

Written evidence submitted by the RAF Families Federation

DEFENCE COMMITTEE ENQUIRY- WOMEN IN THE ARMED FORCES: FROM RECRUITMENT TO CIVILIAN LIFE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: We welcome the significant changes around flexible working, flexible service and wraparound childcare that have been introduced within the last three years. These should support the retention of female serving personnel, and offer more options for all serving personnel. There is more to do. We believe further cultural change will be needed to support the take up of these offers by male personnel, and to challenge the default of responsibility for childcare or flexible service sitting with female personnel. In addition, a much clearer understanding is needed of why women are over represented within the service complaints system, and why female military careers tend to be shorter than male careers.

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 single 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.

RAF FAMILIES FEDERATION EVIDENCE - ADDRESSING KEY ENQUIRY QUESTIONS

We have answered specific questions from the enquiry list, where as an organisation we have gathered evidence, views and experiences. There are other areas which we feel are clearly important, but have not had these issues directly raised with us by personnel.

Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces?

There are undoubtedly a range of unique and additional challenges faced by female personnel in the RAF. Our focus in this submission will be the areas where we have been directly approached for support by personnel, rather than areas where we do not have direct evidence brought to us.

The RAF is seeking to achieve higher numbers of female serving personnel by 2030 (20% overall, with 40% of new recruits being female). The RAF currently has the highest percentage of Regular female serving personnel in the UK armed forces at 14.9%¹, but in comparison to other '5 Eyes' air forces, these figures are fairly low. For comparison, figures in other air forces include Canada at 20%, USA at 20% and Australia at 22 %

This ambition for higher numbers of female personnel (and more representation of women at senior ranks), is set against the wider societal context of working women bearing a more significant mental load and responsibility for household and domestic/family tasks². We see this illustrated in the personnel who contact us around childcare issues or flexible working queries – female personnel are still more likely to approach us for advice on flexible service and childcare than a male partner, and so appear to be bearing more of the responsibility for

¹ [UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 October 2020 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-1-october-2020)

² [Insights 2017 A4 stg 6.pdf \(understandingsociety.ac.uk\)](https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/insights/2017/A4_stg_6.pdf)

locating and arranging childcare. They are also more likely to make arrangements for flexible working to fit around childcare requirements.

Retaining female personnel with children – or those who are planning to have children – will be important to the RAF if goals around female retention and more female senior representation are to be met. The RAF Families Federation Childcare Survey³ found that RAF personnel face the same barriers of high cost and availability of childcare experienced by the civilian population. This is compounded when considering mobility, which means the costs of childcare can fluctuate significantly on posting– we received many responses to our survey detailing differences in costs of hundreds of pounds per month, depending on location. Availability of childcare places in some locations, and flexibility of hours available were also highlighted as problems. Many civilian families make use of close family members to provide childcare to combat issues of cost and flexibility, but few military families are able to make use of this option⁴.

What about female BAME personnel?

We do not hold enough unique data about the experiences of female BAME personnel to draw any specific conclusions about their experiences within the RAF. We have been concerned by the points made by the Service Complaints Ombudsman, who has repeatedly highlighted the over representation of BAME and female personnel within the service complaints system, including complaints raised by RAF personnel⁵. We therefore extrapolate that personnel who are both female and BAME potentially face some significant challenges.

Are the Government and MOD doing enough to address these challenges? What more could be done? How effective are their strategies/initiatives?

The introduction of Flexible Working, Flexible Service, and the Wraparound Childcare Pilot launched last year at RAF Halton and RAF High Wycombe are all examples of positive progress, and RAF data over time may show the potential benefits of these changes. It is also worth noting that the RAF won a best practice award from the Working Families charity in 2020 for support to mothers in the workplace, in recognition for the package of support in place for serving mothers.⁶

It is arguably harder to tackle entrenched cultural issues driving the over representation of women in the complaints systems, and the high scores around bullying, harassment and discrimination seen in AFCAS.⁷ The RAF senior leadership team have spent a significant amount of time educating personnel on issues impacting minority groups within the RAF, and leading a cultural change. However, the introduction of a defence wide anonymous helpline last year, whilst welcome, needs in our view to be more widely marketed and promoted to personnel. It would be interesting to understand the uptake of this support option so far.

