



# The effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines families

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## **Executive summary**

### **Introduction**

Military families can experience a variety of different separations due to the occupational demands of Service personnel. The most prominent of these is the deployment of personnel on operational and combat missions. Previous international research has demonstrated how separations related to deployment can negatively affect the functioning and health and well-being of military families. However, little is known about how this might compare to shorter, but more frequent separations unrelated to operational deployments – *non-operational family separations*. This form of family separation is more common among the UK Naval Service community, many of whom do not live near military bases or move with personnel but instead reside within local civilian communities across the UK. An estimated 24% of UK Armed Forces families live separately from personnel during the working week, increasing to 36% among Naval Service families (Ministry of Defence 2016). While this can have benefits for Naval Service families in providing increased stability to support spouse/partner employment and the education of children, it often results in serving Naval personnel living away from the family home during the working week - referred to as “weekending”. Such separations can also occur in addition to operational deployments, increasing the time Naval Service families may be apart.

To help understand non-operational family separations and how they influence family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines (RN/RM) families, a research project was commissioned by the Naval Families Federation, with funding from Greenwich Hospital. This report presents the findings of this study and makes recommendations for future research and potential interventions to support military families experiencing this type of separation.

### **Methods**

This study combines data from pre-existing studies of Naval Service personnel, spouses/partners and children from within the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) with new studies including an online survey, interviews and focus groups.

### **Findings**

- The online survey showed most Naval Service spouses/partners perceived non-operational separations to have a negative effect on their employment and on family functioning and health and well-being.
- Spouses in the interview study reported how non-operational separations affected their employment and career progression through difficulties in balancing work and family life without the support of their partner.
- Most spouses reported no major difficulties communicating with personnel.
- The physical absence of Naval Service personnel from the family home during the week was described by spouses as limiting the time families and couples had to spend together and was compounded by short notice changes to working rosters and poor-quality communication.
- Family roles altered across the week to account for the absence of personnel, with older children taking on additional responsibilities to assist the stay-at-home parent and, in some cases, assuming the role of another adult within the household.

- The combination of a lack of time as a family and the rapid changes in family roles could influence family relationships, with resentment towards personnel from spouses who perceived there to be an unequal distribution of family responsibilities.
- Older children were also described as feeling resentment towards their father because of difficulties adjusting to their changing role within the family. However, young people themselves tended to have more positive perceptions about non-operational family separations than spouses.
- The accumulation of stressors arising from separation could influence family mental health and well-being. Many spouses discussed a sense of 'just' coping with their additional responsibilities, with feelings of stress, anxiety, and tiredness reported.
- Some participants directly attributed their mental health problems to separation, either through the emergence of new problems or by exacerbating pre-existing conditions.
- Access to resources such as civilian employer support, social support, childcare and schools and increased finances were reported to help mitigate some of the challenges caused by non-deployment separation, however, these were not available to all families.
- Perceptions of Naval Service support varied, with some spouses receiving excellent support and others reporting little or no assistance. Some spouses expressed confusion about who they should contact if they required welfare services.
- No differences in perceptions of spouses and young people according to rank and Service branch were evident. Variation in experiences instead related to the amount of experience families had with military life, perceived individual personality traits and the age of the children.

### **Conclusions**

The findings demonstrate how non-operational family separations can influence family functioning and well-being among Naval Service families. While this is the first study to focus on this particular aspect of Service life, many of the benefits and challenges reported are similar to those described by families experiencing deployment-related separations. Spouse employment, family roles and relationships and spouse and child health and well-being could all be affected but access to family resources could alleviate adaptation to separations. With an increasing trend towards a greater number of military families settling in civilian communities, it is possible that non-operational separations may increase across all three Services. It is therefore important that additional research and resource is focused on understanding the interaction of particular stressors during these separations and how to best alleviate the issues some families may experience.

### **Recommendations**

Developed from suggestions from participants and the study findings, the following recommendations include ways in which military charities, Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW), Naval Command and the Ministry of Defence can support Naval Service families, and those across the Services, who are experiencing non-operational family separations. While designated to particular institutions, their implementation will require input and support from all parties and should be seen as inter-related, rather than stand-alone proposals.

## **Naval Service families**

Participants in the interview and focus groups were asked for their recommendations on how to manage during non-operational family separations. Their comments included:

- Work at developing communication skills within, and as, a family
- Have a good network of friends, either military or non-military, for support
- Develop independence and self-sufficiency
- Don't overthink it – "roll with it"
- Try to have a positive state of mind and something to look forward to

## **Military charities**

- Ensure advocacy reflects the full range of experiences of Naval Service families, including relocation, deployment and non-operational separations.
- Provide information on common experiences and reactions to weekending and simple methods for overcoming these to help families know what to expect when starting non-operational separations. These should include information about:
  - the benefits and challenges of separations for family relationships and roles
  - the possible impacts on health and well-being for all family members
  - the potential for a period of reintegration at the weekend for all family members
  - ways to manage financial stresses
  - low-cost ways for families to spend quality time together
  - accessing the Naval Service community when not living close to base ports or units
- Develop and advertise online platforms specific to the experiences of families undergoing non-operational separations to increase informal information sharing and emotional support and counter the lack of physical Naval communities.
- Investigate innovative ways to expand advice to Naval Service families to include information on easy ways to encourage physical exercise and healthy eating as well as mental health and well-being. This could be combined with welfare services to provide alternative means of encouraging social interaction between spouses in the Naval Service community to complement services that are already in place.

## **Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW)**

- Increase the provision of information about the services RNRMW can provide families and clear contact details that are easily accessible to non-military personnel and do not rely on personnel as a conduit of information. This should include:
  - Increasing awareness of the Royal Navy Forum
  - Identifying extra resources for increased advertising and resources (e.g. online videos and chat) for current services
  - Exploring additional permissions under Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system to allow RNRMW to contact family members directly
- Improve outreach of RNRMW to increase provision for geographically dispersed families, including greater advertisement of outreach programmes and an easily identifiable and accessible central information point to signpost families to the nearest welfare service. This hub could also help aid information dissemination for families living outside military communities.
- Provide varied timings for community events on bases to encourage spouses with childcare responsibilities to improve access to social support.

- Explore alternative events to coffee mornings and mother-toddler groups to appeal to more spouses/partners and accommodate dual-serving partners.

### **Naval Command and the Ministry of Defence**

- Seek opportunities, where possible given operational requirements, to increase consistency around programming, duties and watch-bills to increase the ability of families to plan.
- Improve training and awareness of the similarities in stressors between families separated by deployment and those separated by other military requirements among military leaders and career managers within the Naval Services.
- Improve identification of separated families within military systems to allow welfare services to target support to families during non-operational separations. This could be introduced as a checkbox in personnel records held by the military with consent for contact by Naval Service representatives.
- Raise awareness of the ‘dependant’s’ pass among families living near Naval Service bases.
- Explore ways of improving information-sharing with Naval Service families to increase awareness about current and planned welfare provision, including exploitation of current and planned systems within the military community such as the Royal Navy Forum or development of new systems for families similar to the Veteran’s Gateway.
- Review the Tri-Service operational and non-operational welfare agreement (JSP 770) to ensure geographically dispersed families are able to receive, and are aware of, welfare support from the Service provider closest to the family home. This should also ensure that departmental policy is delivered appropriately at local level.
- With the trend towards an increase in non-operational separations across all three Services, the Ministry of Defence should consider how dispersed military families could be supported to connect with each other to maintain the benefits of the military community.
- The Ministry of Defence should consider the impact of non-operational family separations as well as relocation in spouse employment initiatives and programmes. A recently announced fund has been established which will help spouses and civil partners of serving personnel who wish to retrain or become self-employed which may help some spouses.
- Childcare programmes for both civilian spouses and women serving across the military should be explored under the Armed Forces Families strategy to help alleviate work-family conflict among Naval Service families.

### **Future research**

- Given the differences in the outcomes of military personnel, veterans, spouses/partners and children by Service, future studies should examine military family health and well-being according to Service branch, to ensure differences are explored and to examine changes over time. This includes data from current and future studies within KCMHR.
- Further research should be conducted to expand on the findings of this study, particularly the experiences of family functioning and well-being among personnel and children and young people. This should include the use of robust measures of mental health, well-being and family outcomes as well as qualitative studies to better understand the impact of this particular form of family life on all family members, including personnel.
- A framework of common stressors during deployment and non-operational separation should be further developed to allow for targeted support in key areas for families undergoing such experiences. This should be disseminated to doctors, social workers,

local councils, teachers and NHS services to improve understanding of different aspects of military life among service providers and associated professions.

- Interventions to support UK military families undergoing non-operational separations and alleviate stressors and support stronger family functioning, health and well-being should be explored. These could be adapted from existing programs in the US, such as 'Families Over-Coming Under Stress' (FOCUS) (Beardslee, Lester et al. 2011) or the After Deployment Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT) (Gewirtz, Erbes et al. 2011) or newly developed to be specific to the UK military context. Any intervention must include online delivery of these interventions from inception to account for geographical dispersion among military families.
- Research should be undertaken to determine what welfare support Naval Service families are aware of, their sources of information about services and the type of support they would like to receive.

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## Abbreviations

Abbreviation	
KCMHR	King's Centre for Military Health Research
RN/RM	Royal Navy/Royal Marines
OMHNE/OMHNE (M)	Operational Mental Health Needs Evaluation (Maritime) study
NCOs	Non-commissioned officers
RAF	Royal Air Force

## Glossary

Term	Explanation
Non-operational family separations/weekending	Family separations that are <b>not</b> related to operational deployments (e.g. training, other military requirements)
Deployment-related family separations	Family separations that <b>are</b> related to operational deployments (e.g. combat, humanitarian missions)

## Acknowledgements

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Finally, we would like to thank all participants for sharing their experiences with the research team. We greatly appreciate their help and honesty.

## **Introduction**

Military families can experience a variety of different separations due to the occupational demands of Service personnel. The most prominent of these is the deployment of personnel on operational and combat missions. Previous international research has demonstrated how deployment can negatively affect military families, with spouses/partners describing assuming the role of both parents, reduced emotional and practical support from personnel, difficulties with communication and emotional intimacy and problems maintaining employment, all of which contribute to increased stress and anxiety (Aducci, Baptist et al. 2011, Baptist, Amanor-Boadu et al. 2011, Jennings-Kelsall, Aloia et al. 2012, Lara-Cinisomo, Chandra et al. 2012, Waliski, Bokony et al. 2012, Chambers 2013, Karakurt, Christiansen et al. 2013, Werner and Shannon 2013). Young people from military families have also described the issues they face with changes to family roles and responsibilities during deployment and the potential impacts on their health and well-being (Huebner, Mancini et al. 2007, Houston, Pfefferbaum et al. 2009, Mmari, Roche et al. 2009, Kwan-Lafond, Harrison et al. 2011, Knobloch, Pusateri et al. 2015). The return of personnel following deployment can also be a demanding time for military families, with some requiring a period of adjustment to personnel resuming prior roles and positions within the family home (Huebner, Mancini et al. 2007, Waliski, Bokony et al. 2012, Knobloch, Pusateri et al. 2014, Louie and Cromer 2014).

While deployment and relocation have been the focus of much of the research regarding UK military families (Quinault 1992, Dandeker, French et al. 2006, Jervis 2011, Blakely 2012, Iversen, Fear et al. 2014, Rowe 2014, Gribble 2017), other forms of separations may also be experienced because of training, short-notice postings or other work requirements made of Service personnel. This form of family separation is more common among the UK Naval Service community, many of whom do not live near military bases and instead reside within local civilian communities across the UK. Current estimates suggest 24% of UK Armed Forces families live separately during the working week (Ministry of Defence 2016), increasing to 36% among the families of Naval Service personnel. Royal Navy/Royal Marines (RN/RM) families also experience longer separations, with 24% experiencing separation of more than 6 months compared to 11% of Army and 5% of Royal Air Force (RAF) families. More recent results suggested this may be increasing, with 38% of RN/RM families reporting living away from personnel during the week compared with 20-21% of Army and RAF families (Ministry of Defence 2017). While these separations can benefit Naval Service families by providing increased stability to support spouse/partner employment and the education of children, it often results in serving Naval personnel living away from the family home during the working week - colloquially referred to as "weekending". Such separations can also occur in addition to operational deployments, increasing the time Naval Service families may be apart.

Despite being a relatively common experience for military families, and in particular Naval Service families, little is known about how these shorter, more frequent and ongoing non-operational separations might influence family functioning and the health and well-being of family members. Some evidence is provided from military surveys of families, which indicate that RN/RM spouses tend to feel less positive about the amount of separation, the impact of separation on children and their relationship and feel less connected to the military community compared to spouses of personnel in the Army or RAF (Ministry of Defence

2017). However, these surveys are unable to provide deeper insight into the experiences particular to this form of family separation.

To help address this question, a research project was commissioned by the Naval Families Federation, with funding from Greenwich Hospital, to explore the effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among RN/RM families. This report presents an overview of the findings of this study and makes recommendations for future research and potential interventions to support military families experiencing this type of family separation.

## Methods

To address the study aim, a combination of data from surveys, interview and focus groups was used. This includes prior health and well-being research conducted within the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) to provide some background on Naval Service personnel and families and new studies conducted for this particular project that provide a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of spouses and young people from Naval Service families during non-operational family separations.

### Previous studies of Naval Service personnel and families

#### a. Cohort study

The King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) health and well-being cohort is a multi-phase study of deployable UK Armed Forces personnel that was established in 2003 to examine the health and well-being of Service personnel deployed to Iraq (Hotopf, Hull et al. 2006, Fear, Jones et al. 2010).

During the first phase of data collection, full-time serving, ex-serving and reserve personnel who had deployed in the first Iraq war between January and April 2003 were recruited (n=4722, response rate 62.3%). A group of serving but not deployed Service personnel were also recruited and served as a comparison sample (n=5550, response rate 56.3%). The overall response rate at phase 1 was 59%. At the second phase of data collection, 3 samples were recruited; Service personnel followed up from the initial study (n=6429, response rate 68%); Service personnel deployed to Afghanistan between April 2006 and April 2007 (n=2665, response rate 50%); and those who had joined the Armed Forces between 2003-2007 (n=896, response rate 40%) (Fear, Jones et al. 2010). The last two samples were included to ensure that the study reflected the age and rank structure of the UK Armed Forces and those deployed to Afghanistan. The overall response rate at phase 2 was 56% (n=9986). This data included 1,538 Naval Service personnel.

#### b. OMNHE (M) study

The Operational Mental Health Needs Evaluation (Maritime) (OMNHE) study was a survey conducted among deployed Naval Service personnel (RN and RM) on four warships; one on routine operational deployment and the others on maritime exercises. All personnel were invited to take part. Information on socio-demographics, military and operational characteristics were collected as were responses to validated measures of mental health and alcohol misuse (Whybrow, Jones et al. 2016). 91% of personnel were in the Royal Navy.

### c. Children of Military Fathers' study

Data from the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) Children of Military Fathers' study was used to investigate the outcomes of spouses/partners and children from Naval Service families (Iversen, Fear et al. 2014). This study was established to investigate the impact of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on military families and collected data on socio-demographics, military characteristics and mental health and behavioural outcomes from Service personnel, spouses and partners and their children.

Families were recruited into the study through Service personnel at phase 2 of the KCMHR cohort study. Personnel who reported that they had one or more children aged 3-16 years were eligible to take part and comprised two groups. The first were regular or reserve personnel who, according to their scores on a common checklist for PTSD, had probable or borderline PTSD. The second group was comprised of Service personnel with scores that suggested they did not have probable PTSD. Data collection took place between July 2010 and October 2012.

A total of 1030 military fathers were invited to take part, of which 621 completed the survey (66.7% response). 507 (81.6%) gave consent for the mothers of their children to be contacted and 519 spouses/partners were contacted as some Service personnel gave contact details for more than one mother of their children. 405 spouses/partners completed or partially completed the survey (78.0% response); 18.6% were the spouses/partners of RN/RM personnel (n=71). Parental reports from personnel and spouses/partners were collected on a total of 1,044 children, of which 16% (167) were from Naval Service families. Spouses/partners who completed the survey were also asked to give consent to invite any children aged 11-16 years to complete the children's section of the survey themselves. A total of 249 children were invited to participate and 176 completed the survey (70.7% response).

### **Greenwich study of non-operational family separations among Naval Service families**

Three new studies were conducted for this project; an online survey, an interview study and focus groups.

#### a. Online survey

As little prior research had focused on non-operational family separations, an online survey was conducted to provide some background context about spouse/partner experiences during non-operational separations. It was also used as a means of recruiting participants for the interview study. Questions for the survey were developed from previous research on deployment, pre-existing studies of military families within KCMHR, and in consultation with representatives of the Naval Families Federation (NFF). The final questions covered spouse/partner employment, family life and relationships, health and well-being.

Data was collected in May 2017 via an online survey. 503 spouses or partners of currently serving RN/RM personnel were recruited via the social media accounts of KCMHR, the NFF, and members of the research team. Data was analysed using statistical tests to determine the frequency of particular experiences during non-operational family separations and how these might vary across different groups, for example by rank or Service branch.

### b. Interview study

Following the online survey, an interview study with spouses/partners was conducted to explore the survey findings in greater detail and provide more in-depth understanding of the influences of non-operational separations on family functioning and well-being. Interview topics covered similar topics to those included in the online survey - spouse/partner employment, family life, roles and relationships, health and well-being. Participants were also asked for their recommendations of how to improve the experiences of Naval Service families during non-operational separations.

Participants in the online survey who provided contact details were invited to take part if they were the spouse or partner of a currently serving member of the RN/RM and had current or recent experience of weekending or other forms of short, repeated family separations that were not due to operational deployments. Potential participants were excluded if they were no longer in a relationship with RN/RM personnel or if they were the spouses/partners of RN/RM veterans. While the research team sought to recruit spouses/partners with a wide range of experiences, only married, female spouses met the inclusion criteria. Twenty individual semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted. Details about the participants can be found in Table 3, Appendix 2.

