

Written evidence submitted by the 'Living in our shoes' review team

Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life

This response is submitted by Professor Janet Walker OBE on behalf of the 'Living in our shoes' review team:

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This response is informed by the review commissioned in 2019 by the then Secretary of State in the Ministry of Defence (MOD) into the needs of UK Armed Forces families led by Andrew Selous MP.¹ The subsequent report from the review: '*Living in our shoes, Understanding the needs of Armed Forces families*' was published in June 2020² and formally launched on 12 January 2021.³ The review team collected evidence from Armed Forces families across the UK and those stationed abroad and the analysis of the evidence led to 110 recommendations for change. During the review, Andrew Selous and Janet Walker talked directly with a number of female Serving personnel, some of whom were single mothers and others were in dual-serving partnerships. The team also received written evidence from female Serving personnel across the three main services.

We are grateful for the opportunity to offer evidence to this very important inquiry. We address below the questions posed by the Defence Committee for which we have evidence from the review.

Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the Armed Forces?

Yes.

Serving women and parenting

The additional challenges faced by female Service women are particularly evident when the Serving woman is a parent. The obligations of military life put operational effectiveness and the commitment to 'duty first' as a number one priority. Family life is secondary. Yet it is well-documented that childcare and responsibility for the raising of children in our society falls mainly on mothers rather than fathers. The impact of service life on all military families featured heavily during the review, with the majority of respondents to the call for evidence and the Serving and non-serving families we met on military bases, raising concerns about the challenges of balancing family life with the rigours of military life. Parents were particularly exercised about the effects of their life-style on their children. They cited the high level of mobility and repeated periods of separation which can lead to increased numbers of children and young people experiencing levels of stress and anxiety. A literature review by the University of Winchester⁴ found that deployment has a significant impact both academically and pastorally on Service children, creating:

- an increased incidence of emotional and behavioural problems

¹ Andrew Selous MP was the Lead Reviewer, Prof Janet Walker OBE was the Lead Adviser, and Dr. Gabriela Misca was the Research Adviser

² The full report and the Summary are available on gov.uk

³ Link to the launch webinar is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH7qw3czvMs&t=130s>

⁴ McConnell et al (2019) *Early Support for Military-connected Families: evaluation of services at NSPCC military sites*, NSPCC

- a higher incidence of mental health issues in children and parents
- an increased incidence of children as carers.

While the vast majority of Serving parents are male, the drive to attract more women into the military means that an increasing number will be mothers at some stage even if they join as single women without children. Much of the evidence about the negative impacts of deployment on children's wellbeing refers to the absence of fathers, but there is every reason to expect that these impacts will be just as great if not greater when mothers are absent for long periods as a result of military service. We suggest that more research about how children fare when their Serving mother is away is needed to examine these impacts in greater depth. We know that fathers miss children's milestones and family occasions and it is certain that Serving mothers will also miss important family time with their children. While both mobility and separation are characteristics of military life, the latter poses significant conflicts for Serving mothers who frequently feel torn between their career and their role as a mother. This is an even more significant issue for single Serving mothers and those in dual-serving households.

Families with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), face additional challenges when the family is moved from one location to another. Serving mothers highlighted the additional strain they felt when trying to find suitable schooling for SEND children, and their concern when their child may receive no educational support for several months. This challenge can effect their career prospects. For example, one mother described how she had turned down promotion in the RAF and her husband had taken time off from his work in order to address their son's special needs on assignment. This was a recurring issue in our call for evidence.