What effect has the introduction of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Act (2010) had?

³ [Our Surveys and Reports | RAF Families Federation \(raf-ff.org.uk\)](https://www.raf-ff.org.uk/our-surveys-and-reports)

⁴ [SFR template National Statistics 240815 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/424815/SFR-template-National-Statistics-240815.pdf)

⁵ [SCOAF-Annual-Report-2019-Factsheet-RAF.pdf](https://www.raf-ff.org.uk/scoaf-annual-report-2019-factsheet-raf.pdf)

⁶ [Working Families | Working Families Announces Winners of 2020 Best Practice Awards - Working Families](https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/news/working-families-announces-winners-of-2020-best-practice-awards)

⁷ [Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2020 main report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/424815/Armed-Forces-Continuous-Attitude-Survey-2020-main-report.pdf)

The flexibility offered has been very welcomed. The RAF will have more specific detailed evidence to show any early impact on retention, given it is still the case that female serving personnel currently serve on average for shorter durations than men. However, one ongoing challenge will be to support the wider cultural change needed within the services to support and encourage men to take this option as well as women, given that research carried out in a range of civilian firms shows that comparatively few men request the option⁸.

Do female Reservists face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces? Are they similar to those faced by regular female service personnel?

We have had no issues raised to us that are specific to female Reservists. We welcome the lower rates of harassment, bullying and discrimination cited in RESCAS⁹ in comparison to AFCAS, and the fact that the RAF Reserves have a significantly higher percentage of women serving (23.2% vs 14.9% for Regular RAF).¹⁰ Whilst this does not mean that issues do not occur for female reservists, the data on Reservist personnel is more positive.

Why do female service personnel choose to leave the armed forces? Are the reasons different to why men leave the armed forces?

The study funded by the Forces in Mind Trust on these issues found that female service personnel appear to choose to leave the armed forces for similar reasons that male service leavers do.¹¹ The fact remains that female service personnel generally serve for a shorter period of time than male personnel. Understanding the reasons behind those shorter terms of service is important, and we are not aware of a full data set or quantitative research on this gap.

How easy is it in practice for female service personnel to complain? What are the issues encouraging or hindering female personnel from complaining?

As noted in the response on BAME personnel, it is clear that female service personnel are over represented in the service complaints system. The Service Complaints Ombudsman has also flagged on multiple occasions her view that the system is 'not efficient, effective or fair.'¹² Whilst some female personnel are coming forward to complain (hence the over representation), the fact that the system is not working as effectively as it should leads us to believe there are others who would be put off raising a complaint. As noted in the Wigston Review, there is a lack of service wide data and research on factors impacting on why female personnel may or may not complain.¹³ We welcome the completion of an RAF Sexual Harassment Survey in late 2020, the results of which may contribute further to the understanding in this field.

Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges during transition to civilian life?

Fewer female service leavers are economically active after leaving the military than male service leavers, and of those who are not economically active, most said they would prefer to be employed. The Cranfield Study on Female Service Leavers and Employment¹⁴ has

⁸ [Flexible working qualitative analysis \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

⁹ [RESCAS survey report 2020 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

¹⁰ [UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 October 2020 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

¹¹ [female-service-leavers-employment.pdf \(pcdn.co\)](https://pcdn.co)

¹² [20200428-SCOAF-2019-Annual-Report.pdf](https://pcdn.co)

¹³ [Wigston review \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

¹⁴ [female-service-leavers-employment.pdf \(pcdn.co\)](https://pcdn.co)

some excellent recommendations on this area, not all of which have been enacted – we would support further work on this.

Conclusion

There have been some significant positive steps to support the inclusion and retention of female personnel within recent years. Flexible service, flexible working, and the wrap around childcare pilot are all important initiatives. However, the provision of childcare for RAF families remains patchy - in some locations it is expensive, inflexible and has insufficient places available.

The continued over representation of female personnel within the service complaints system is very troubling, and a more detailed understanding of the drivers behind this would be very helpful. Further qualitative data on the reasons female personnel leave could ensure that the diversity and inclusion work being conducted across defence is being correctly formulated and targeted.

29 January 2021