### c. Focus group study

The final study involved focus groups with young people from Naval Service families to ensure that perceptions of non-operational family separations among different family members were reflected. Topics for the focus groups built on previous components and research and included young people's experiences of school, family life, roles and relationships. Participants were also asked for suggestions on how families and young people might manage family separations.

Participants were recruited from pre-existing youth-led support groups within the Naval Service community, snowball sampling and via the social media accounts of the NFF, KCMHR and the research team. Young people were eligible to take part if they are aged between 13-19 years and from a UK Naval Service family with current or previous experience of non-operational family separations. As with spouses/partners, this could be due to personnel living elsewhere during the week ("weekending") or other forms of family separations that were not the result of operational deployment. Participants were ineligible for the study if they are not usually resident at home (i.e. attending boarding school) or were the child/ren of RN/RM veterans. Two focus groups involving 12 participants were conducted in UK cities with a high proportion of Naval Service families. Details of participants can be found in Table 4, Appendix 2.

### Qualitative analyses

Data from the interviews and focus groups were analysed using Framework analysis, a more robust methodology for applied qualitative research developed by applied social policy researchers (Ritchie and Spencer 1994, Spencer, Ritchie et al. 2003, Lacey and Luff 2009).

Analysis involved the development of an initial Framework by using free-text responses from the online survey. This was then used in the initial coding of interview transcripts and

developed and refined until a final Framework reflecting the themes and sub-themes describing the influences of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among spouses and young people from Naval Service families were identified.

Similar themes were identified in the data from spouses and young people (Figure 7). Where relevant, differences in experiences and perceptions are explored between spouses of commissioned officers, non-commissioned officers/ratings and other ranks and according to the age or gender of young people. Comparisons of the experiences of spouses and young people were also explored to highlight similarities and differences between the perceptions of different family members.

Pseudonyms were used for the reporting of the qualitative findings and potentially identifying information removed from quotes to maintain participant anonymity.

### **Report structure**

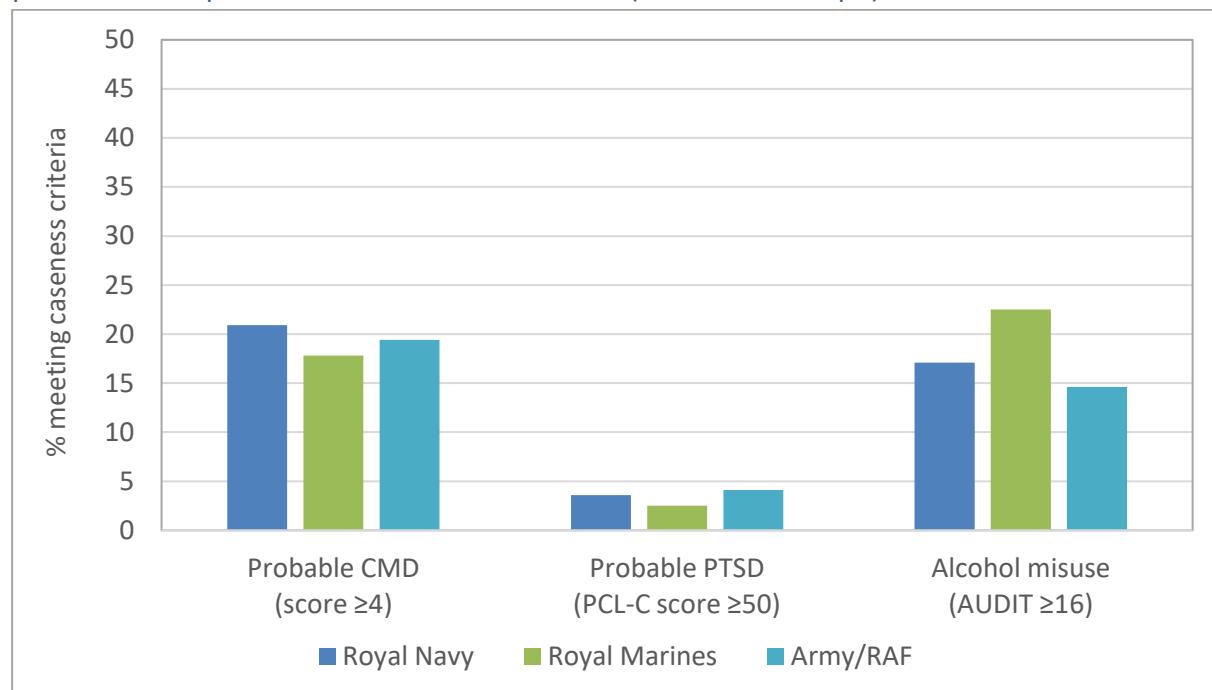
To reflect the different approaches used in this study, this report takes the following structure. An overview of what we already know about the health and well-being of Naval Service families is provided based on data from pre-existing studies. Findings from the new studies are then presented and discussed under four overarching themes—*family life and functioning, spouse employment, family health and well-being* and *family resources* (see Figure 7). Within each theme, data from the online survey is presented first, followed by findings from the interview study and focus groups to provide more in-depth understanding of the experiences of Naval Service spouses during non-operational family separations and allow for comparisons between family members. Finally, recommendations for further research and potential interventions are made based on the findings and input from interview and focus group participants.

## What do we know already know about the health of UK Naval Service families?

### The health and well-being of Naval Service personnel

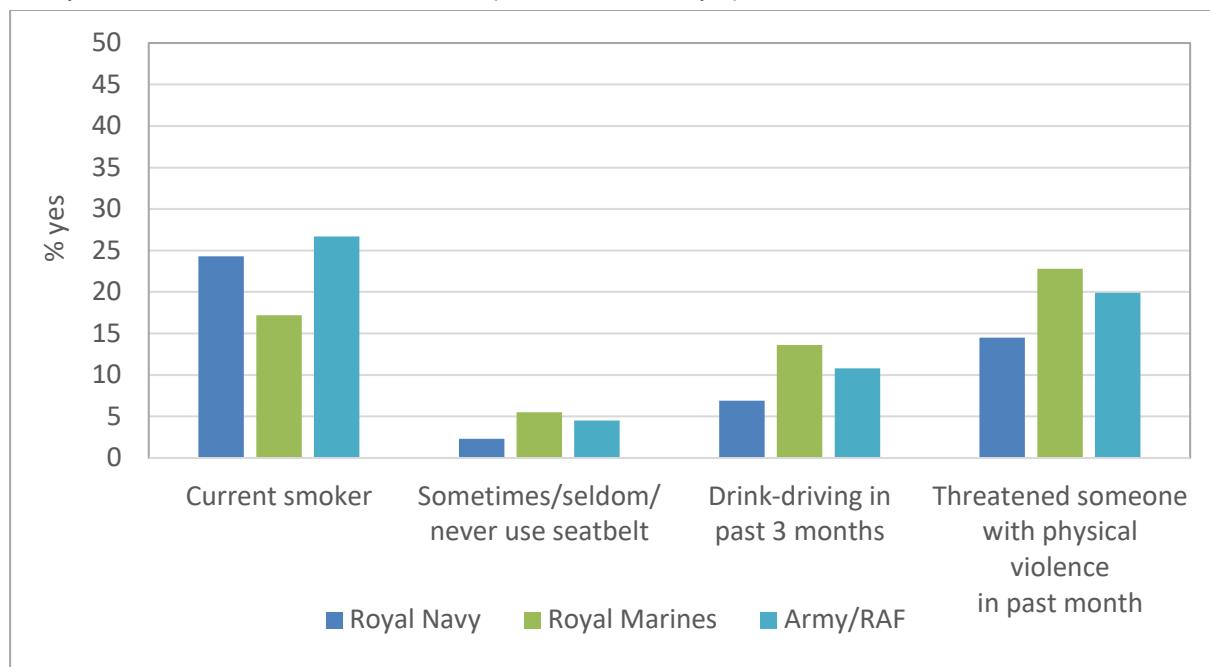
Data from the KCMHR health and well-being cohort study (phase 2) showed no differences in the prevalence of common mental disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) between RN/RM personnel and those from other Service branches (Figure 1). Alcohol misuse (AUDIT score  $\geq 16$ ) was higher among RM personnel compared to personnel from other Service branches.

Figure 1: Prevalence of mental health outcomes among Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel compared to other Service branches (KCMHR cohort p2)



Other health and social outcomes were also examined. Royal Marines personnel were less likely to take part in risky health behaviours such as smoking but a higher proportion reported drink-driving in the past 3 months and threatening someone with physical violence, particularly when compared to personnel in the Army and RAF (Figure 2).

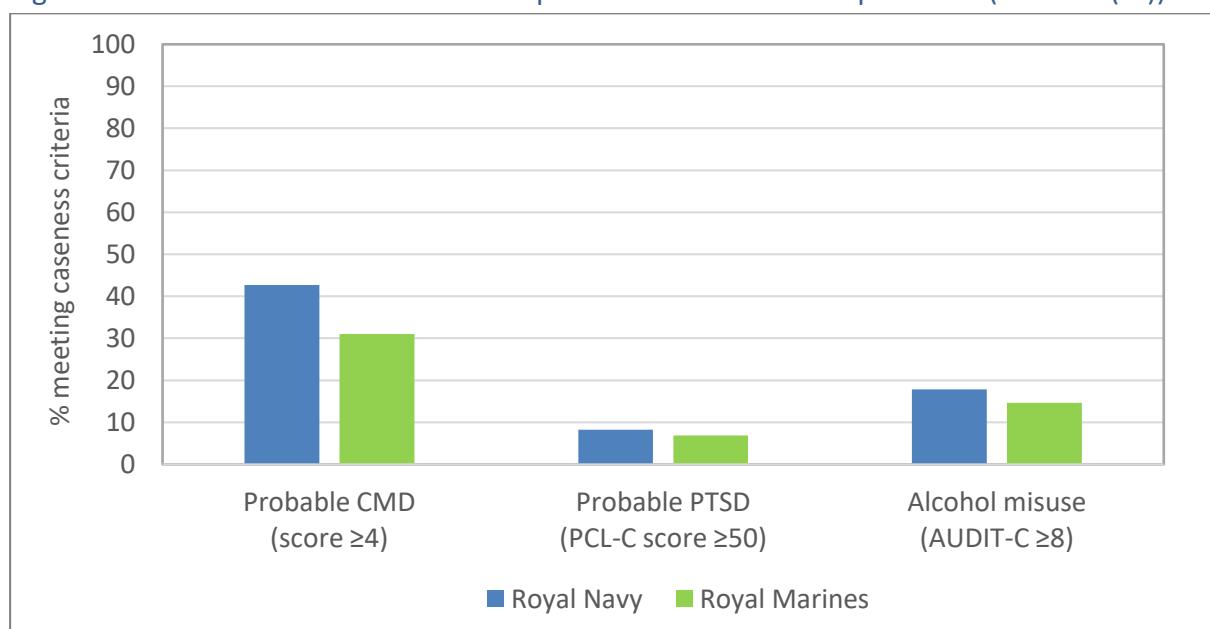
Figure 2: Prevalence of risky behaviours among Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel compared to other Service branches (KCMHR cohort p2)



### The effects of maritime deployment on Naval Service personnel mental health

The Operational Mental Health Needs Evaluation (Maritime) (OMHNE (M)) study examined the mental health of Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel on warships undertaking routine non-operational deployment or training exercises (Figure 3). The findings show higher proportions of reported mental health problems and PTSD among Naval Service personnel currently away from home on non-operational maritime operations compared to the main cohort study. Alcohol misuse in this study is similar what was reported in the larger cohort but with less of a difference between Services, possibly as they are at sea.

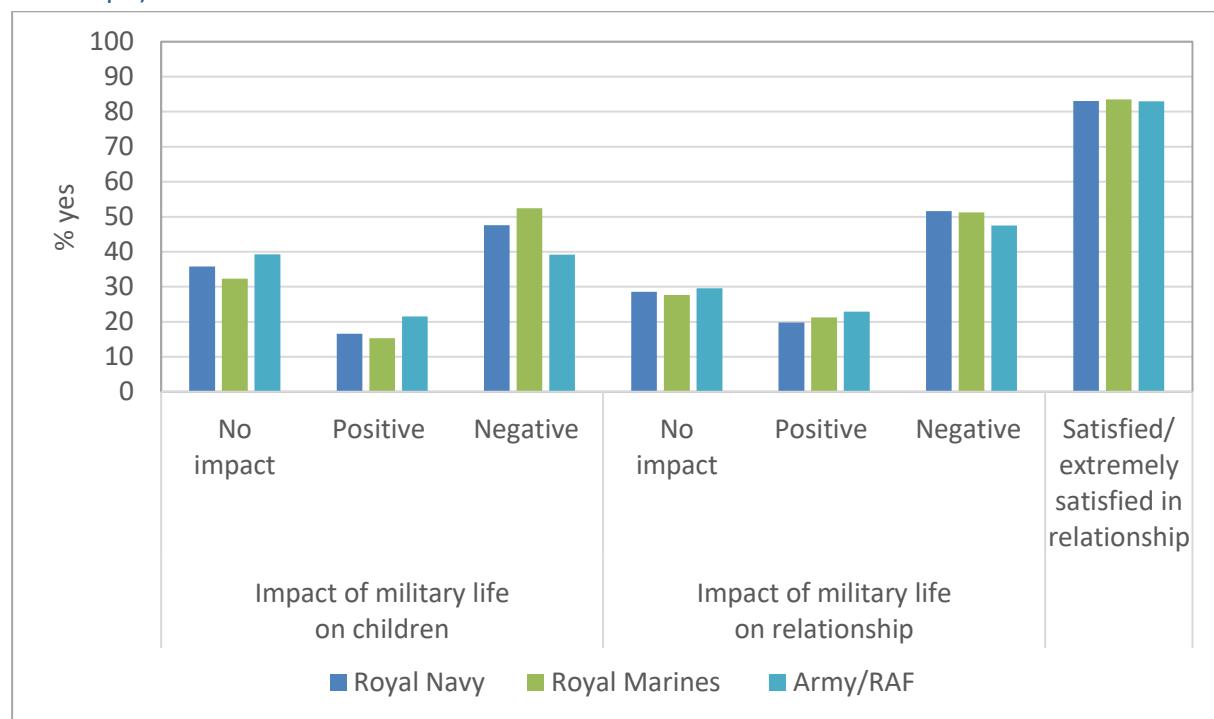
Figure 3: Mental health of Naval Service personnel on maritime operations (OMHNE (M))



## Perceptions of family life among military personnel

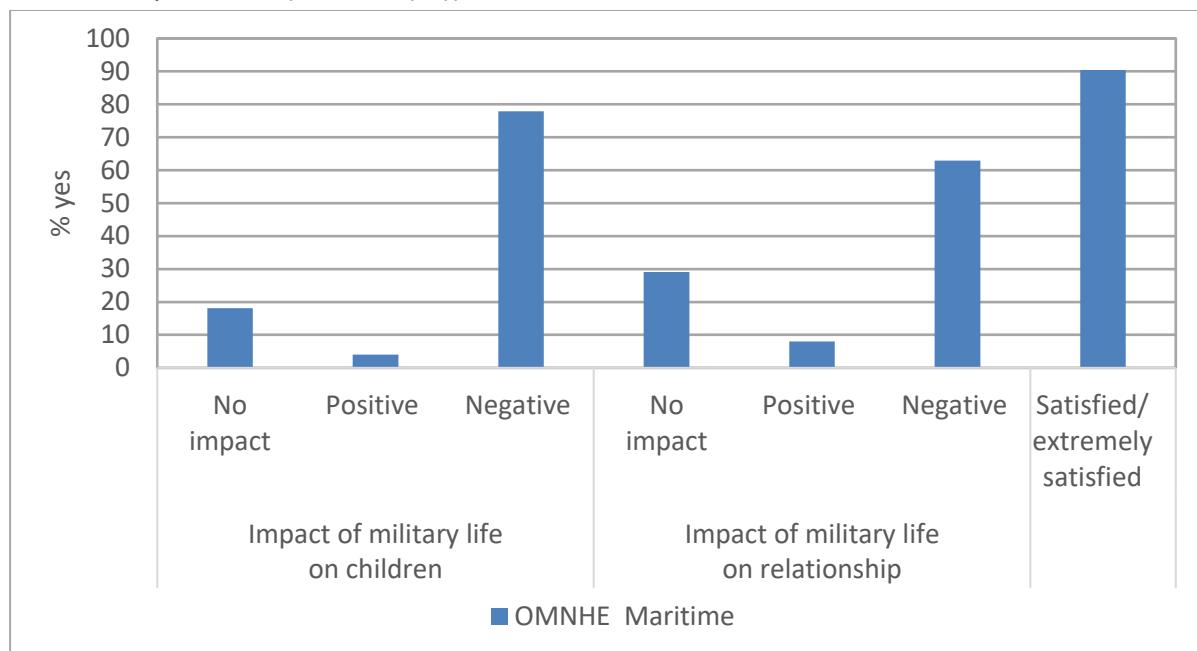
Both the KCMHR cohort and OMHNE (M) studies examined how personnel perceived military life to impact on their families.

Figure 4: Perceived impact of military life on families of Naval Service personnel (KCMHR cohort p2)



While there was no difference in marital satisfaction or the perceived impacts of military life on relationships between Service branches within the KCMHR cohort study (Figure 4), Army and RAF personnel were more likely to perceive there to be no impact or a positive impact on their children than Royal Navy or Royal Marines personnel. Within the OMNHE (M) study, endorsements of a negative impact of military life on children and relationships were higher than in the cohort study, although a similarly high proportion reported being satisfied in their relationship (Figure 5). These outcomes were similar between Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel, although Royal Marines personnel were more likely to report a positive impact on their relationship (15.2%) than Royal Navy personnel (7.4%).