We heard from a number of dual-serving parents whose children had experienced greater challenges with either one or the other parent being away much of the time. Family life when both parents were at home was scarce. They felt that understanding and support for dual-serving families is lacking within the Armed Forces. Moreover, they pointed to the challenges associated with postings that are not co-located and several mothers indicated that looking after two small children while both parents were serving was increasingly unsustainable and would almost certainly result in them leaving the military. It was not unusual for dual-serving parents to be told that they may have to consider placing their children in foster care if they wanted to maintain their careers. This is a suggestion that all the parents we spoke to regarded as completely unacceptable. The decision as to whether to maintain a military career was often influenced by the availability, accessibility and the affordability of appropriate childcare. Without extended family members living nearby and able to offer childcare, Serving mothers cited the lack of wrap-around childcare as a barrier to sustaining a military career. The Children's Commissioner has highlighted the disruptions experienced by children in dual-serving families.⁵ The problem these parents face was illustrated by a dual-serving mother who gave evidence to our review who said:

'...there is still a difference for a Service couple where both partners are working. Traditionally the Service is geared for men with wives at home. When we both serve, we face additional challenges. For example, on returning from maternity leave I was offered a role which would have seen me away for at least three out of four weeks'.⁶

It was impossible for her to accept this role because she was still breast-feeding, and her husband had a twenty-four hour watch-keeping role in the Royal Navy. Moreover, this mother told us that her daughter

⁵ Children's Commissioner for England, (2018) *Kin and Country: growing up as an Armed Forces child*

⁶ *Living in our shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families* p86

had changed nursery four times by the age of four, which had *'affected her development, both personal and educational'*. While childcare may well be a challenge for civilian families when both parents are working, nevertheless the specific demands of Service life render it even more challenging for Serving mothers to find childcare support that fits with the demands of their career.

Some families choose to send their children to boarding school when they are older in order to provide some educational stability. For some parents this is not what they would wish but feel that they have to make difficult choices between maintaining a military career and looking after their children's best interests. The prevailing view from our review is that dual-serving couples find it extremely difficult to continue their careers and bring up children. A Royal Marine father in a dual-serving family told us:⁷

'...we are both working full time in the military with children. The constant cycle/threat of moving home and then having to re-establish ourselves with childcare again, with one of us being away so much of the time...there has been a marked increase in personal instability over the last few years with short notice job changes to fill gaps...We both love our jobs, but there have been occasions recently when the 'is it worth it' or 'is it sustainable' question had to be asked.'

We agree with the recommendation by the Children's Commissioner for England that when both parents are serving and subject to deployment, every effort must be made to ensure that both parents are never deployed at the same time, and certainly never unless suitable childcare is available.⁸ This requires those career managers determining assignments for each parent in dual-serving partnerships and for single mothers to take account of their parental responsibilities.

Serving women and health

We considered in some detail the differences between the provision of medical services for Serving personnel and those provided to non-serving family members. Primary health care, including community mental health, for Service personnel is provided by Defence Medical Services (DMS). The health of non-serving family members and children and young people is the responsibility of the NHS in the four nations of the UK. Only overseas do DMS provide comprehensive healthcare to the whole family. Having to find doctors and dentists on every relocation in the UK is challenging for non-serving partners, but it is even more difficult for dual-serving parents and single Serving mothers. We were given numerous examples of GP surgeries refusing to register children unless at least one parent was also registered with the practice. Although GP regulations were updated some three years ago to ensure that military children can be registered with a practice when their parents are registered with DMS, the DMS staff on bases we visited acknowledged that it is not helpful for children to be registered completely separately from their parents.

There is a considerable risk to the child from being registered as an 'orphan' as the GP is unable to provide any oversight of any child protection concerns. Registering children and their parents with the same medical practice allows any child protection or safeguarding issues to be flagged up earlier. Several DMS doctors argued that there should be a more comprehensive offer of healthcare to families, especially when both parents and single mothers are serving. An integrated model of primary and secondary healthcare for Armed Forces families is the norm in the US (coordinated by a TRICARE healthcare system) and it is especially helpful for ensuring any mental health concerns relating to any family member can be addressed by the same medical team. We understand from NHSEI and welfare staff at military bases that there has been a notable rise in mental health issues, particularly relating to military children, emotional disorders

⁷ Ibid. p 87

⁸ Children's Commissioner op cit.

including anxiety and depression being the most prevalent. There remains a stigma about admitting mental health issues and this can result in Serving personnel leaving the Armed Forces because of the toll on their health and their family life. The Armed Forces Mental Health Strategy must take a whole family approach to the problem, and this is a current MOD priority. We paid particular attention to the growing concerns relating to mental health and wellbeing within the military and these can be found in Chapter 6 of our report.

