



15 The Push for Inclusion

As military policies seek to reflect changes in broader society, traditional boundaries are challenged by the wider embracing of family, diversity, and equality.

The general view that the Armed Forces are becoming empathetic to the real needs of family life, are keen to embrace diversity, and are looking at new ways to provide opportunity, was expressed by many we interviewed. That said, although open to change, it is also fair to say that not everyone felt completely comfortable with the idea of traditional hierarchies being challenged. *“Diverse workforces have more successful outcomes. But they are not the military. Should we reflect society? I’m not sure.”*¹⁰⁷ Like it or not, however, the days of Armed Forces personnel living a 24/7 existence within their own community are, in peace time at least, numbered.

But the drive for diversity also affects the make-up of the Services themselves. There are a number of areas in which the Armed Forces are embracing change. Reservations aside, for many, the primary issue is how military personnel can better represent wider society. Today is increasingly *“about the Forces wanting to reflect the society they defend. So, they need to be able to step outside of the wire and bridge that gap.”*¹⁰⁸ With more Service personnel living off-base, several consider that the traditional barrier of being an enclosed community is eroding. *“It all comes down to engagement”.*¹⁰⁹ Greater interaction with civilian life makes the transition out of the Forces easier. It also makes it easier for wider family members to build a life of their own, forging a career or, for children, going to school with a wider cohort. Some suggest that in the future, *“maybe a family would never have to live behind the wire. It will just become commonplace to live close to your work, like others do.”*¹¹⁰ Others disagree. *“I don’t think it will go that far,”*¹¹¹ as *“being in the Armed Forces is not a job, it’s a life. It’s*

*24/7.”*¹¹² So often *“there is no need to go beyond the wire and no need for life beyond the wire to come to you.”*¹¹³ The problem is, if many continue to live this way, *“with food and health paid for ... they may struggle to understand how things are done when they leave.”*¹¹⁴

One expert suggested that overall, *“there is a huge blind spot around families,”*¹¹⁵ and in particular *“veteran families are a hidden group”*¹¹⁶, with the support offered to them as *“lip service.”*¹¹⁷ Whether on or off base, greater understanding of the challenges and different needs of family life is clearly difficult. Perhaps this is down to a lack of appropriate leadership. For example, we heard reference to senior leadership of both the current Services and also the charities that support veteran communities being *“stale, pale, and male.”*¹¹⁸ Even some in senior positions hoped that, as they retire, *“boards do not appoint in their likeness, but instead bring fresh, different approaches to their leadership.”*¹¹⁹ With its still largely male focus, several consider that *“the military is not remotely there on equality and diversity.”*¹²⁰ The knock-on effect on family life was often mentioned. Despite the MOD increasing its investment into childcare support, *“children of serving personnel have been found to be at greater risk (compared to children with non-military parents) of emotional and behavioural problems.”*¹²¹ Consequently, *“you choose your career, or you choose your children.”*¹²² We heard that this disproportionately affects women, *“a lot of women leave the Armed Forces because of the challenge of balancing kids, where primary care givers are mostly women.”*¹²³

Our interviews revealed that in general, women often have a difficult transition when leaving the Armed Forces. *“It was a real hardship to leave, but the reason I left was that the military made it incompatible to serve and to bring up children.”*¹²⁴ While *“there are more female veterans out there,”*¹²⁵ they currently comprise only 10% of the current Services community. As a result, integration back into society can be a lonely process. *“It is doubly difficult being both a veteran and a woman.”*¹²⁶ Several we spoke to suggest it is *“amazing how little dedicated provision there is for female vets.”*¹²⁷ In part, this is because *“most studies focus on men, with limited evidence based on the experience of women and families.”*¹²⁸ As more women are joining the Armed Forces, the problem is becoming more pressing. *“If this is not addressed, then those problems will magnify if nothing is done about it now.”*¹²⁹

Certainly, it seems that *“one of the most commonly recorded reasons for personnel leaving the military is unsuitable employment opportunities for spouses and partners.”*¹³⁰ Sometimes, it seems that this is due to focus; there are simply too many other priorities to be dealt with. Other times it is due to process. For instance, *“at the moment, the military can only contact families through the Service person. So lots of information gets lost. Unless the military can get over the communications/information gap, the military will never be able to get the family involved properly.”*¹³¹

We often heard the suggestion that the *“concept of family needs to be carefully considered, as there are lots of different styles of family.”*¹³² Several felt *“a huge relief when the MOD recognised gay marriage and civil marriage,”*¹³³ but *“the serving community is a small C conservative community”*¹³⁴ and needs to continue to move forwards. Much can be achieved if the right tone and language are used. However, *“at a recent Sandhurst dinner, I heard some stuff that made me think that people don’t understand the terminology - they are struggling to see people as just people.”*¹³⁵ In terms of the MOD keeping pace with society, some have the *“impression that the two have diverged more over the last 20 years. Civil society and its ideas are racing ahead - but the Armed Forces find it difficult to have open and unembarrassed conversations. That worries me, because I see a loss of relevance.”*¹³⁶

The Armed Forces are also doing their best to address issues of race and ethnicity, and have developed clear policies around discrimination. Given the young cohort from which the Army in particular recruits is more ethnically diverse than the population as a whole, it needs to improve its image among BAME people to keep its numbers up. While some consider attitudes to race have a long way to go, others see progress in comparison to other fields: *“I thought the military was in the dark ages on racism until I left and worked elsewhere.”*¹³⁷

An Implication: Armed Forces charities seek to increase the diversity of their leadership in order to better serve the needs of the ex-Forces community.