Figure 5: Perceived impact of military life on families among Naval Service personnel on maritime operations (OMHNE (M))

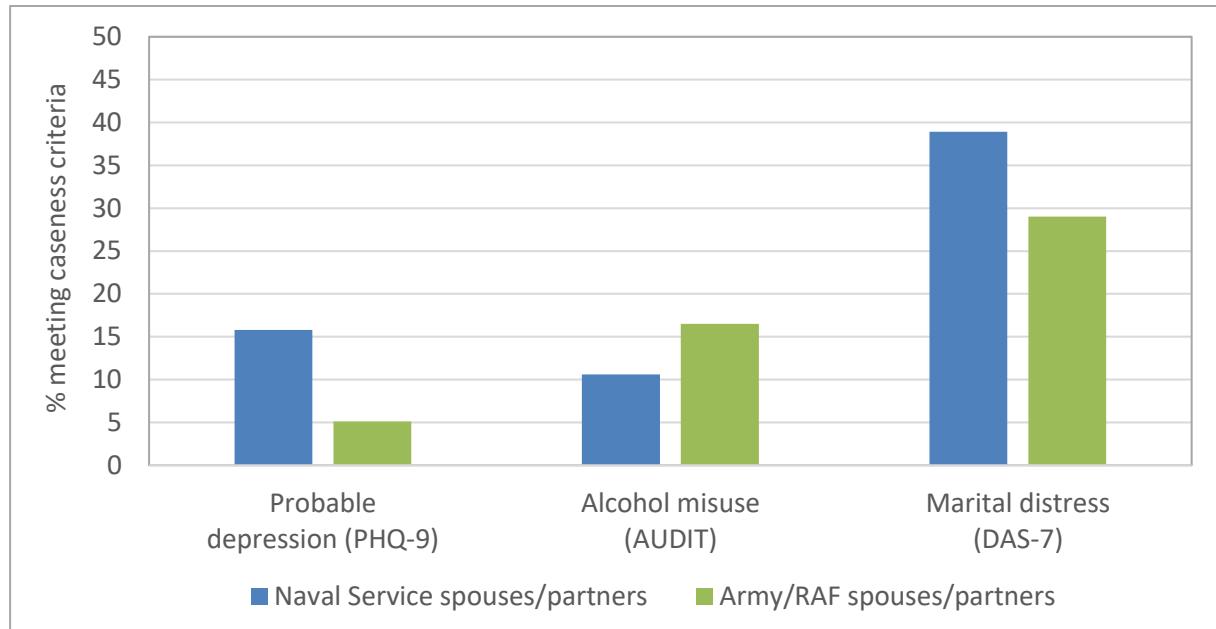


#### **The health and well-being of spouses/partners and children from Naval Service families**

The health and well-being of spouses/partners and children from Naval Service families was examined in the Children of Military Fathers' study. Because of the small number of Naval Service spouses/partners, it was not possible to look at these outcomes according to specific Service branch. However, compared to spouses/partners of Army and RAF personnel, there was a suggestion that there may be a higher prevalence of probable depression in this group although this was not statistically significant (Figure 6). Although alcohol misuse was higher among Naval Service personnel compared to those in the Army/RAF, there was no difference in the alcohol outcomes of spouses/partners by Service branch.

Data from the Children of Military Fathers' study showed no difference in maternal reports of emotional and behavioural well-being among children from Naval Service families compared to children from Army/RAF families (Appendix 1: Table 2). As with spouses/partners, it was not possible to look at outcomes by paternal Service branch because of small numbers.

Figure 6: Health and well-being outcomes among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel compared to spouses/partners of other Service branches (Children of Military Fathers' study)



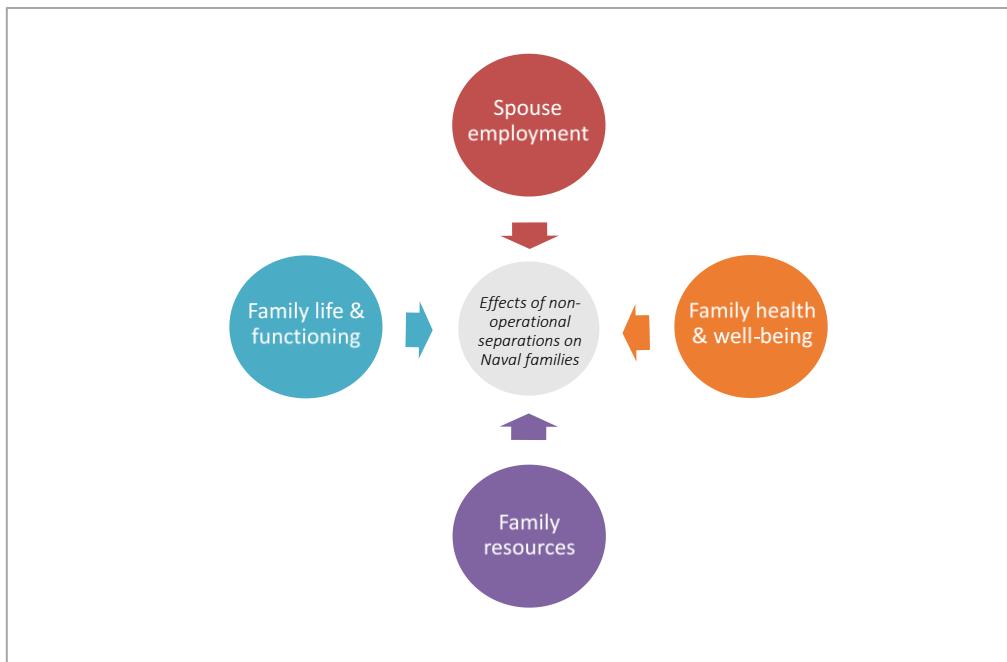
### Summary

- Alcohol misuse remains an ongoing issue for military personnel, especially for those in the Royal Marines.
- While Royal Navy personnel are less likely to engage in risky and violent behaviours than Army and RAF personnel, Royal Marines were more likely to engage in these behaviours.
- Royal Navy personnel had fewer positive perceptions of the impact of military life on their families than Army and RAF personnel and these perceptions appeared to be worse when Royal Navy personnel were separated from their families on non-operational maritime exercises.
- Despite personnel perceptions of the impact of military life on families, no differences were found between the outcomes of children and young people from Naval Service families compared to those of Army and RAF personnel. This is not to suggest there are no negative aspects of Service life for children from military families but that any impacts may be experienced equally across all Services.
- While no statistically significant differences were found between the mental health outcomes of Naval Service and Army/RAF spouses/partners, further research should be conducted to examine these outcomes given their importance in family well-being.

## Findings from the Greenwich study

Four themes were identified from the online survey, interviews with spouses and focus groups with young people – *family life and functioning, spouse employment, family health and well-being* and *family resources* (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Thematic diagram of study findings

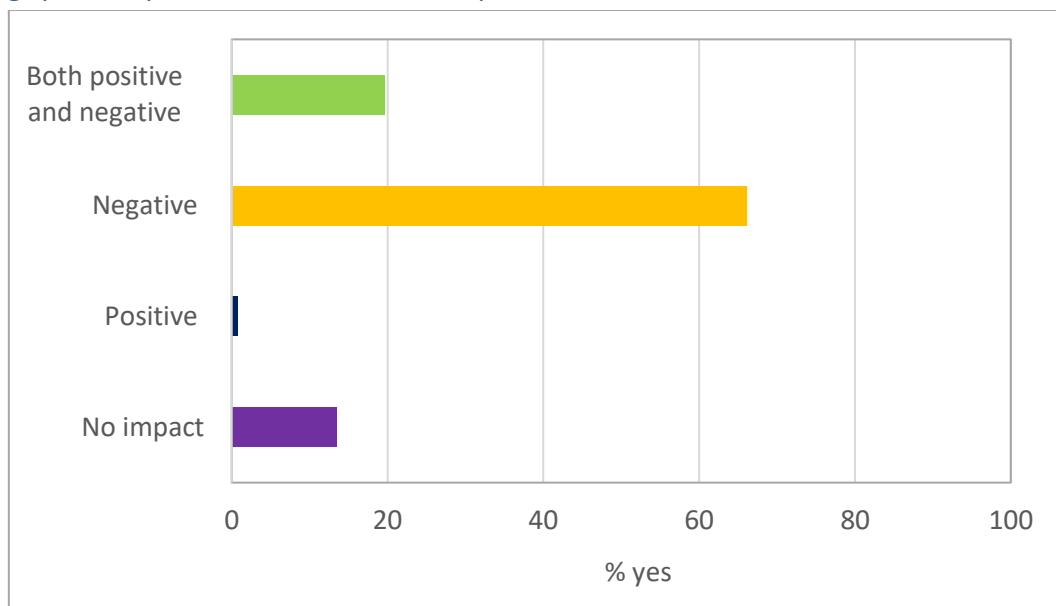


### 1. Spouse/partner employment

#### Perceptions of the impacts of non-operational family separations on employment among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel

Two-thirds of spouses/partners responding to the survey perceived non-operational separations to have a negative impact on their employment while the remaining respondents felt there had either been a mixed effect or no impact (Figure 8). This differed by child age, with nearly 30% of spouses/partners with children aged 0-5 years reporting either a positive, mixed or no impact of separation on their employment compared with over 75% of those with children aged 16 years and over. No other socio-demographic or military factors were associated with perceived impact on spouse employment.

Figure 8: Perceptions of the impact of non-operational family separations on employment among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel



### Interview findings

Almost all the participants in the interview study (see Table 3) described the difficulties they encountered in balancing family responsibilities with employment during non-operational separations. Two sub-themes were identified: *work-family conflict* and *career progression* (Figure 9).

#### *1. Work-family conflict*

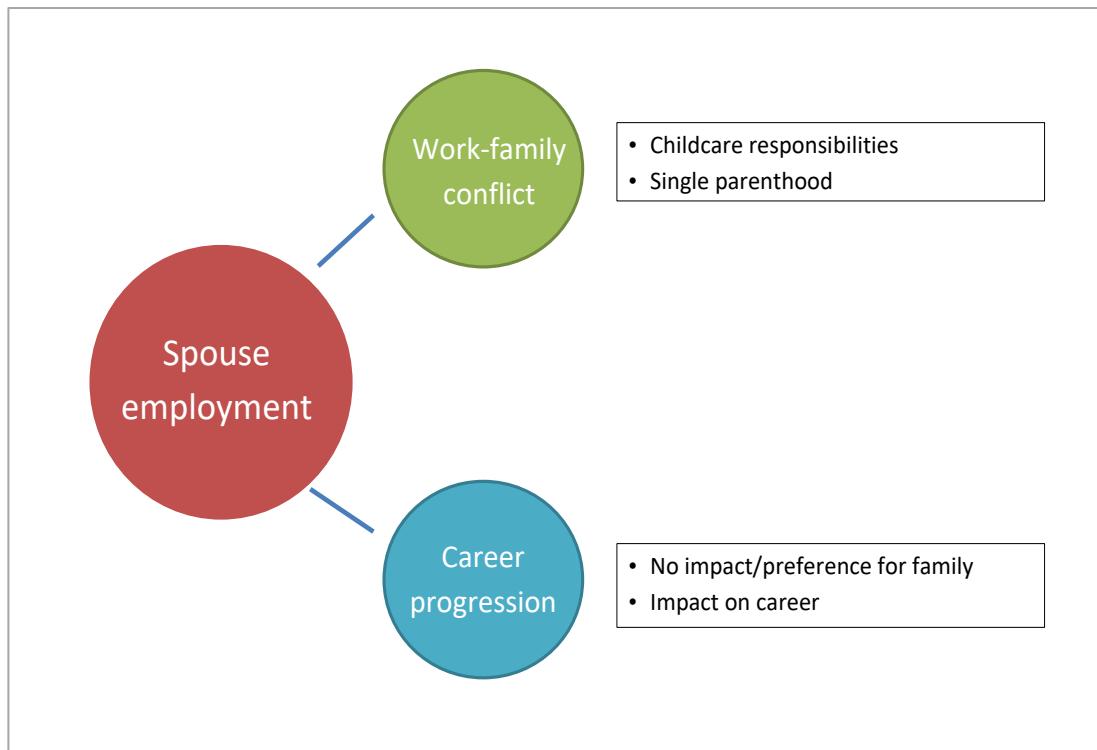
Most participants reported difficulties managing employment alongside managing almost the entirety of the family responsibilities in their partner's absence and the limits this could place on the hours they felt able to work. This conflict between employment and responsibilities at home resulted from two key restrictions relating to childcare needs and the pressures of single parenthood during the week.

Managing childcare was the most commonly described difficulty with employment among spouses of personnel of all ranks and Services. This was especially true when children were younger. Some spouses reported how they were restricted to working within school hours because of perceived difficulties in accessing either informal or formal childcare and unable to take on further work without additional support. This limited spouses in the type of work they were able to undertake and could cause worry about managing when children were ill.

*[Work] it changes every week, [it's] very dependent on what I need to do at home... it all has to fit around [that]... I don't have much childcare, so I can't work in the evenings, I can't work at weekends, we can't really afford to pay for childcare during the half terms and holidays. So I'm very restricted on what I can and can't do..." Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Participant name, personnel Service, personnel rank, if spouse also served, current or previous experience of non-operational family separation. All information can be found in Table 3.

Figure 9: Employment experiences of the spouses of Naval Service personnel during non-operational family separations



The difficulties balancing work and family were not necessarily eased by access to childcare. Some spouses reported feelings of stress and worry about maintaining family responsibilities alongside work because of a sense of uncertainty about being able to successfully find and manage childcare arrangements (see 4. Family resources, 3. Childcare and schools, p60). Guilt was expressed among participants who felt that by putting their children into childcare they were not fulfilling their role as a mother. While common among working mothers, this feeling was exacerbated by the perception that children may need additional support from the stay-at-home parent due to the absence of personnel from the family home during the week.

*"While the children were young, they were in nursery schools when I was working and it felt like I was working just to put them in nursery school... there's a lot of guilt that you're feeling like you know they've got one parent that's missing and you're neglecting them because you're working"* Caroline, RN, junior NCO/rating, 13 years

Some participants described how seeking or maintaining employment could be further complicated by the problems they had experienced managing as a single parent during the week, although this was less common than issues with childcare. For these participants, the pressures of taking on the bulk of the household responsibilities without the functional support of their partner, as well as managing childcare, led them to either cease employment entirely or reduce their working hours in order to better manage the competing demands of work and family.

*"...I found that trying to do the childminding and the classroom assistant and be a single parent... I just said 'I can't do it' ... because you're having to do everything when you come home. You know there isn't somebody else to say 'Right look... I'll make the dinner and that and you go... sort out whatever needs to be done'..."* Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

*"I'm having to take responsibility of the children and all of the stuff that is running life, it means that I can only go back to work two days a week because there's all the other stuff that needs to be done... with [partner]... it's just not feasible. Whereas if [partner] was in a 9-5 job then he'd be able to do more of the meal cooking and the laundry... after school clubs... all that stuff..."* Rebecca, RN, officer, approx. 5 years

The restrictions that childcare and single parenthood could have for spouse employment were experienced by spouses seeking to update and develop their skills through further education or going through resettlement after leaving Service. For these participants, the perceived lack of time, childcare and support from their partners meant having to postpone or quit courses and training that would have allowed them to continue working around family responsibilities or advance into a career that was better suited to managing during his absence. Such experiences were more commonly discussed by spouses who had previously served and spouses of junior NCOs/ratings who may not have had the same level of education as the spouses of officers or senior NCOs/ratings when they married.

*"I applied for [nurse training], was accepted and started and in that time my [partner] was posted to [XXXX]... we thought right we've got two years of... my [partner] being home... he was only there for four months and then he was posted... I had to give up my degree... that was actually very, very hard... I couldn't do what I wanted to do."*

Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"I can't go off and do [resettlement] courses because [partner]'s not here, who's going to look after the kids? Am I going to be able to go in and even do an online course in the learning centre? Cause I've got the baby and the two-year-old... how am I looking after me now for our family's future interests..."*

Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment

## *2. Career progression*

The conflict spouses encountered between work and family required participants to make concessions and compromises to their careers. Spouses with career ambitions described how they were prevented from taking on additional responsibilities and opportunities because of the difficulties they faced and the lack of support from their partner in his absence, limiting their progression within their chosen career.

*"I was asked to [work in management] for a bigger company... but that was full-time, and I know with [partner] being away and the upheaval with the children that that's just not a possibility. So it sort of restricts my career quite majorly really."*

Shauna, RM, junior NCO/rating, 6 months, prev. exp.

*"...I've been approached by my [manager] saying 'Look why don't you do this? Why don't you do that?' and I'm like 'Because I don't have the time to do it'. I physically cannot do it... I'm a single parent because he's not here and it's doing the homework, getting them all sorted for the next day, getting them bathed... I don't see it as having a career, there's nothing moving forward for me... it's an impossibility."* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

Some participants were able to overcome some of these limitations by using contacts within the community to find work at their children's schools as teaching assistants or in other part-time roles. While this reduced the friction between employment and family responsibilities by providing steady employment within school hours, some spouses felt undervalued and under-utilised within such roles because of discrepancies between the skill level of their current job and their previous experience and expertise.

*"[My current job] doesn't match my skills or education at all. I was very successful, I sort of reached sort of like the top of my career very young and I was doing very well... to go from that to earning minimum wage because the kind of jobs that are available to you for school hours... [are] a minimum wage job. So the hours that I get paid for are effectively a dinner lady. But the volunteer work I'm doing sort of helps me sort of to challenge myself really."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

*"I'll be honest, I can't stand [current job]!... I definitely don't like having to give up something that I was passionate about and that I was very good at for... a job that I don't care for. I don't think that benefits anybody, it doesn't benefit the people that I'm working for, it doesn't benefit the children that I'm with at school and it doesn't benefit me if I'm not enjoying myself."* Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months

Such concessions could lead to frustration among spouses who wanted to work or who were eager to continue developing their career. This frustration could be partially towards their partner if they were not perceived as understanding the restrictions that spouses faced because of non-operational family separations.

*"I think I felt a bit resentful, if I've got to be honest... I've got other groups of friends that are at management level and I kind of... wish that I'd done that... I just didn't think it was fair on the children to... take on a more responsible role... I still don't think my [partner] comprehends this... he keeps saying well that was your choice!"* Caroline, RN, junior NCO/rating, 13 years

*"... there is certainly a resentment there, definitely.... I don't specifically think that is Navy or weekending related... the very nature of [partner]'s job is that he can't do part-time... there is that niggle that having children hasn't affected his life in the same way... my life is unrecognisable now as to what it was pre-children... it's a frustration with the being a parent rather than specifically related to anything to do with [partner]'s job."* Rebecca, RN, officer, approx. 5 years

As in the survey, not all spouses in the interview study reported negative effects to their careers, although this was a minority view among participants. Some opted to stay at home

to raise children and were not as concerned about maintaining a career during this time or opted to prioritise family.

