that somebody would not want to stand out early on.

Q67 **Chair:** I am going to slot in one last question, if that is all right, which is about the MoD's career transition partnership. The evidence is suggesting that the uptake is very low for female service leavers, because it is quite male-orientated, so ultimately they are not getting the support that their male counterparts would have when they are looking at transitioning into civilian life. Is this something that women who have come to you have expressed a concern about?

**Maria Lyle:** We have not had women raising that with us as a complaint. However, we did do a tri-service families federation report on transition, which looked at a number of issues, mainly for families. The statistics for women around taking up the CTP offer are clear: they are not doing it in the same way. I think, again, it would be really interesting to do some further research to understand the reasons behind that.

I have heard it dismissed as being simply, "Well, women leave because they want to look after children," so they are not accessing it because they have decided to opt out of the workplace. Now, there are some statistics to say they are more likely than men to be economically inactive and therefore, quite possibly, leaving to spend some time with children. That is fine, but are there the retraining and career options available that represent the full gamut of what women might be interested in going into? My answer on that would be: probably not.

I actually did use CTP myself and found it fairly helpful, but I do not think that women have been involved in designing the opportunities available within it in the same way that men have.

**Anna Wright:** I would agree with what Maria has said. It was a tri-fed piece of research that we did.

**Chair:** Thank you, all. That is the end of our first session looking into the lived experiences of women in the Military and female veterans. I do not think we should underestimate how important this platform has been for women to have their voice heard and valued.



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**Maria Lyle:** Chair, could I add one more short point? I really want to add some weight to the earlier witnesses' concerns about the service complaints system. It will be writ large, I am sure, in much of the evidence, but the fact is that we have people coming to the RAF Families Federation distressed because they are caught up in it.

Women are over-represented in that system; therefore, that has got to be a factor in women's experience of the Military. I personally have not experienced it, so I am not coming at it from personal experience, but I do know of others who have been let down by it. So if we can make recommendations around the reform or independence of that system and a deep-rooted change from where it currently is, I would wholeheartedly support that.

**Chair:** Maria, that is a great segue. Watch in on 18 March for the second session, which will be all about the service complaints and service justice system. Thank you very much for that prompt—good timing. Thank you all. Your input has been much appreciated.