

Written evidence submitted by the RAF Families Federation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: We welcome the opportunity to revisit the recommendations that were provided in the July 2021 Report into Women in the Armed Forces. It is clear that the MOD and single Services have made some progress against the recommendations, but we believe there is still much more to do. The cultural change that we outlined in our evidence two years ago is still at best a 'work in progress,' which is unsurprising given the long-term nature of such change. Indeed, events during 2022 may have made that process lengthier and more challenging for the RAF because they impacted on levels of trust in senior RAF leaders.

THE RAF FAMILIES FEDERATION

The RAF Families Federation is funded by the RAF but sits outside the Chain of Command as an independent organisation, parented by the RAF Association. We represent all RAF personnel, be they Regular, Reserve, single, married or in a partnership, together with their families. We are tasked with representing serving personnel as well as families. We capture evidence of issues and concerns, and report to senior RAF and MOD staffs, and government ministers, proposing changes to improve quality of life for personnel and their families.

How much change has there been in past two years, when it comes to improving the experience of female Service personnel and/or female veterans?

Our review of the recommendations has been from the perspective of serving female Service personnel, rather than that of veterans. One point we wish to highlight is that an environment where more of these issues are (rightly) discussed has led to more disclosures being made public. This has coincided with much work being put into place around unacceptable behaviours, and a focus on the recruitment and career pathways for female personnel - which included questions and challenges made public around the way this was being embedded into practice by the RAF. Anecdotally, some RAF personnel have found the overall impact of these events unsettling. We have seen this articulated most clearly on social media, but also in the impact of the enquiry into RAF recruiting practices - part of the reason behind significant levels of distrust with the senior leadership, which came out clearly in the AFCAS 2023 report.¹ Unfortunately, this makes the cultural change needed to underpin some of the recommendations harder to reinforce. Whilst there has been a raft of updated and improved policies put in place (below), leaders at all levels are required to understand and enact these, and an atmosphere of distrust makes this harder.

What specific changes are you aware of against the Committee's initial recommendations?

There has been some limited progress made in implementing the recommendations. In some cases, this is because the MOD did not accept a recommendation - such as establishing a central Defence Authority to provide a reporting and investigation system outside the chain of command - despite both the Committee and reports such as the Wigston Report making the case for this. The same is true of the decision not to automatically move murder, manslaughter and rape to the civilian court system. We regard these as missed opportunities given the current statistics on the retention of female personnel, and a change that would underline the intent of the MOD to make significant changes to deliver a fair and safe environment.

¹ [UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2023 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/115444/uk-regular-armed-forces-continuous-attitude-survey-2023.pdf) P5

The MOD has made progress in introducing new policies to handle unacceptable behaviours which arguably give a clearer framework for female personnel to utilise in the absence of more fundamental change. However better promotion of these via a range of more innovative communications methods would be welcomed across the single Services and Units. Throughout 2022 the MOD has implemented a series of actions Ministry of Defence policies to tackle unacceptable behaviour - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk):

[Tackling Sexual Offending in Defence Strategy](#): Applies to all Armed Forces personnel.

[Zero Tolerance to Unacceptable Sexual Behaviour: A Victim/Survivor focused approach policy](#). Applies to all Armed Forces personnel.

[Zero Tolerance to Unacceptable Sexual Offences and Sexual relationships between Instructors and Trainees](#). Applies to all Armed Forces personnel.

[JSP 769: Zero Tolerance to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(SEA\) Policy](#). Applies all MOD service and civilian personnel.

In addition, the MOD has updated several policies and measures to tackle, prevent and report unacceptable behaviour:

[JSP 763: The MOD Behaviours and Informal Complaints Resolution Policy](#): A guide for all MOD service and civilian personnel on behaviours and the informal complaints resolution process.

[JSP 831: Redress of individual grievances: service complaints](#): A guide for MOD service and civilian personnel on the application of policy for service complaints.

[Armed Forces service complaints process](#): Information about how to make a UK Armed Forces service complaint, including changes made to the complaint process on 15 June 2022.

There has been progress regarding female uniform and health support – for example, the RAF has introduced Menopause Dresses, and there are sports bras issued. It is a one-time provision; new joiners will be provided with an initial issue allowance. On health, the MOD has published a [Servicewomen's Health Handbook - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) which is available to all personnel to better inform managers about specific female health needs. In addition, the MOD has developed a Menopause Policy and a women's health survey.

Are there areas where you hope to see more change?

The RAF, in common with the other single Services, is not meeting recruiting targets for female personnel. ² 2023 stats confirm that 15.6%³ of the RAF are female. Whilst this is higher than the Army or Royal Navy, it still lags behind air forces in countries such as the USA and Australia. Although there has been progress in the areas noted above, there are still significant challenges, and the most recent figures showed more women leave the Armed Forces than join, which is likely to see the ratio of RAF females decrease. ⁴

² [Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2021-22 \(parliament.uk\)](#)

³ [UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics: April 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ [UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics: April 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Despite the new measures outlined above, this year's FAMCAS report⁵ reported that 12% of all female personnel report being subject to sexual harassment in a Service environment in the last 12 months, compared to less than 1% of male personnel; these levels have not changed since the question was first asked in 2021.

As outlined above, we would question whether defence has made the fundamental changes in resourcing, organisation - and even more crucially - independence of investigation which would allow it to be as robust as possible in showing a commitment to change and support the recruitment and retention of female personnel.

Personnel overseas would benefit from more support infrastructure for those RAF service personnel experiencing domestic abuse. In the UK there is the support provided by Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA). There currently are not IDVAs accessible to those serving overseas. RAF Community Support is exploring funding options with the RAF Benevolent Fund for Aurora New Dawn to provide this service.

We have had feedback very recently from female personnel serving on a detachment overseas where they were expected to share ablutions, which included naked male personnel, making them feel uncomfortable. The Chain of Command should always fully examine what options are available in austere operating conditions, which can include simple measures such as temporary sign on the door indicated whether men or women are using the facilities.

Finally, with the increase in initiatives to support service personnel there needs to be consistent communication and access to the services to ensure that people are aware of these changes and know where to get/how to access the relevant information.

Do you see 'easy wins' for the Services/MOD?

That very much depends on the definition of 'easy win.' Most of the quick changes in terms of updating and publicising new policies and improving uniforms have been made or are in progress.

What has helped or hindered change?

After flagging childcare as barrier in our previous report, we welcomed the implementation of wrap around childcare, rolling out in Autumn 2022. In some areas (particularly in Scotland) access to this is still an issue due to constraints in local childcare provision. In addition, the RAF is working through a rolling programme of reviewing and tendering for nursery provision on its units, seeking best value and quality from childcare providers.

It may well be that the publicity around cases of harassment, discrimination and assault that have been covered in the press recently will have been a disincentive to women considering joining the armed forces. In addition, these cases will no doubt impact those women currently serving and considering whether to stay. Whilst senior leaders in all three single Services have been unequivocal in condemning these events, there is less evidence of structural change in response to these events.

Summary

Whilst significant work has gone into developing improved policies that support some of the Select Committee recommendations from 2021, more can and should be done to address more fundamental change, such as the specific recommendation for a central Defence Authority. There is limited evidence that a positive change has occurred – for example, the retention of female personnel has not improved, nor has there been a drop in female personnel saying they have experienced harassment.

⁵ [UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2023 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

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