*"I didn't have a career, I was a civil servant, I worked in the [military] base... which is where I met him. I had never any great desire to have a high-powered career... I was very old fashioned. I wanted to get married and have a family. That was my ambition."*

Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

A small number of participants described how they and their partner had actively chosen to weekend to give greater stability to both their children's education as well as to the spouses' employment. Such spouses described how they were able to maintain, although not necessarily advance, their career and forgo some of the difficulties military spouses could encounter as a result of frequent relocation, although at the expense of time as a family. This was more commonly discussed by participants with professional careers or those for whom work was described as being important to their sense of purpose and identity.

*"We made the decision that we were going to stay put and we were a family that weren't going to be moving around so that I could have a career and the children could have a stable home and a stable education. So it's one of those sacrifices... you can't necessarily have it all... So the decision was to stay here and make our home and then make the most of family time when we could."*

Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

*".... it was all very clear from my part from the outset [of relationship] that this was my job and that I wasn't going to sacrifice that for anyone or anything... I am not going to be that wife that will move around and give up my life... to follow him around. [Work] is a huge part of who I am and it's... difficult to become a vet... it's more than a job."*

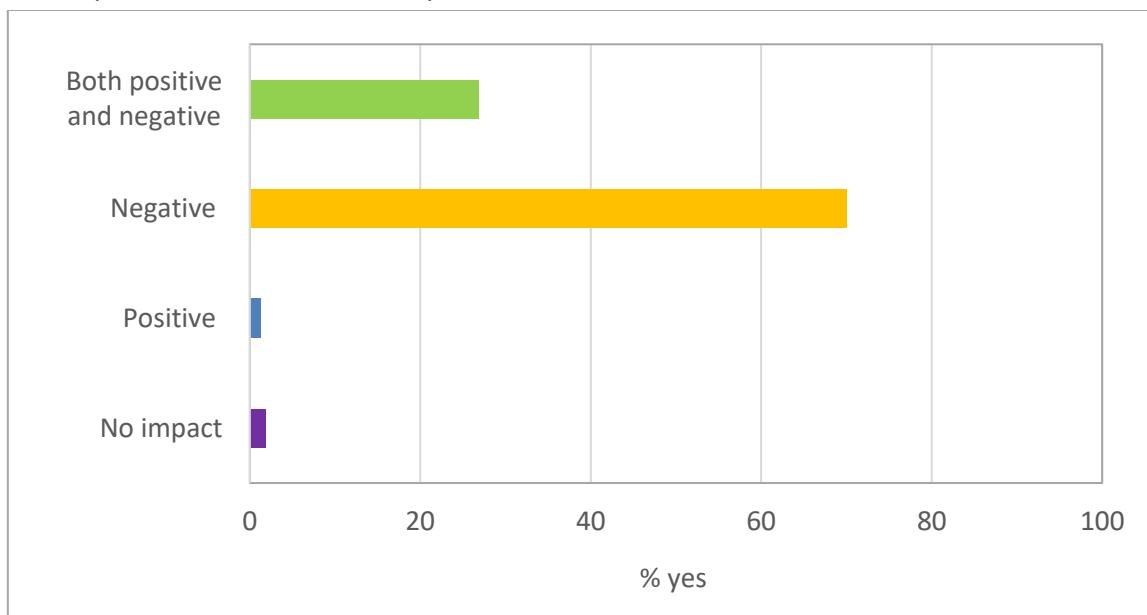
Rebecca, RN, officer, approx. 5 years

## 2. Family life & functioning

### Perceptions of family life during non-operational separations among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel

As among Naval Service personnel in the cohort study, most Naval Service spouses/partners responding to the survey felt that non-operational separations had a negative impact on family life (Figure 10). Spouses/partners with younger children were statistically less likely to endorse a positive, mixed or no impact on family life compared to those with older children (0-5 years 24.6% vs 16 years and over 42.1%). Positive, mixed and neutral responses were less likely among spouses/partners who were currently 'weekending' compared to those who had previous experience (24.5% vs 35.9%), suggesting perceptions may change as families start and complete living separately.

Figure 10: Perceptions of the impact of non-operational separations on family life among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel



### *Interview findings*

Participants in the interview study described the influence non-operational separations had on family functioning. Three sub-themes were identified (Figure 11): *family time*, *family roles* and *family relationships*.

#### *1. Family time*

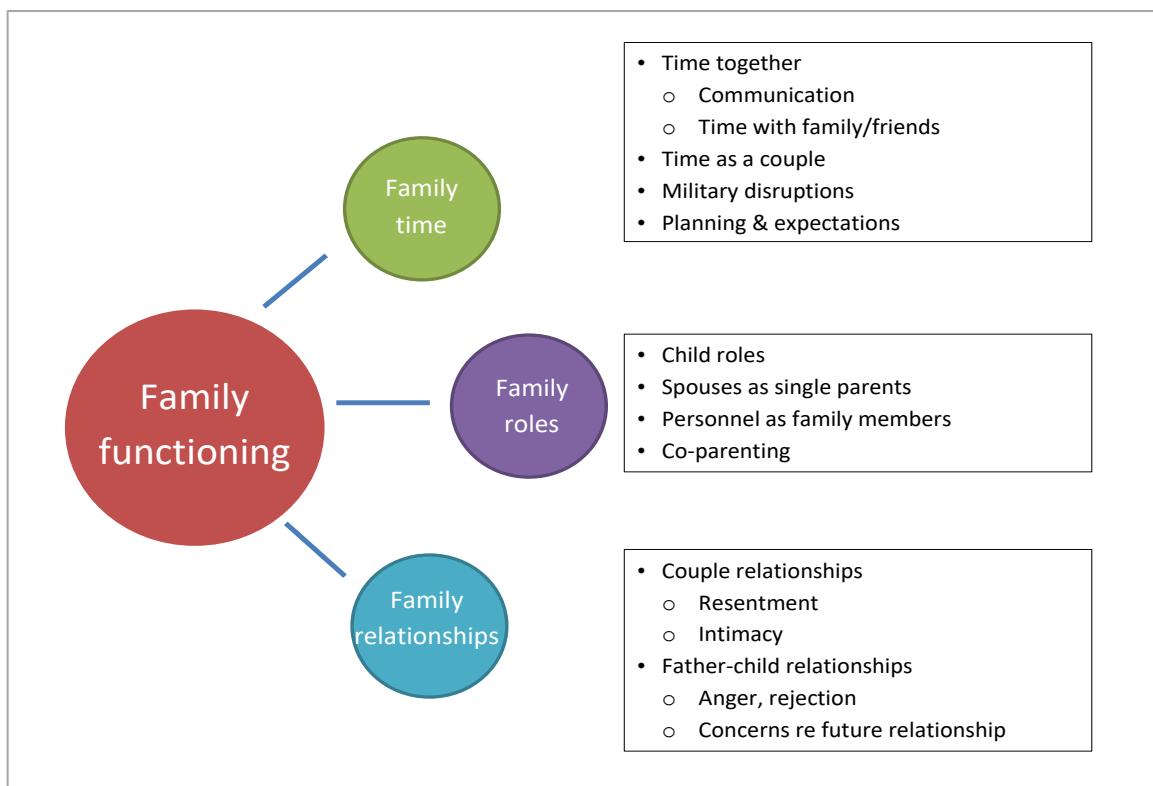
##### *a. Time as a family*

Spouses explained how non-operational separations limited the physical time families were able to spend together. For most, this period comprised the time between Friday evening and Sunday afternoon before personnel were required to return to work or when personnel were rostered off. Time as a family was further lessened if personnel had long distances to travel home or in families where spouses were only able to work if personnel were home to look after children.

*“What would normally happen is he’d come home late on a Friday evening, it’s generally after [child] has gone to bed and then he would leave on a Sunday afternoon. So we’d have... two days really together and we would try and do as much together as possible like days out and things like that.” Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months*

*“...he gets [transport] on a Friday night so he arrives at about eight o’clock on a Saturday morning and then we drop him off again at about eight o’clock on a Sunday night. And I work all day on a Sunday and then go and drop him off, so we really have about six hours of family time per week... with us all together” Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years*

Figure 11: Perceptions of family functioning among spouses and young people from Naval Service families



The limited time families had together at weekends could be subject to interruptions from wider networks of friends and family who wanted to see personnel when they were home. While this was not commonly discussed and was not reported to cause major problems, it was an additional obligation that families experiencing separations had to manage within the short amount of time together.

*"And there's always the pressure when he does come home that we go and visit... his mum and dad as well. Because otherwise we get the 'oh you never come to see us!'"*  
Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

*"...he'll come back on the Friday night and then his friend will be at the door at eight o'clock like 'Oh, are you coming to the pub [partner]? Like you're back now for the weekend?'.... [it's] just a bit disjointed cause he's got to try and manage his time between everybody that wants to see him, because of course we kind of want to steal him to ourselves..."* Lucy, RM, other ranks, 15 months

#### i. Armed Forces disruptions

Perceived inconsistencies and last-minute changes to Naval Service programming, duties and watch-bills, especially in particular occupations such as engineering, were described as further restricting the time families were able to spend together during non-operational separations. Although sometimes unforeseen due to operational reasons, these disruptions were reported to impact on the plans families may have made for the weekend.

*"Him coming home far more difficult last year... because he's in [engineering], the ship doesn't go anywhere if the engines aren't working... the number of times they have to pull engines apart and things like that, it was ridiculous! So we had a lot of... weekends where it would kind of get to Friday lunchtime and I'd get the phone call, not coming home this weekend."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12months.

*"...he came back for a weekend two or three weeks later... then he had a week where he was working down here so he was back for that week and then he's away again for like another three weeks... it's just very, very hit and miss at the moment... cause of the way the ship is, I have no idea when... he's coming home."* Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months

The unpredictability such changes introduced into family life was viewed by some spouses as more difficult to manage than operational deployments when personnel were away for longer, but usually a pre-determined, period of time. This could lead to a sense of frustration among participants.

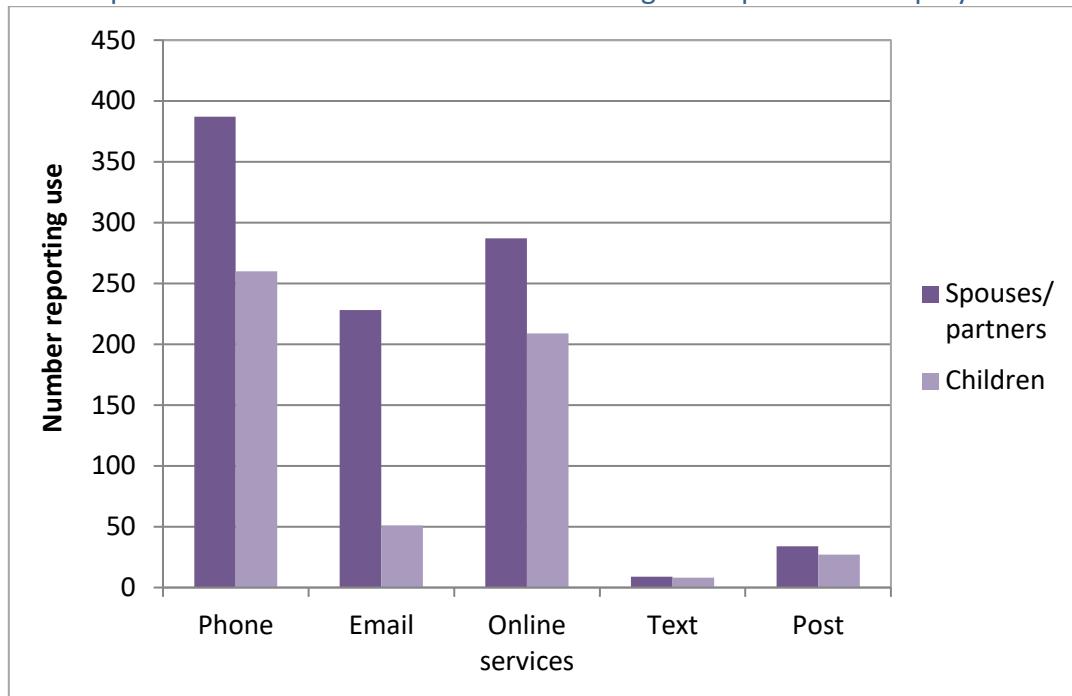
*"... it's the inconsistencies with the non-operational deployments... that's the pain I would say... and why we struggle as a family more... with the operational deployments... at least you know where they are. And [partner]'s actually put in now to go submariner to hope for a bit more consistency cause at least then we know that he's going to be off for three months..."* Shauna, RM, junior NCO/rating, 6 months, prev. exp.

*"... there's just so much uncertainty and as the wife you just have to nod, nod agreement and get on with it... I find that happens a lot with the Navy, its... changes at a moment's notice... it's like someone just throws a deck of cards on the floor and says there you go, see you later! That's the best analogy I can come up with!"* Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.

## *ii. Communication*

Families opted for a range of different ways to help maintain contact and create family time during the week. Findings from the online survey indicated that most spouses/partners reported using phone, email and online services such as Skype, Facetime or Facebook as the primary means of communication with personnel during non-operational family separations, while children mainly used phone and online services (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Reported methods of communication during non-operational deployments



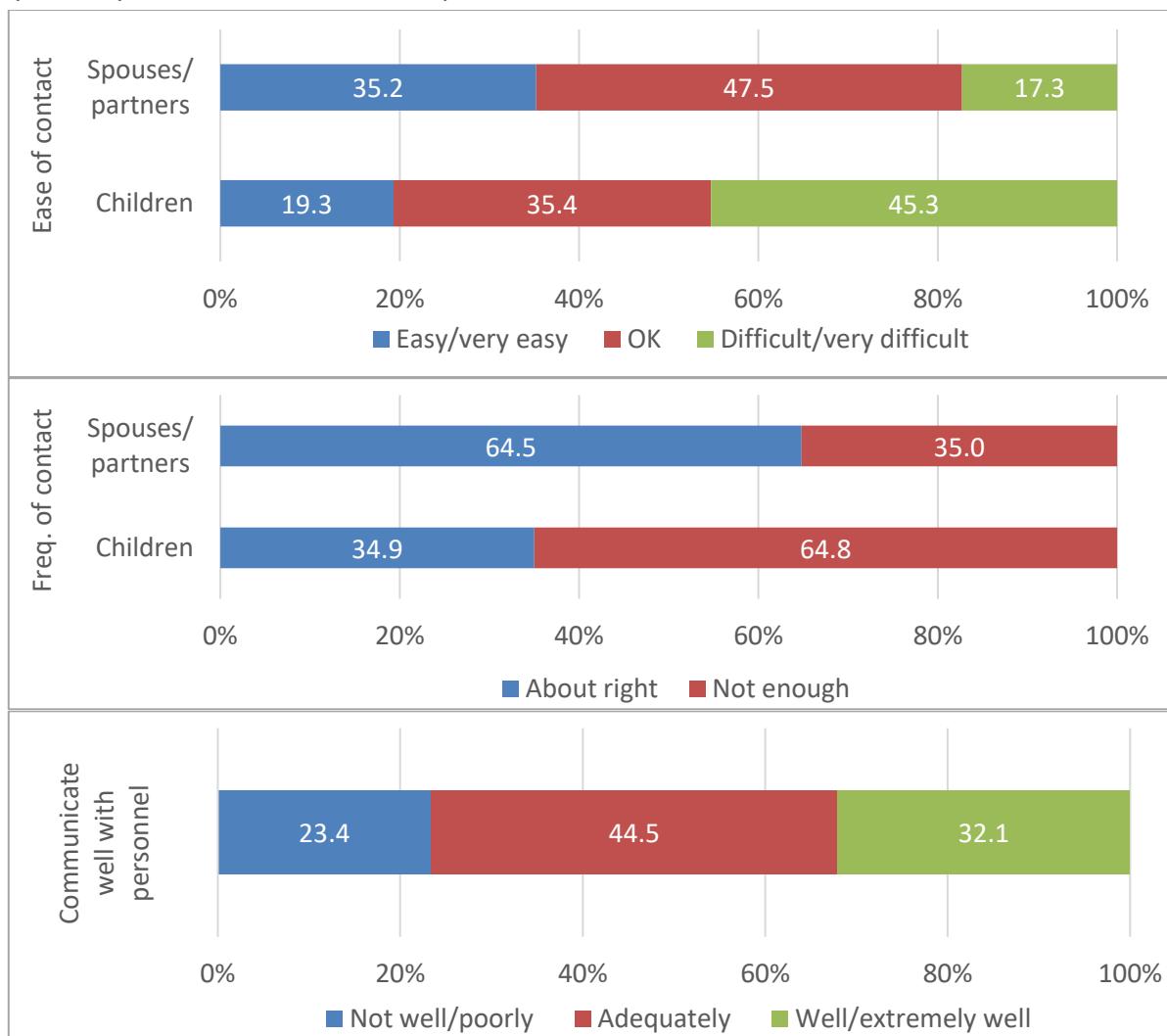
NB: Participants could record multiple methods of communication

More than eight out of ten spouses/partners encountered few difficulties in their ability to communicate with personnel and nearly two-thirds believed they had a sufficient amount of contact during the week (Figure 13). However, nearly a quarter reported they did not feel they communicated well with personnel, suggesting some couples may face problems maintaining communication during the absence of personnel. Communication between personnel and children was viewed as more challenging by spouses/partners, with almost half reporting that communication with their father was difficult or very difficult for their child/ren and nearly two-thirds perceiving there to be insufficient contact during his absence.

Communication was also discussed in the interviews with spouses. As in the survey, some participants reported no problems maintaining contact with personnel when they were away from home, especially with the use of online technologies such as Skype and FaceTime or because they felt they did not need to speak with their partner daily.