We have argued that recent moves towards a more integrated approach in primary care for military families in the UK (such as that being developed at Catterick Garrison) should be encouraged to avoid the current disconnect between healthcare for Service personnel and family members. DMS staff indicated that it is extremely difficult to ensure that families receive the necessary support from the Chain of Command if civilian GPs feel unable to share concerns with DMS staff. This disconnect is an issue which concerns many dual-serving couples and single mothers in the military.

The transition to parenthood

Numerous research studies⁹ confirm that the transition to parenthood marks a change in family dynamics which can have positive and negative consequences for families and relationships. We were particularly impressed by the Parental Support Programme for Serving Parents and for Non-serving Partners which we learned about during our visit to HMNB Devonport. The Royal Navy employs parental support Senior Rates in Devonport and Portsmouth to offer support to Serving and non-serving women who are pregnant or adopting a child. The Royal Navy measure the benefit of this service in terms of retention of Serving mothers, and the Captain of the Devonport base told us in 2019 there had been a considerable fall in the Serving mothers opting to leave the Navy after maternity leave, from 16 per cent to 3 per cent annually. We have recommended that a similar service should be offered on all military bases. Commanding Officers in all three services indicated that the transition to parenthood and the ability to balance a naval career with family responsibilities is a major determinant of Serving women exiting the Armed Forces.

Why do female Service personnel leave the Armed Forces?

The evidence submitted in answer to the previous question gives a clear indication as to why some Serving women leave the Armed Forces prematurely. There are a number of push and pull factors. The most common push factor is the incompatibility of Service life with family life. We received evidence from a number of military families who mentioned other factors such as dissatisfaction with pay and allowances; lack of job satisfaction; lack of career progression; and feeling undervalued. The pull factors included better career opportunities outside the military; greater choice and control over daily life; more stability; and more time as a family. However, most of those leaving the Armed Forces expressed sorrow that they had to leave a career that they loved, but the stress and the disadvantages just became too much.

The incompatibility of Service and family life is a key factor, especially for Serving mothers. Dual-serving partners were aware of the strain associated with managing demanding careers with raising children, such that it becomes inevitable that one of them would have to leave the military. Almost invariably it is the female Serving partner who makes this choice in order to support her partner's career and fulfil her responsibilities as a parent. This difficult decision is enhanced when the Serving parents are working at different bases, or are in different branches of the military, and find it impossible to live together in any co-

⁹ See, for example, Walker et al (2010) *Relationships Matter: understanding the needs of adults (particularly parents) regarding relationship support*, Department for children, schools, and families, Research report DCSF-RR233

located home. We were told that it is a struggle for some dual-serving couples to ensure compatibility in their work demands when career managers do not talk to each other nor attempt to balance the differing demands. This pressure was cogently described by a Royal Navy dual-serving mother:

'Pressure on my relationship with my husband and both of us with our children is considerable. We are resigned to living separately for the majority of the time. We have no prospect of living together. I have no choice about where I work and neither does he. We have no choice as to who is in a position to care for the children and therefore where they live...we both love our jobs but have discussions about whether it is really worth the cost to our marriage and our children.'

Another mother in a dual-serving couple who had made the decision to leave the Royal Navy told us:

'The year post our wedding my husband and I were both deployed at sea. It nearly broke us. The added pressure of having a displaced family, small children, both parents in Command roles and trying to strive for promotion and advancement is a hard dynamic to manage...It is my opinion that long-term it is unsustainable to have two parents in the Forces...My children's needs must come first, followed by our needs as a couple. I would very much like to continue working in the Navy but not to the destruction of my marriage and my children's happiness.'

We heard about these difficult decisions from many dual-serving couples, some of whom referred to increasing mental health problems due to the stress of trying to manage their careers alongside their duties as parents. In the vast majority of cases it was the Serving woman who decided to leave the Armed Forces in order to resume the role of supporter of a Serving male partner and concentrate on looking after the family. Mothers who had chosen to leave the Services spoke of deployments being too long to be sustainable; becoming burnt out; spending too much time apart from their partner and their children; the added pressure on women to commit whole-heartedly to their chosen career while trying to keep a marriage and family together; and the inevitable strain on relationships.

They also spoke about what they perceived to be a lack of understanding and support within the military. They consider that the Armed Forces are not female friendly, there is too much bullying, and that all ranks are forced to complete work within unrealistic time-frames. While flexible working might relieve some of the pressure, living in different locations will still cause enormous stress. Women want much greater coordination of career pathways for dual-serving couples and Serving mothers. Preventing relationship stress and being aware of the cumulative pressures for Serving mothers are needed within the Armed Forces if women are to be retained.

We have recommended that there needs to be a more pro-active system of support, greater attention given to the importance of stability for families managing competing demands, and to ensure that Serving personnel and their families feel valued by the military. There is also a need to pay attention to the experiences of Serving personnel from the Commonwealth. We met single Serving women from Commonwealth countries who had not been able to travel home to see their families for several years, and whose family members could not afford to visit them in the UK. They do not get any support to travel home unlike UK Serving personnel. No Serving person should have to face years of separation from their family.

Concluding Comment

We were privileged to meet many brave and committed Serving women in all three Services. We have recognised the sacrifices they make to serve in the Armed Forces. In order to value them and to aid

retention we have recommended that there needs to be cultural change within the Armed Forces that seeks to better understand and respond to the additional pressures on single Serving mothers and dual-serving families with children, offering pro-active support to enable them to continue to meet the overriding need for operational effectiveness.

We would be happy to offer further evidence to the Defence Committee at any time.

This response is submitted by Professor Janet Walker OBE on behalf of the '*Living in our shoes*' review team.

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Evidence from the review of the support needs of Armed Forces Families: *Living in our shoes* published in June 2020.

Summary of the evidence submitted

This submission provides evidence relating primarily to the additional pressures on Service women who are parents. It addresses two questions:

1. **Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the Armed Forces?**
2. **Why do female Service personnel leave the Armed Forces?**

Question 1. The submission looks at the difficulties relating to balancing the demands of military service with the demands of family life for single Serving mothers and dual-serving families. Concerns about the impact of both parents being away on deployments on children's wellbeing frequently led to many Serving mothers deciding that they could not sustain a military career and provide adequate care for their children. Almost invariably it is the Serving mother in a dual-serving family who makes the decision to relinquish a military career in order to support the male Service family member and their children. Single Service women with children also struggle with balancing work and home life and often struggle to find suitable wrap-around childcare. These challenges can result in parents and children experiencing mental health problems.

The submission also considers Serving women and the provision of healthcare for their children, looking specifically at the disadvantages of children having to be registered as 'orphans' with a civilian GP while the Serving parent(s) receive primary healthcare from Defence Medical Services. In considering the challenges relating to the disconnect in healthcare, we also examined the needs of Serving women during and after having a baby.

Question 2. While we found evidence of both push and pull factors, the most common push factor is the incompatibility of Service life with family life. In parallel with this, the most common pull factor was greater choice and control over daily life, coupled with being able to spend more time with the family. When managing a military career alongside bringing up children becomes too stressful it is usually the female

Serving partner that leaves the military in dual-serving families. Serving women told us that these were difficult decisions as they had loved their jobs but they were not prepared to sacrifice their children's happiness.

Service women spoke about the lack of understanding and support within the military which, in their view, continues to be structured around a male model in which men join the military while women stay at home to care for children. If women are to be valued and retained in the Armed Forces, there needs to be greater pro-active support to ensure that they can balance the demands of military service with the demands of parenthood.

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