*"I probably speak to him three or four times a day. But... three times out of the five nights is where the [children] speak to him. If they've done something good at school or, I don't know something good happened, then we send a photograph and they tell me what to write with it... the [children] have started to write to him a little... you know actually like through the post... and he's going to start writing back to them."* Amy, RM, senior officer, 1.4 years

Figure 13: Perceptions of communication during non-operational family separations among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel



Other participants reported problems communicating because of poor quality internet connections or phone reception on certain Naval installations or personnel being based at sea. This could limit the amount of interaction families were able to have during separations.

*"He's got no phone signal really at all where he is. He has to like hang out of the window and then it still goes off all of the time! He can get like an internet package while he's there but it's not the greatest when you've got so many people streaming videos... we probably talk two or three times a week if we're lucky."* Lucy, RM, other ranks, 15 months

*"...it's very much dependent on where the ship is... his external email isn't working at the moment... we were completely out of touch altogether last week... he was at sea Monday to Friday and during that time I was completely unable to get in touch with him for the whole week... it is very much on an ad hoc basis"* Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

Communication between children and their father could also be limited because of separation. While some younger children were described as not being particularly interested in talking to their father, others could become upset when they were prevented from speaking to their father because of his work schedule.

*"... if he's had a long day at school, he often just doesn't want to talk on the phone. So it's not unusual to go the whole week where they don't speak... he can go some weeks with no communication at all with him and he'll just wait until the weekends... [it's] just age and he's just tired at the end of the day and doesn't want to talk on the phone"*  
Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

*"... sometimes when he comes out of the office and he tries to ring them, they're already asleep... then they're sad because they've missed Daddy and Daddy's sad because he hasn't spoken to the [children]... then [partner] feels like he's let them down."* Amy, RM, senior officer, 1.4 years

While some children reportedly became upset when using online ways of communicating with their father because it reminded them of his absence from the family home, online technologies made communication easier for families, especially when children were able to use these systems themselves.

*"it's a little bit negative for the kids sometimes... once they hear him, they get a little bit upset... not all the time, but I think sometimes if they're feeling in a particularly sad mood... [on] the other hand to that is sometimes [child] just wants to speak to him... he'll sit in front of the phone or like the iPad or what have you and then he'll just have a chat... his whole demeanour changes once he's spoken to Dad, he's feels like a lot happier."* Crystal, RM, Senior NCO/rating, 3.5 years

Another aspect of communication that could be affected by separations was the depth of communication between spouses and their partner. The lack of physical time together as a family and a couple meant less time for sharing aspects of their daily lives which were not necessarily captured through short telephone calls or via messaging services. This was reported to lead to a reduction on the types of topics discussed between couples and more stilted conversations. This change in conversation was described as like having a "virtual husband" by one participant (*Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years*).

*"When you go from talking to someone almost every day about anything and everything no matter what the subject or no matter what your feelings were, to suddenly have a very limited contact of maybe just a few text exchanges or a phone call would last like ten minutes... that very much limits what you want to talk to them about or how you want to come across... texting is extremely dangerous in the respect that you can't always tell how the person has meant something... it's very easily to misunderstand you know what their meaning is... you think oh well I'll talk to them about that at the weekend because it's not the time right now."* Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months

*b. Time as a couple*

Spouses described the attempts they and their partner made to spend time as a couple when personnel were at home. Some found this easy to achieve or discussed how they made more of an effort in their relationship now because of the limited time they had together.

*"Even if it's just going out for a coffee, you know going and getting a drive-through Costa and going and sitting in the car for half an hour you know by the river... it only takes half an hour, but... it's couple time!... we'll leave the children with either Dad or you know... and go out for half an hour and walk the dogs..."* Fran, RM, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"...we do try and make the most of, you know, the time that we have together and at least twice a year we get either one of the mother-in-law's down to you know look after the [children] so we can get away for a weekend... I don't know whether or not we would do that if he was here every single day, whether or not we'd make the effort... although we see less of each other, you know a couple of times a year we do have more quality time than if we were just... seeing each other every single day."* Amy, RM, senior officer, 1.4 years

Others reported difficulties finding time to spend together as a couple in the short amount of time they had available. This was particularly true in families with young children, where some spouses explained how they felt they sacrificed time as a couple to ensure the family was able to spend time together at the weekends. This could lead to concerns about the potential short- and long-term impacts on relationships.

*"I try and make sure he spends as much time as he can with the children because it's his only time with them... in return I almost sacrifice my time with him... we've not managed to find the right balance yet... it worked really well the last time we were weekending, but we didn't have small children [then]..."* Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.

*"I feel that we don't see each other or spend time together... we just kind of facilitate the children for the weekend and then he goes back to work... we've only done [weekending for] a year, I don't know how long we can last just doing that... I've said that before that worries me that we're going to end up with nothing between us because... we've not spent any time together, not really."* Katherine, RM, junior NCO/rating, 1 year

Time as a couple at the weekend could be limited by additional responsibilities during the week. Physical fatigue meaning some spouses were unable to stay up to spend time with their partner or found it difficult to find quality time with their partner.

*"I mean the only real time we get together is maybe when [child]'s gone to bed... it's really is not what I would call quality time because you're both knackered... you're sat there either on your phone or you're watching a film together and you're not really talking... it's very difficult to kind of carve time for each other..."* Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months

*"He's not very good at putting his phone away on the weekend. Just like I'm not very good at staying awake on the weekend!... it's very easy to get into that rut, but incredibly difficult to get out... I'm really saddened by it... cause we're already having to work hard at getting through the week to have to work hard on the weekends as well."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

Another aspect of time as a couple that was discussed was accessing support for fertility treatment. One spouse described the difficulties her and her partner had experienced in family planning and seeking fertility assistance around separations. While this did not relate to the physical aspects of treatment, separation was reported to make it difficult to try and get pregnant without assistance, resulted in delays in accessing medical treatment, made it more difficult to find time where they could seek treatment as a couple and prevented them from providing emotional support to one another during the process.

*"...even just... juggling him being at major appointments has been really difficult... we couldn't find a block of time, a period of time, where he could say yeah I'll definitely be there. And that's the hardest bit... it's trying to achieve quite a... major sort of bit in your lives and so you can't even find four or five weeks you know where you can comfortably think yeah he's going to be there and... [we can] support each other."*

Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

### c. Planning weekends

In order to make the most of their time together, families described planning their weekends. There were different approaches to this. Some participants explained how they took a spontaneous, flexible approach to planning weekends, preferring to wait until their partner was at home before making decisions. Others described how they made their own arrangements with the hope that personnel could join in if they were able to come home. Such perceptions were usually due to spouse experiences with frequent disruption to weekend plans because of changes to military planning and was often an attempt to mitigate the negative impacts of any last-minute changes not only on children but also on themselves.

*"[Partner]’ll think about it all week... he’ll be so looking forward to the weekend and I’m like let’s just not bother. Let’s just wake up in the morning and decide... if he reminds them all week of ‘This is what we’re going to do on Saturday and this is what we’re going to do on Sunday’... they have this you know pressure inside them that they just need to release cause they’re so excited... when it doesn’t happen for any reason or it goes completely wrong, everyone’s just really disappointed and down... no, we’re just going to you know try and just chill out."* Crystal, RM, Senior NCO/rating, 3.5 years

*"... whatever plans we make... are about [son] and I and if [partner] can fit in, that's great... we don't do that to exclude him, we do that because we can't count on him being at home... it's better to plan for the worst-case scenario and anything other than that is an improvement. But that does then limit what you choose to do."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

Families where personnel had more stable positions, for example because of higher rank, were better placed to plan ahead; one such participant explained how she was able to organise events and holidays in the mid- to long-term so they could make the most of the time they had together and see friends and family.

*“...I’m always sort of looking at the weekends in the long term, you know long term planning... I know the weekends that I’m working between now and Christmas, I know what weekends we’ve got free to potentially go visiting, I know what weekends we’ve got major family events that we need to go... whereas [partner] is very much ‘Right I’m home, what are we going to do this weekend?’”* Rebecca, RN, officer, approx. 5 years

#### *d. Family expectations*

The lack of time together during the week, combined with the excitement of the return of a partner and father at the weekend, could lead to high expectations of how this time would be spent. Some spouses explained how non-operational separations could result in pressure to have ‘perfect’ family weekend, with disappointment expressed if they felt their plans had not come to fruition.

*“...you try to make more [of the] time you have together, but at the same time there’s a pressure to make the time you’re together perfect. And sometimes when it doesn’t work out that way, you feel that you’ve failed at something. You know if your weekend... isn’t all absolutely perfect and wonderful and you think oo I’ve I wasted that, you know you’ve wasted that time!”* Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

Differing expectations among spouses and personnel about how to best spend the time available together at the weekend were expressed. Some personnel were described as wishing to spend time relaxing at home but this could be in opposition to what spouses, some who were at home with small children during the week, wanted to do. A failure to manage these expectations and poor understanding of the different demands on couple members during the week was reported to contribute to mostly minor arguments at the weekend.

*“...trying to marry up [differences] in expectations I think is really difficult... I need some stimulation at the weekends because I haven’t had any and he needs the opposite because he’s had too much... we balance it, but normally because of what somebody is giving up... we do probably bicker about stuff a lot more than we would if we weren’t having to balance that...”* Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

There could be more serious implications for some families. One spouse attributed conflicting expectations between her partner and herself to her depression as she saw as a failure to spend quality time together as a family and a couple leading to a lack of sufficient support or attention from her partner.

*“His expectation is to have a nice relaxing weekend on the sofa... my expectation is that he would like to enjoy spending time with his family because he’s not seen us all week... we just need to figure out... the balance of allowing him to have a bit of peace, but also allowing us to want to spend time together as a four and as a two... I think that’s kind*

*of what's added to the whole depression and anxiety thing... [if] we've not done anything nice together as a family, then it's that whole 'Oh he doesn't really care about us' thing. Which I'm sure he does, but... I don't think he realises the effect... [of] not being at home.. he just come and goes and everything's sweet..." Katherine, RM, junior NCO/rating, 1 year*

## *2. Family roles*

Spouses described how the absence of personnel from the family home during the week and their eventual return at the weekend could result in changes to normal family roles of personnel, spouses and children (Figure 11). These rapid changes across the week could lead to uncertainty about family responsibilities, causing tensions between family members as roles and tasks were negotiated when personnel departed and returned.

### *a. Parental roles*

#### *Spouses as single parents*

Some spouses explained how the physical absence of their partner from the family home required them to adapt from a two-parent family at the weekend to a single parent family during the week. Their absence, and the changes it caused within the family home, were described by some spouses as contributing to greater stress and poorer mental health.

*"...I no longer had a partnership at home... I was... in a way a single parent looking after a small child and my partner was doing his own thing and he had you know in a sense... no family responsibilities because he wasn't there day-to-day. And that can be quite strenuous..." Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months*

*"... there's no one there to help so if the children wake up, it's me that has to deal with it. If the children are poorly, it's me that has to deal with it... there's no other parent to... just take the strain... time for anything that I want or need to do is very limited...I have found it very tough and I would probably [say] it has been a contributing factor to... [my] depression." Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.*

One spouse discussed how she had anticipated that her partner's role within the Royal Navy meant that he would be unlikely to be able to help with family responsibilities and so had established methods for managing the household as a single parent once they had children. However, this was an unusual experience among participants.

*"I can't rely on [partner]... during the week... whether he's weekending or not. It's very much I need to be able to run my life and the kid's life without any input from [partner] because even if he can do it currently in a job, he may not be able to do it in a job in two years' time... I need to make sure that... that I can be solely responsible for the kids so that if he is away, it doesn't... affect my daily sort of running of... the household."*  
Rebecca, RN, officer, approx. 5 years

#### *Personnel as parents*

While many spouses found being effectively a single parent during the week challenging, the absence of personnel was seen by spouses to alter how their partners' felt about their

place within the family. Some personnel were described as being upset about missing key events in their children's lives and that they were no longer an integral part of the family.

*"But definitely for [partner] I think it's tough just because he's away all week so he doesn't really sort of feel that he's part of the family during the week."* Rebecca, RN, officer, approx. 5 years

*"I'll get the messages from him 'Are they going to forget about me? Do they ask about me?'... it's not like you go and we forget about you. We talk about what we're going to do with Daddy at the weekend and things that we need to tell Daddy and it's all these sorts of things... he's still very much a part of family life."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

There is some evidence that such concerns among personnel may be justified as the absence of personnel was reported by spouses to diminish the perception of personnel as figures of parental authority among a small number of families. This could place additional stress on spouses as they explained how they had to manage this change in perceived role, either by continuing to be the primary parent at weekends or ensuring that personnel had sufficient time with children to reinforce and re-establish their position as a parental figure.

*"[Child] spends all of his time with me so it's important that [he] still has that relationship with his father and appreciates him as a father rather than just a buddy... cause I've noticed that relationship change in that [partner] will be in the kitchen and... [son] will be thirsty and he'll come upstairs to ask me for a drink... like 'Well dad's downstairs!', 'Oh yeah!'"* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

*"I think with the older two... he's probably lost some control... they're used to me running the show...if he says something to them, they'll like turn to me and give me an eye roll as if to say 'oh he's at it again mum!' I don't think they listen to him anywhere near as much as they used to do when he was here permanently."* Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.

Such perceptions among personnel may be exacerbated by the inadvertent behaviour of spouses themselves. While only discussed by a few spouses, participants who described the need to be independent during the week in order to be able to manage on their own mentioned how they sometimes needed to remind themselves that they should involve their partner in family and parenting decisions to avoid personnel feeling excluded on their return. Although largely unintentional and beneficial for spouse coping, such behaviour could lead to negative implications for family relationships if not resolved.

*"[I'm] maybe a little bit too independent! Because when he comes home I'm like 'oh blah de blah we're going to go and do this and this'. And he says 'oh, hang about, are you going to ask me?!'... it is difficult cause you are kind of focused on doing what you need to do and you just think for yourself... then you have to readjust and think 'oh actually do you want to watch something on the telly?'"* Fran, RM, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

### *Co-parenting and parenting styles*

Spouses described three main styles of co-parenting across and during non-operational family separations (Table 1). In *supported parenting*, spouses reported how they were able to use telephone calls or online technologies to ensure personnel could continue to co-parent and discipline their children despite not being present in the family home.

Table 1: Types of parenting during non-operational family separations

Type of parenting	Examples
<i>Supported parenting</i>	<p><i>"... if I had had a tough week with them you know [partner] will come home and will speak to them and say 'Look you know Mummy has had to shout at you this week and you know she then had to shout at you because I wasn't here to shout at you'." Amy, RM, senior officer, 1.4 years</i></p> <p><i>"Daddy does discipline him, even via Skype or when he's here... it's not that [partner] sits back and lets me do it which is good" Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.</i></p>
<i>Reluctant parenting</i>	<p><i>"...he didn't want to be the parent who said 'No!'... one particular time I did go crazy at him... I was telling [one of the children] off. And he was standing behind me laughing! So I just blew up!... 'you'll join me in disciplining them or when I'm disciplining them, you shut up!... 'it is not fair to (1) make me the bad parent all the time AND to undermine my authority'" Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years</i></p> <p><i>"... we clash because I'm like 'Well bloody hell! I've had the kids all week! You know, you need to do something with the kids!' and they're just like 'They're bloody arguing argh!' And then we end up clashing sometimes, not every weekend... [not] massive arguments, but it'll be like the odd bicker and you just think oh sod off will you!" Crystal, RM, Senior NCO/rating, 3.5 years</i></p>
<i>Military parenting</i>	<p><i>"[Partner]'s very much an 'if I say jump, they say how high' which it is in the military... the reality is children don't do that. And it's trying to get him to see that. But because he has to obey orders, if he's told to do something, he has to do it. He seems to think that his children should do it..." Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years</i></p> <p><i>"... his way of parenting is just to yell at the kids... I'm just like 'Will you all just shut up!' So for God's sake yelling at them is not working! You're speaking to them like they're teenagers, they're 4 and 2!... I have to sit and say to him 'They're going to hate you cause all you do is come back and yell at them'. And it's like 'Yeah, but... they're being loud!' And I'm like 'They're kids! You just have to block it out'... I think he struggles because... he's used to dealing with adults all the time..." Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment</i></p>

In *reluctant parenting*, personnel were viewed by some spouses as hesitant to step into a position of authority on their return because they wanted to enjoy the time they had with their children. In *military parenting*, personnel were reported to find the adjustments from an adult, military setting to a family home with young children difficult to manage. This was reported to result in more rigid discipline from personnel that was more suitable to their daily occupation than to (re-)establishing parenting roles. Because of some of these co-parenting styles, spouses were not able to share parenting responsibilities at the weekend as they had to manage discipline as well as supervise family relationships.

Minor difficulties with parenting during reintegration reportedly arose from variations in parenting styles and a lack of awareness of the behaviour of children by personnel because of their absence. Participants explained how both parties had to adjust to different disciplinary styles from their partner to prevent undermining the others' parenting techniques and how such differences could be more pronounced when living separately. Other participants explained how the absence of personnel meant they weren't always aware of the behaviour of children and could inadvertently undermine the consistency of their partner's parenting during the week.

*"when it's just me and them discipline's quite easy... it's more clear. Whereas if it's us both together, then it is difficult because well we both have different styles.... I would feel that... my way of doing things is the best way to do it because I know that they work! Whereas my [partner] would feel that his way of doing things would be the best way because that's just the way... he would do it"* Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"there are times when you know I've had to set clear boundaries for [son] because he's been doing a certain thing that's silly... at the moment [son] is playing rough with the dog... last weekend [partner] thought it would be funny... to play rough with the dog...it was funny, but it usurped what I was trying to achieve the few days before because... he wasn't there to see how [son] has been with the dog."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

#### *Parenting children with additional needs*

There were particular challenges in maintaining parenting roles in families with children with additional educational needs or disabilities. With personnel not actively involved in daily parenting and therefore less practiced in managing these needs, spouses explained how personnel could be less aware of routines or how best to manage their child's behavioural or health care. As with certain types of co-parenting, this could impact on the ability of spouses to reduce their role as primary carer as they had to ensure children were not upset by changes in routine or received appropriate care.

*"I have to tell him [how to best manage child with additional needs]. Which... must be quite annoying for him... he'll be acting in a way... that I know is not helpful to her... I'll have to kind of step in and say you know 'Don't do it that way, do it this way'. So it seems like I'm micromanaging him using his own words actually there!... I kind of have to keep the... day going the way it needs to go"* Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

### b. The roles of young people

As well as changes and renegotiations regarding the roles of spouses and personnel as parents, there were also changes to the roles and responsibilities of young people within Naval Service families experiencing non-operational separations. Participants with teenagers, largely the spouses of non-officer rank, described how they assisted them during their partner's absence. For most, this meant taking on extra chores within the home that were then reduced once personnel returned home. However, others explained how young people came to partially fulfil the role of the absent parent. Such expectations could cause feelings of guilt and concern about the burden placed on older children, but such assistance was required in order to help spouses manage the family home and support well-being.

*"She likes to be the other grown-up in the house like when he's not here. And then when he comes back, she almost feels like she's kind of being pushed out a little bit because then she's back to being a child. Which can be... a strange dynamic cause she's my little helper... this sounds awful, but I need the help, sometimes... just to keep an eye on [other children] for 5 minutes just while I go and do [a chore]."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

How these changes to the role of young people with Naval Service families influenced family functioning during reintegration varied between participants. Minor tensions between children and their fathers were reported which were resolved once spouses intervened to make personnel aware of the support young people provided in their absence. However, these rapid changes were not always accepted by teenagers who found the change in status from an adult to a child more difficult to adjust to and could result in feelings of resentment towards their father and arguments and tension due to their changing status in the family.

*"The older ones do an awful lot during the week to help me, but it does mean that when he's home at the weekends, they walk away from it as I would expect them to... it has caused friction in the family recently and I have had to actually talk to [partner] about it and say look don't be so hard on them at the weekends because you don't see what they do during the week, you're not here."* Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.

*"... [oldest child]'s... man of the house... he helps with everything, he tells his brothers what they can and can't do or he'll sit down and do homework with them if they're stuck and I'm busy... then Daddy comes in and he gets pushed to one side, he's back down to 'You can't do anything!' And I think he resents it. [Partner and son] are like rutting stags! Absolutely head-on... it's stressful. Sometimes I just think it's easier when [partner]'s not here."* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

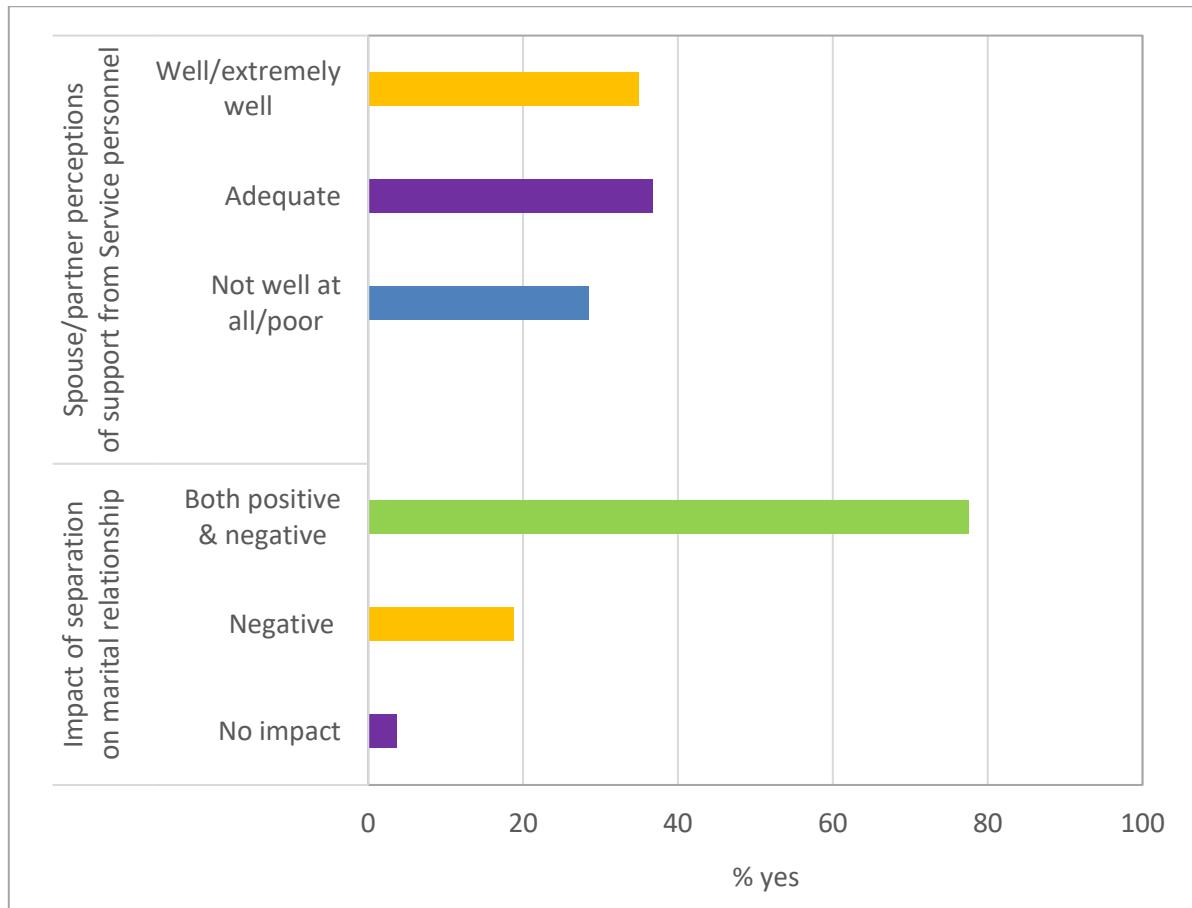
## 3. Family relationships

### a. Couple relationships

Unlike previous questions about the impact of non-operational separations on family functioning and well-being, respondents to the online survey had more mixed views about the benefits and challenges for relationships. More than three-quarters endorsed both a

positive and negative impact on their marital relationship (Figure 14), and seven in ten felt adequately, well or extremely well supported by their partner during separations.

**Figure 14: Perceptions of couple relationships during non-operational family separations among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel (online survey)**



Despite none of the survey respondents reporting a positive impact on their relationship, some participants in the interview study explained how there were positive influences on their relationship with their partner because of non-operational family separations (Figure 11). The limited time spouses had with personnel was described as resulting in couples placing greater value on the time they were able to spend together.

*“... there’s good and bad in everything. Yes, I miss him desperately, but I appreciate him when he’s home ... if there’s something that brings him home, it’s like ‘Oh great he’s coming home!’ You know an extra day and you really do... value the time you spend together.” Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years*

*“... as much as married unaccompanied as had a bit of a detrimental effect to our relationship... it’s made us appreciate the time more with each other... I look forward to the fact that he’s coming home on Friday. And if he can’t come home for that weekend for any reason I get a bit like ‘Ooh... I’m not going to see him this weekend!’... it makes you... appreciate each other a bit more.” Crystal, RM, Senior NCO/rating, 3.5 years*

However, the challenges that non-operational family separations could have on marital relationships were more commonly discussed by participants, even among those who described separations as potentially beneficial. Some spouses explained how they felt they bore most of the burden of family caring roles as a single parent while personnel had few responsibilities or did not fully appreciate the stresses of managing the family home without his support. Such perceptions could lead to expressions of frustration and resentment among spouses who felt there was a disparity in the sharing of responsibilities for the family and home between themselves and personnel.

*“...you just think ‘oh how is this fair that he gets to keep all of his leave, you know and swan off around the world and not have to deal with any of this?’... [I] can’t blame the Navy... it’s a job we signed up for... [it’s] resentment to[wards] him that he can go and live a single man’s life while I’m juggling at home and... just you know not sleeping through worry.”* Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment

*“... you do get resentful of the fact well they’ve not been here all week and you know I’d quite like a lie in... sometimes that’s where the resentment comes from... that he’s got somebody to do his cooking cause he can go to pay as you dine, he’s got a cleaner that comes in to do his room. When he gets up in the morning, he’s literally just got to get himself up, get himself showered and go...I get really angry sometimes and I get really jealous...”* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

Few spouses reported sharing these frustrations, or others, with their partner. Emotional distress among spouses was reportedly reduced or minimized to prevent arguments during the short amount of time families had together and so as to not upset personnel. In such circumstances, other avenues of emotional support, such as family and friends became increasingly important but were not available to all participants (see 2. Social support, p56).

*“...if we have a disagreement or something, we really only have one day to have the disagreement and then to you know to overcome the disagreement and for things to be ok again... we would probably avoid bringing up things that maybe should be brought up... because we know that there’s just not really enough time to properly work through it...”* Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*“...I don’t like to disclose too much to him if... I’m not feeling great!... because I understand for him it’s also very hard because he’s not at home. I don’t want to make things harder by saying... I might be struggling or I might be having a bad day. Cause I don’t want to put any more pressure or worry or anything onto him cause I know sometimes he’s already having quite a hard time being separated from us... I just sort of carry on as best that I can.”* Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months

This lack of disclosure, exacerbated by poor communication, the lack of time together as a couple and frustrations within the relationship, could have implications for perceived intimacy between spouses and their partners. Some participants explained how they felt they were living separate lives from their partners, “co-existing” rather than sharing a life with him.

*"... [communication] doesn't become a fluid real conversation between husband and wife, it just becomes like 'Are you ok?', 'Yeah'. 'How's things? How's home?', 'Yeah, ok'. 'How's [child]?', 'Yeah fine thanks'... it's just all very staggered and... it's not real conversation and that can be quite difficult because you feel like you've lost that... that pathway to the person you've married."* Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months

*"...I can see how like people drift apart and you've just got to work really hard to... not drift apart to the point where you don't want to be with that person... [because] you've found out you've nothing in common... just because you've both been leading separate lives and we have been leading separate lives, you know in the week"* Crystal, RM, Senior NCO/rating, 3.5 years

Physical intimacy, including sex, could be reduced among spouses who described feeling resentful or that the emotional connection to their partner had changed, as well as those who were physically exhausted due to the additional family responsibilities during the week.

*"...I've gotten used to just being by myself and it's great to have someone home and have the company..... sometimes... you do resent them and you don't want to [have sex] and you don't talk about [it] because you know there's not a lot you can do to change it... sometimes walls are put up between two people."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

Although not commonly discussed, concerns or worries about relationship breakdown or infidelity because of this lack of intimacy were described. More explicit examples were given, with one spouse explaining how she considered separating from her partner because of the lack of connection while another described how separation contributed to her partner's affair.

*"I was hell-bent on splitting up with him [last year]... I wasn't enjoying him being home... I was looking forward more to him being away. I was pregnant, so full of hormones and everything. It's not easy cause we don't get any time to ourselves... [we] sat down and [I] said to him 'You know, [we] can't keep going on like this... I'm falling out of love with you!' We're sort of co-existing a lot of the time... we're just trying to muddle through until he leaves."* Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment

*"He had an affair last year... [because of] pressures of work. Of long periods of separation and she was there and she listened to him and she was a shoulder to cry on... [the affair] was about... his job and the fact that he couldn't come home and there was the company... it's been horrendous. The last eighteen months has been absolute hell."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

#### b. Relationships between children and father

Non-operational family separations were also described by spouses as influencing the relationship between children and personnel. Some younger children were reported to display anger, resentment or rejection towards their father as they acted out their

uncertainties or frustrations about his absence and adjusted to his return. Because of the limited time personnel had at home, this could make it difficult to (re-)establish a relationship with their children before returning to work.

*"... [child] will sort of lash out a bit more towards him and not want to do stuff with him and he doesn't need his help... he's very negative towards him in... every possible way from... for a good while, while he's at home. And I think it's very much because he's waiting for him to leave again."* Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months

*"... some weekends it would be really good between them... [but child] would then act out towards [partner] sometimes. He would go through a stage where he would just want me and he wouldn't even want to look at [partner]... [partner] would... try and do things over the weekend and he would really misbehave for him, but he'd be really good for me... it's not a consistent behaviour ... I could never predict how [child] was going to act week to week..." Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months*

These behaviours, as well as the resentment some young people were described as feeling towards their father because of their change in status within the family (see b. The roles of young people, p38), could lead to poorer relationships between children and personnel. This could be heightened in families where military-style parenting was employed. Expressions of anger and frustration from children could extend into the wider family, adding additional tension to the weekend and limiting the time families were able to spend together.

*"[Partner and oldest child] had a really good relationship before he went and they used to get on really, really well. But since he's signed up and has just been coming home at weekends... they cannot get on. Sometimes it's just they don't even stay in the same room... I say it to [partner] 'He's still a child... [partner]'s very much an 'If I say jump, they say how high' which it is in the military."* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

*"... [the tension between daughter [5] and partner] broods in the household... she's forever aggressive towards him, shall we say, then it puts the whole house on edge cause then I'm having to calm them down all the time... it's been a lot harder this time with her being older."* Shauna, RM, junior NCO/rating, 6 months, prev. exp.

Such experiences led to the expression of concerns about the potential impact on the future relationship between personnel and children. One older participant was able to provide some insight into this by explaining how she felt regular family separations and a lack of time together as a family had contributed to a more distant and unsettled relationship between her partner and her son.

*"I am sort of worried about how they're going to have a relationship in the future. In that obviously you know he comes home and he just yells at them... all they want is to have some fun with their dad, he just comes home and yells at them and then goes away again. They seem to have... more fun with the local neighbour than you know my [partner]."* Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment

*"I think even now he says, at what twenty, he said 'I don't really know Dad' because... they spent most of his formative years apart. I mean he loves his dad and... they get on really well. But... I think [child] is sometimes a wee bit not sure where he stands with his dad... I think [child] just wants to please his dad. And I don't even know if [partner] is aware... I think [child] missed having... a male figure around, a role model."* Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

### Perceptions of family functioning during non-operational separations among young people from Naval Service families

Perceptions of family functioning during non-operational separations discussed in focus groups with young people mirrored the experiences of spouses/partners, with discussion of time as a family, communication, planning weekends and family roles and relationships (Figure 11).

#### *1. Family time*

##### *a. Spending time with their father*

Participants discussed the frequency of their fathers' return and how they found time to spend with him at the weekend. For some, this involved participating in chores together such as cooking dinner or relaxing and spending time together watching TV. Some young people reported taking part in specific activities with their father, such as outdoor crafts or theatre productions, which allowed young people to have close contact with their father and share experiences and interests.

*"We watch telly together, we like watch a film or something. And then go out for the day maybe on Saturday or Sunday... go out for lunch or go on a walk or something."*  
Hannah

*"[We do] wood carving, lighting fires, lots of outdoor stuff... most of the time, it's just with my dad."* Daniel

Weekend hobbies and activities could limit the amount of time young people were able to spend with their father, as could managing demands from other siblings.

*"... on a Saturday I'm in London for the whole day [doing activity], so I don't see him on Saturday. Then on Sunday afternoons I dance, so I only see him Friday night, Sunday morning."* Thomas

*"... there's four [other siblings]... we normally go do something together, like all of us, it's all right because obviously everyone wants to see him, so it's only fair."* Stephanie

##### *b. Communication*

Participants described maintaining contact with their father during the week and how they were able to do this themselves through phone calls, text or emails. As with spouses, difficulties in communicating with personnel were reported because of the work schedule of personnel or difficulties contacting them when they were off-shore.

*"Most of the time we just ring him, but most of the time he's always busy cause when he's working, he's - it's 12:00 'till 12:00, so 12:00 am 'till 12:00 am and on Sundays it's 12:00 'till 1:00."* Daniel

*"The time thing again, like you think he's finished work but then you call him and it's like, 'No, I've got to carry on work.' You're like, 'When can I call you, then?' He's like, 'I'll just text you' but then he never texts... we call him and then either he says he's busy or he doesn't pick up, or the signal goes so we just end up texting him most of the time."*

Stephanie

### c. Planning weekends

Unlike spouses, all of the young people who participated in the focus groups reported that their family took a relaxed approach to planning their time together at the weekend, engaging in spontaneous activities at the weekend rather than planning in advance. However, this may be because young people are not privy to the conversations their parents may have during the week about weekend plans.

*"We won't really do anything that special. We just do whatever comes up."* Aimee

Military disruptions were also described by young people. These were accompanied by expressions of acceptance among participants about the nature of military life as most had experience with long-term separation. Younger siblings were reported to be affected however, with one participant describing how frequent last-minute changes to his father's return at the weekend resulted in his parent's altering how they planned weekends to avoid upsetting his younger brothers and sisters.

*Joseph: Cause you can't really change what happens in the Navy.*

*David: In the Navy, anything can just happen [just] like that."*

*"With my dad, his schedule changed with, especially with his role, his schedule changed at a moment's notice, so there was no point planning anything, because, not so much for me, but for my younger brother and sister, they'd plan something, they'd get all excited and then they'd be like, 'No, sorry, Dad's got to do this', so they kind of like keep it all secret, if that makes sense? So they'd plan it between parents, but not [with the whole family]..."* Aaron

## 2. Family roles

### a. Child roles

Participants in the focus groups discussed how their role as a younger member of the household changed during non-operational family separations. Participants explained how they took on extra chores and for some, their concerns largely centred around the perceived fairness of the distribution of these tasks.

*"... when [father is] not at home, I have to do recycling and my sister does the washing up. When he is home, I do the recycling, washing up, hoovering, I do all the shopping and everything... he says 'It's just cause [sister]'s younger.' Yeah, but when I was her*

*age, he was still making me do all the same chores I'm doing now when he's around."*

Daniel

As described in interviews with spouses, assuming the role of an adult member of the household was discussed by young people. However, there were differences in how this role was operationalised within families according to the age difference between siblings. Participants who were older than their siblings explained how they naturally assumed this role while young people who were closer in age to their brothers or sisters described an element of rivalry for this role that was not described by spouses. Despite the potential for tension, competition for adult roles were not reported as causing major issues.

*"... there was no room for discussion. When Dad wasn't there I was in charge. And they kind of took it [chuckles]. I didn't have this rivalry"* Aaron

Joseph: David [brother] is older than me, but I'm a little bit more of a stronger character than David.

David: Yeah.

Joseph: It's a bit of juggle between who was...

David: Who would get more attention.

Joseph: No, no, who would be the boss, like the dad.

David: The dominant, dominant sibling."

### b. Parenting

Participants discussed the influence that non-operational separations had on their perceptions of parenting and discipline within the family home. A commonly mentioned positive of separation was the sense of greater freedom young people felt because of less parental control. Some participants discussed having the opportunity to modify the usual disciplinary rules or use differences in parenting styles to their advantage.

*"Mum goes to bed at nine o'clock, and if I'm out with my mates, and I like, have to be in after nine, she won't find out what time I come in, cause she goes to bed really early, but if my dad's home then he stays up really late, so he will find out. So that means I've got to do as I'm told... so positives is that I can do what I want."* Thomas

Some young people described how they perceived their father as less of an authoritarian figure on his return because of his absence from daily family life. This could be due to personnel not fully understanding how children had grown into young adults or because personnel did not want to give mixed signals regarding the rules established by the stay-at-home parent during the week, similar to the reluctant parenting described by spouses (see Co-parenting and parenting styles, p36).

*"... he comes back and then he says by the time that he is here, at like eight o'clock, to get ready for bed - but actually we don't go to bed 'till, like, 11:00. I don't think he really knows that we're not that small. We're actually just trying to grow up but he just hasn't caught up with it yet... [it's] a little bit annoying."* Alex

*"Our mum's more like - she thinks she's like the captain of the house, and I think our dad knows that, because if we ask him something he'll be like, 'Check with Mum', but if I ask my mum something she'll never say, 'Check with Dad', she'll just be like, 'Yes.' Like I think he doesn't want to say yes to things that she wouldn't agree with, but she would say yes to things that he wouldn't agree with."* Thomas

Different disciplinary styles could influence how personnel were seen by their children. One participant discussed how his father engaged in 'military' style parenting when he was younger which he viewed as a lack of respect towards the responsibilities and roles that he took on to support his mother during the week.

*"Dad would come home and he wouldn't differentiate the fact that he's no longer at work... sometimes he'd say stuff and you're like, 'I'm not one of your sailors. Don't speak to me like that.' And then that kind of mutual respect is lowered, because if he doesn't have the respect to speak to me with respect, then I'm not going to treat him with respect."* Aaron

While schooling wasn't reported as a problem in either the interviews or focus groups, participants explained how there could be competition for homework support from their stay at home parent if other siblings also required help.

*David: ... if you need help with something, it's like a battle to see who gets the help first. I guess like if you were stuck on your homework, obviously, the two parents should get one of them to help you, and the other one could help the other person. But when there's one, then it's like... a fight for the help.*

*Aaron: You've got to find the right time."*

### *3. Family relationships*

#### *a. Relationship with mother*

Some participants described the benefits that non-operational family separations had had on their relationship with their mother. While one young man felt it could be "a bit repetitive" (Matthew) only seeing their stay at home parent, others felt the presence of their mother provided stability within the family home and a reliable, consistent source of support.

*Aaron: But I think you always know your mum's there like, whereas, Dad, he could be anywhere. You always know your mum's there.*

*Interviewer: So she's a constant.*

*Aaron: Yes, she might be home late, but she's going to be there, if that makes sense?"*

Arguments with their stay at home parent were reported but these were largely minor and could benefit families by allowing them to come to an understanding of the particular expectations or pressures different family members were experiencing. One participant explained how separation had contributed to a sense of respect towards their mother from himself and his sister because of the greater awareness they had about how she managed in their father's absence as they grew older.

Interviewer: Do you think that you have a closer relationship with your mum because she's the parent at home and your dad's not - he's away.

Matthew: A bit, it's more arguments with her though.

Alex (Matthew's sister): Yeah.

Interviewer: What kind of things do you argue about?

Alex: Whether we've done our homework and whether it's up to her standards! But over time I think that we know how we both work so she's gotten to know how me and Matthew work so she's sort of gone around and worked with us about it."

"I think it has strengthened my relationship with my mum, cause she's always at home. She's always the one who's dealing with all our issues and stuff... She also works from home, so she's managed to get all of that sorted in one go, and that's given both me and my sister good respect for her, and she also understands that we are stressed in our own ways and have things to do, so she sort of lets us get on with that, and that just makes us closer." Jacob

#### b. Relationship with father

Most participants described little or no influence from non-operational family separations on their relationship with their father. As with spouses, young people described becoming more appreciative of the time they were able to have together at the weekend and fewer arguments because of the lack of close proximity.

Jacob: Because he's away a bit more, we get on each other's nerves a little less, so less time to actually build up these sort of arguments against each other, and then when we are together it's the special times.

Aaron: That's what I was just going to say, like the times that you do have together are a bit nicer, because he knows that he's home on Friday night, and he's going again Sunday night."

However, the desire to have an enjoyable time at the weekend could affect disclosure between young people and their father, with some participants, both female and male, explaining how difficult issues were not or should not be discussed at the weekend so as not to spoil the time families had together.

"I feel like it kind of has a good impact because when he's home on the weekend you just want to be like friends like rather than having arguments... whereas if we were always together then it would be a lot more arguments... sometimes the things he says annoys me, but then I just keep them inside, yeah. It's better off that way." Stephanie

As previously mentioned by Aaron and by spouses in the interview study, personnel could have difficulty adjusting from a military environment to the family home on their return. Aaron's father's use of military-style parenting at the weekend had resulted in a strained relationship when he was younger but this had resolved once he became an adult and left home.

"I feel like, like I said with the authority, the authoritarian stuff... he feels that he should be in control, and I feel like he shouldn't be, that puts a strain on it a little bit... I knew I

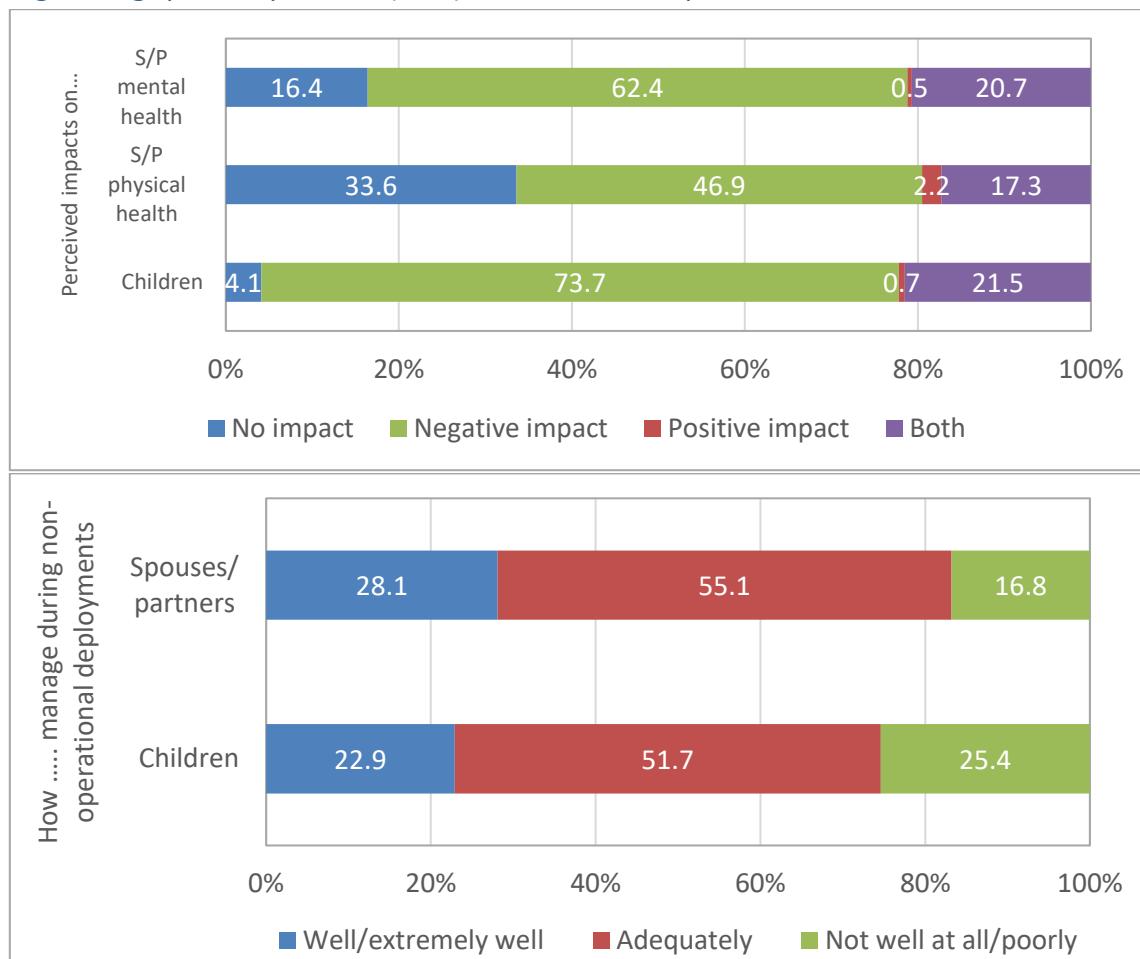
*was in the right. But he'd always think he was right. But then that's just the result of two strong characters, really. So, yes, my relationship was strained a little bit." Aaron*

### 3. Family health & well-being

#### Perceptions of the impacts of non-operational separations on family health and well-being among spouses/partners of Naval Service personnel

More than 60% of spouses/partners responding to the online survey reported a negative impact on their mental health as a result of non-operational separations and nearly 50% felt there was a negative impact on their physical health (Figure 15). The majority of spouses/partners also perceived separations to have a negative impact on the health and well-being of their children. Despite this, most spouses/partners reported that they and their children managed well or extremely well during separations.

Figure 15: Perceptions of impact of non-operational separations on family health and well-being among spouses/partners (S/Ps) of Naval Service personnel



No differences were found in perceptions regarding mental health during separations across particular groups of spouses/partners. Unmarried partners were statistically less likely to report a negative impact on their physical health compared to married spouses (33.3% vs

49.4%). Younger spouses/partners<sup>2</sup> and those with younger children<sup>3</sup> were statistically more likely to report a negative impact of separation on their children compared to older spouses and those with older children respectively. This is likely to reflect increased understanding of, or adjustment to, separations as children grow older and spouses/partners adapt to military life.

### *Interview findings*

Interviews with spouses provide greater understanding of how experiences of daily life and family functioning during non-operational separations could influence the health and well-being of Naval Service families. Two themes were identified: *spouse health and well-being* and *child adaptation* (Figure 16).

#### **1. Spouse health & well-being**

##### *Mental health and well-being*

A small number of spouses stated how they felt non-operational separations had contributed to their personal growth and confidence. This was either because they felt they had a strong, self-sufficient personality or because previous experience of lengthy periods of living apart from their partner had given them confidence in their ability to manage in his absence.

*“I think now I’m so used to it that I find it less strange when he’s not there than I do when he’s here. Like when he moved away in March I fell back into the routine very, very quickly and it was very normal and natural to me to fall back into that routine so it didn’t seem strange.”* Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

*“... sometimes I felt uncomfortable having to be on my own, but I think I just had to learn to be more independent and more self-confident with things. But then I guess that something that comes with age as well.”* Caroline, RN, junior NCO/rating, 13 years

Despite this, discussions of the emotional difficulties they experienced when managing in their partner’s absence were more common among participants, even those who reported personal growth as a result of separations. Some spouses explained how they felt they were ‘just’ coping with their multiple responsibilities and duties as a single parent during the week but that this may change at any moment.

*“I just kind of have to [manage]! I have to manage it... I do often hear from... friends and things they do often say ‘Oh I really don’t know how you manage’. But I just always sort of think... the other option would be not managing!... that wouldn’t be great so... I just end up being really quite busy.”* Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*“I feel like I’m juggling about eight balls and when everyone is healthy and I’ve had a good night’s sleep and there’s nothing extra sort of in the mix, then I manage. But as*

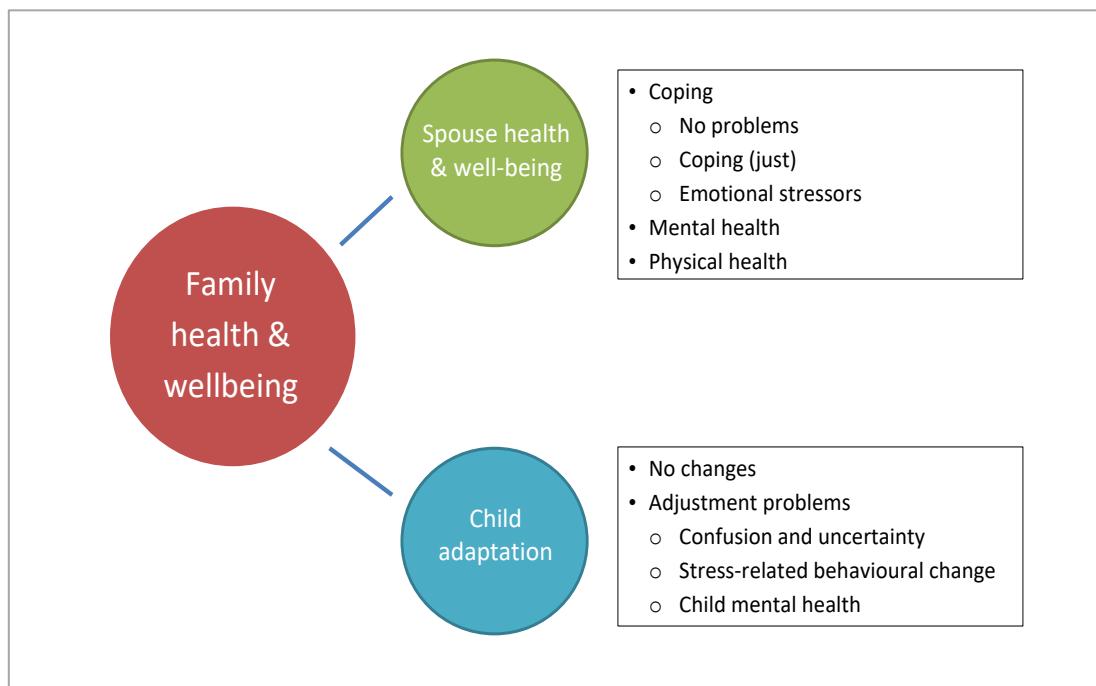
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<sup>2</sup> Negative impact on children=77.8% among spouses/partners aged 18-24 years vs 64.3% among spouses/partners aged 50 years or older.

<sup>3</sup> Negative impact on children=78.2% among spouses/partners with children aged 0-5 years vs 50% among spouses/partners with children aged 16 years or older.

*soon as sort of anything goes slightly awry, I don't have a lot of flexibility in the system, in the fact that you know that that the tower crumbles very easily.*" Rebecca, RN, officer, approx. 5 years

Figure 16: Perceptions of family health and well-being during non-operational separations among Naval Service spouses



More serious emotional problems were also described, such as stress, anxiety and concern about their ability to cope, as were physical exhaustion and sleep problems.

*"Some days I don't [manage] if I'm perfectly honest... I struggle and then if there's... if I don't feel very well or I'm quite stressed, I struggle with it a bit and then I have to play catch-up [with chores] and so it can be quite difficult... if I don't do it, nobody else is going to. So a lot of time I don't have a choice. So I have to get on and do things..."*  
Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months

*"I find weekending emotionally a lot tougher than a nine month deployment, although that's physically harder because there's no respite. This is emotionally very difficult because he's coming and going... [it's] just exhausting cause it's relentless."* Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.

Participants who discussed their mental health problems specifically ascribed these issues to the emotional and physical stressors they experienced as a result of separation. Attributions of mental health followed two broad approaches; either separation exacerbated pre-existing mental health problems, in particular postnatal depression, or mental health problems were the result of an accumulation of stressful experiences during separation.

*"I'm diagnosed with depression and anxiety... I got postnatal depression when I had*

*[child] and got over that, got fine, everything was good. When he decided to sign up, I started to wobble again. And pretty much on and off since his been in the Navy, I've been medicated. Him joining tipped me over the edge quite badly that I wasn't going to cope... that I can't do this on my own. Do you know I didn't sign up to be a single parent!" Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years*

*"[I] started getting depression a few months ago ... it was mainly through lack of support because I was just getting... very tired and very stressed and as I say it's very difficult to communicate with someone who is away and who is sort of clocking off at four o'clock and then they have all the time in the evening to do whatever they want... And trying to explain how tired I am and... their response being 'Oh well, I'll be back at the weekend'... you're very unsupported... I couldn't cope... doing it every day." Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months*

Because of the on-going nature of some of the family separations, spouses with mental health problems discussed how they would need to remain on long-term medication until their partner left Service and they were able to have their partner's daily support when they were able to live together as a family again.

*"... I think the reason I've not managed to come out the other side of the post-natal depression is because I've had all this to contend with and I can't foresee myself getting well again until he's home permanently... I certainly won't attempt to come off medication the whole time he's weekending. I just don't think it would be a good idea. Cause I have found it extremely difficult." Linda, RN, junior NCO/rating, 1 month, prev. exp.*

#### *Physical health and well-being*

Although not commonly discussed, separation could influence the physical health of spouses. Difficulties in accessing childcare were reported to restrict the ability of spouses to find time to exercise and preparing meals for young children could lead to unhealthy eating patterns.

*"A gym membership would be my absolute dream. But paying for a gym membership and then having to pay for extra childcare... racks the cost up quite considerably. And then it's finding the time because once you've finished for the day... how do you work it all in?" Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months*

*"If [son]'s eaten a really good dinner at school, then well it's really hard to make dinner for one person and a child... I have more snack food for [son] or bits and pieces that he would eat... I tend to have things that are easy to cook because I feel bad preparing lovely meals for just [son] and I, you know which take an hour of my time away from him in the kitchen." Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months*

## **2. Child adaptation**

Descriptions of child adaptation to separation varied according to experience with living apart from their father and child age. Children who had previously experienced family separation due to deployment or other military requirements were described as being more

understanding of the nature of their fathers' occupation. Benefits of separation were also reported, with one participant explaining how she felt separation had made her children closer and more supportive of each other. No problems with school or education were reported in interviews or in focus groups with young people from Naval Service families.

*"... we manage without him and the children are now used to that... when he's here, you know Daddy's home... I think the children understand that... perhaps just because... they've known no different. I don't know... if it'd be different for children who haven't grown up in that... sort of lifestyle... that is just normality to us."* Fran, RM, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"I think if anything they've always had a close bond, but [partner] being away... has made them more of a unit as in it's just the three of them and they're all very protective of each other... they call themselves 'Team [XXXX]' and that Mummy and Daddy are part of 'Team [XXXX]'..."* Amy, RM, senior officer, 1.4 years

Because of their physical dependence on their mother, babies were described as not noticing their father's absence as much as older children. Separations were viewed by some spouses as more disruptive for toddlers and young children than deployments because of the regular disruption to established family and household routines.

*"[Partner] didn't really have a lot to do with them when they were smaller. So now that they interact with him more cause when they're babies... they're a lot more sort of clinging to mum... so you know as long as I was there, then they weren't really bothered."* Shauna, RM, junior NCO/rating, 6 months, prev. exp.

*"... I personally think [weekending] is more upsetting for the kids than the longer deployment where you can focus on when he's coming home...when you've got a long deployment, you set the ground rules... the children know what's happening. But when they're... weekending, you know they just get used to the parent being home and then they're gone again, and they come home and they're gone again..."* Jackie, RN, senior NCO/rating, 4 months, prev. exp.

The impacts of these interruptions were largely exhibited by younger children as short-term displays of increased dependence and clinginess, tearfulness, irritability or minor arguments between siblings following their fathers' return to work. Such behaviour was reported to reverting to normal within a few days or following extra reassurance from the stay-at-home parent.

*"... his behaviour is different on a Saturday when my [partner] is here... I don't know if he tries to show off or something... for his dad! But his... behaviour is difficult actually on a Saturday. He gets quite whiney and... difficult whereas the rest of the time he's really easy going!"* Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"... the last time he went away she was just horrible. In a horrible, horrible, horrible mood. Just beating up her brother, throwing things, trying to hit me and I'm just... I can't deal with this. But I think it was after a couple of days, she came back round to*

*my way of thinking and started behaving then.”* Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment

The disruption caused by the regular instability of their father’s presence and absence from the family home could be particularly difficult for children with certain additional needs to adapt to. Greater attention and support was required from spouses in order to manage these changes as smoothly as possible.

*“[Child] doesn’t know when [father’s] coming home and he struggles with that. He has got some additional needs as well so that makes it a bit more harder... I have to be very aware. And have to try and find things that are available that help him while [his fathers’] away... he finds it a bit harder than maybe an A-typical child because he doesn’t properly understand and it’s hard to communicate with him sometimes what is happening.”* Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months

*“I keep in close, in close contact with [child] school in particular cause he’s got TAs [for ADHD] and stuff around him. And I let them know that this is happening, he might wobble. Sometimes you can see it in ‘How [child]’s getting on at school?’ And I have to say ‘He’s having a wobble, he’ll be fine, it’ll pass’ ... I’m convinced it’s all down to [partner] not being here.”* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

More serious, longer-term issues with adjustment to separation were discussed by a small number of participants. Stress-related regressive behaviours such the re-emergence of toileting problems on their father’s arrival or departure or extreme externalising behaviours were reported among some younger children which led one spouse to reduce her working hours until her child was managing better.

*“Our middle one bed wets... not all the time but certainly like after Daddy’s been home for like on leave for a few weeks or something like that... and then he’s away again... she’d been dry for... for quite some time. And then we started having the accidents again.”* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

*“...she had to deal with her first week at school plus her dad going away... it was hellish to be honest with you... screaming, crying, shouting, refusing... to go to bed... it took me about two weeks... to realise that it was probably my attention that she was seeking... to maybe make up for... the lack of attention she was getting as a family unit... [with] my attention being shared between the two [children].”* Shauna, RM, junior NCO/rating, 6 months, prev. exp.

Mental health problems among children and young people were reported by spouses, with separation contributing to the severe separation anxiety of one child. Another was receiving counselling to help manage the additional pressure they felt from taking on a number of adult responsibilities during the week in order to help their mother manage the household and support her mental health and well-being.

*“His perception [is that] he’s the oldest, so he’s got to take charge... it’s a lot of pressure for him and he’s putting the pressure on himself, I don’t put the pressure on*

*him. It's not his job to make sure that I'm ok... [but] he sees what's going on, he listens to conversations and he feels that if Daddy's not here to look after us and then keep everything together, that's his job. And then he crumbles under the pressure and he shouldn't do that at twelve, should he?"* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

#### Perceptions of young people

Mental health problems were not discussed in the focus groups. This is not to suggest that such problems do not exist, rather, this is likely a reflection of the experiences and families of the young people who opted to participate.

### 4. Family resources

#### Perceptions of spouses

The previous sections present an overview of the experiences Naval Service spouses have of family functioning and well-being during non-operational separations. The following section outlines the resources that participants explained could alleviate, or contribute to, the stressors arising from separation (Figure 17). These included *employer support, social support, childcare, financial resources and Naval Service support*.

#### 1. Employer support

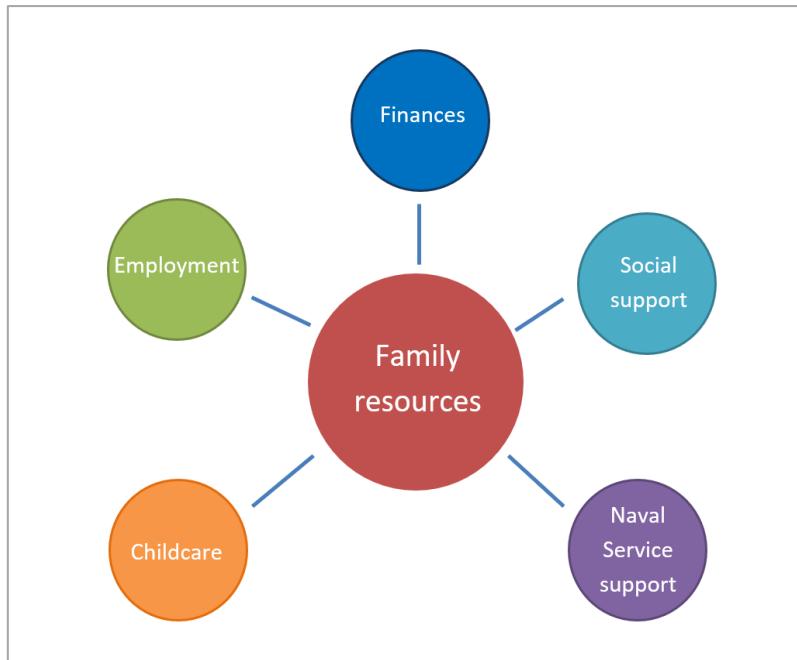
The support of civilian employers could be influential in helping spouses manage work-family conflict and maintain their careers during separations. Employers that allowed flexible working and time off when children were ill were described as relieving spouses of some of the stress and worry of maintaining employment against the demands of family life. While this support was a facilitator of spouse employment, it could also inhibit spouse career progression if spouses were reluctant to seek new career opportunities because of uncertainty about how understanding new employers may be of the same situation.

*"I work for a reasonably small company and they're so flexible and they're so good and I think it's a bit of a two-way thing that if I've ever got extra days or extra time, they know that I'll give it to them willingly. But in return if I can't come in because one of the kids is sick then they're quite happy [with] that. In fact they've given me a laptop so I can work from home!... if for whatever reason I can't come in... I can still work!"*

Katherine, RM, junior NCO/rating, 1 year

*"I've been [with employer for] twelve years and we're very sort of much like a family there so I'm very lucky that you know they understand that obviously [partner]'s away... they know the children and you know they wouldn't prevent me from being there for them... they are very understanding, but then you know if I moved jobs, they wouldn't be as understanding."* Shauna, RM, junior NCO/rating, 6 months, prev. exp.

Figure 17: Spouse perceptions of family resources during non-operational family separations



Not all employers were reported to understand the stresses of separation or life as military family. Participants who perceived there to be a lack of support and flexible working options by their employer explained how this made them feel insecure in their current role or guilty because they may be more difficult as an employee.

*"I was sitting there thinking about whether [partner] passes out from this next phase of training and thinking well if it's not on my day off, they won't let me go unless I take it unpaid... you don't want to put your head above the precipice do you? You want to keep your head down... unfortunately you can't ask for help ... it's kind of seen as you're not coping, if you're not coping you can't do the job. So it's scary." Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years*

Although not directly experienced by spouses, participants anticipated discrimination by employers when looking for work and described taking steps to conceal their partner's occupation for fear of losing out on potential roles.

*"when I apply for a job will go... not being big headed, I'm good at my job, I've got all my qualifications... because they can see I'm a military wife, due to the fact I live in [XXXX]... [XXXX], [XXXX]... [XXXX]... I feel that they don't take the risk of employing me by the fact that I'm going to be moving in two years' time." Amy, RM, senior officer, 1.4 years*

*"When you go and apply for a job, you have to be very careful about you introduce yourself... you have to sort of say I'm you know married into the military, but I'm going to be here for a while. And you have to justify... why you've just moved in, why you've had a break of employment because you've moved again. And actually still give them the assurance that... you're still going to be committed to them for a longer period of*

*time... you end up having to be a little bit flexible with the truth."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

Employer attitudes could also affect spouse employment experiences more directly. Participants who had previously served had mixed perceptions of the Royal Navy as an employer. Some ex-serving spouses reported that separation had not impacted on their career, but others described how the negative perceptions of senior Royal Navy personnel regarding childcare responsibilities led them to leave Service.

*"Not so much [of an impact] within the Navy... a lot of the time they're quite good... because I'm quite old-school Navy so I don't like to sort of take the mickey with [taking time off for childcare]."* Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment

*"When I went back to work, I had to work days because my [partner] was living and working away, I couldn't [work shifts]... that would have required me to get almost 24-hour childcare... the minute they had to rearrange kind of how I worked... it was just downhill from there... there was absolutely no leeway from the other side either to try and make life a little bit easier or any understanding and the huffing and puffing... from bosses."* Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

In a more extreme example of employer bias, one participant described being demoted following her return from maternity leave as her employer felt it would be easier for her to cope with a less managerial role in her partner's absence, a decision she was now fighting with support of her union.

*"My [employer] took the decision while I was off on maternity leave... [to give] my job away to somebody else. And the suggestion was that when I came back initially 'oh, maybe I didn't want to come back full-time because I've got three children and I have to do so much on my own...' They try and put it in the perspective of 'oh well we're trying to do you a favour'... they're aware of the home situation... and there's perhaps the perception that I can't really cope with it all."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

## *2. Social support*

### *a. Support from other military spouses/partners*

Participants living on Naval Service patches discussed the sense of community and understanding they received from other military spouses/partners and the emotional support this could provide during non-operational separations. Through these networks, spouses were able to make social connections, some life-long, that prevented feelings of isolation and loneliness. These relationships were also used by spouses for informational and practical support, helping them to manage the logistical aspects of separation such as childcare.

*"... we all know each other [here], I know every single person in every single house and I know all the children... it's a real 1950's community and it's wonderful, really lovely. Hence why we've not moved with my [partner] because I think the sense of community*

*is so important and especially for my son.”* Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

*“I actually I have a lot of friends who are Navy and non-Navy whose [partner]s work away from home. We are not unique. But there’s a group of us who meet up every week for coffee... there’s a core group of us about... about half a dozen... on an average week and... that has been my lifeline.”* Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

Despite the benefits that Naval Service communities could provide, they could be difficult to integrate into for some spouses. Concerns arose because of perceived difficulties meeting new people following a relocation, encountering cliques and differences in community spirit between bases. Spouses who themselves had previously served described feeling they were not a ‘typical’ military wife and that they weren’t able to access the same social resources as other spouses.

*“... when we moved to [XXXX2]... I found it was all very cliquey and strange... I don’t know it just seemed really false, the relationships seemed really false. So I actually had my horse on the base had a livery yard so... my main friend base was on the livery yard. And most of them had nothing to do with the marines anyway!”* Shauna, RM, junior NCO/rating, 6 months, prev. exp.

*“There’s coffee mornings and things like that you can go to if you’re into that sort of stuff! Which I’m not really!... when you’ve been in the military, you don’t really fit in with the wives... you’re a bit like an insider! An insider and an outsider at the same time!... it’s difficult to be ex-military and fit into those little cliques.”* Fran, RM, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

Divisions in support from other spouses because of their partner’s rank was reported, with some participants, all married to senior NCOs or commissioned officers, perceiving an intentional lack of interaction between spouses of commissioned officers and non-officers because of their partner’s position in the military hierarchy. Divisions in support between spouses of Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel were also described in mixed patches despite all belonging to the same Service.

*“it’s a very, very cliquey way of life which is why I’ve never really wanted to actually wanted to live on the married patch... even [at] the local primary school, other people who when [partner] was working away and they didn’t know who I was... they just didn’t talk to you... As soon as [partner] became [high profile assignment] it was amazing how many people suddenly wanted to be my friend.”* Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

*“... lots of people imagine the Naval community as being this amazingly supportive everyone’s friends with everyone type thing and it’s not really not like that... you could be friends with your next-door neighbour, but... across the road doesn’t speak to you because your [partner] is a sergeant in the Royal Marines... even though they’re part of the Royal Navy.”* Crystal, RM, Senior NCO/rating, 3.5 years

Not all of the participants interviewed lived on or near a Naval Service Families Accommodation patch or community. Those living in their own homes or away from bases described using online communities as a means of 'meeting' other Naval Service spouses. Concerns about cliques were also expressed in relation to online interactions with other spouses but were viewed as being offset by the level of information about Naval Service life that other members could provide, especially if spouses hadn't lived on patch before or new to much of Service life.

*"where I live at the moment, there isn't a Navy community here, a physical Navy community here because it's not a military place at all... there is a support network, it's the Royal Marines Wives and Girlfriends Support Network... we started as... as a way to raise money. We all got together and did events to raise money for the Royal Marines welfare fund and charitable trust fund. But also it's a support network as well on-line."*

Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"... Facebook is... the best way of keeping in touch, there's the Wives of the Royal Navy group. [Partner] hates it with a passion! Because Facebook is the root of all evil as far as he's concerned. And in all fairness, a lot of upset can be caused. You know military wives can be horrible when they want to be... [but] it's a good way of finding out what's going on and kind of sharing information, sharing experiences."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

Not all the information of support available through online forums or groups was considered to be relevant to, or understanding of, non-operational family separations, with a reported lack of groups relating specifically to weekending or other forms of family separations.

*"I briefly was part of the Facebook Navy wives and girlfriends group, but... that again doesn't seem to have a weekending presence. That seems to be... or certainly the people active on it all seem to... live with their other halves. So it wasn't particularly helpful."* Jean, RN, dual-serving, 2 years

#### b. Support from family and friends

Some spouses explained how one of the main reasons for living in their current location and away from the community around Naval bases was because of the support received from family members during both non-operational and operational separations. This support was reported as being pivotal in helping spouses manage daily family life, not only for childcare, but also for the emotional challenges of separation. Friends could provide similar forms of support, but this was less commonly discussed.

*"When [my mother is] not there, I find it very, very hard even if it's just she's gone away for like a week. And I've gone what do I do? What do we do? My back-ups gone! Because... I don't see [partner] as my back-up... I feel guilty sometimes for asking her. I know she understands... she understands the pressure that I'm under... I just hope she realises how much I appreciate what she does. Because she does do an awful lot for us."* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

*"... when I was first pregnant, I had pre-natal depression... that was a very dark time for me during the week... having seen me at that time [my friends] will now come around. If they don't hear from me... one or other of them will turn up to just 'Oh you know we were just passing, we were just making sure you were alright!' Or even if it's just a little phone call or something."* Jean, RN, dual-serving, 2years

There could be other benefits for wider family relationships, with spouses describing how their physical proximity to family members and the assistance grandparents provide with childcare resulting in closer inter-generational relationships and an extra resource for children to use to support their health and well-being in the absence of their father.

*"I mean the kids have been very fortunate that... while their dad has been away, they've got my parents to do things with and you know [son]d probably go clay pigeon shooting with my dad. So you know if [they] wanted to talk about things... they both know that my parents are there as well. If you can't talk to me about it because I'm being horrible, they'd go and see my parents."* Caroline, RN, junior NCO/rating, 13 years

Support from family members was not available to all participants, largely because of the physical distance between spouses and wider family or because family members were unable to help because of their own work and family responsibilities. Family support could be perceived as lacking because of poor understanding of the challenges and difficulties of separation or military life or offers of limited or inappropriate support.

*"My own mum is a couple of hours away, but she has her own business six days a week so as much as she would be more than willing to help, she's just not in a position to be able to help. And my [partner's] parents... [are] a good four or five hours away. So in terms of family that we could rely on, who would happily help, they're just not close enough to be able to do that."* Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

*"... the best way to put it is [family]'ll be there for [child], but they won't be there for me... if [child] needed something they'd be far more accommodating for [them] then it would be for me needing perhaps like a break... taking time out for myself... they don't really have much comprehension of what [military life is] like... [its's] that massive cliché of 'Oh you knew what you were marrying'. Well yes, but that doesn't always mean that you can cope with the daily emotional or mental or whatever kind of struggles that you may face."* Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months

### c. Accessing social support

Regardless of where spouses sought to find social support from, the absence of personnel and the lack of co-parenting support was described as making it difficult for some spouses to meet with friends or participate in social events within the community. While some of this was related to having young children, spouses explained how they felt reluctant to ask others for help with childcare or spend money on a babysitter, especially if family finances were limited.

*"The only time you get to do something is in the daytime because in the evening the children are home. And nine times out of ten, you might have like an hour where you go to someone's house for coffee maybe once a week. But when you think of all the other time in the day and the evening that you're alone, that one hour just really doesn't even scratch the surface... I can't even tell you the last time I went out with friends like an actual friend. Like I don't even know when that would have been."* Lucy, RM, other ranks, 15 months

*"... when I moved previously I joined the choir and that's how I got to know most of the social people within the community... I can't access choir because it's in the evening. So I haven't really been able to access or get to know anyone where I currently am. I've briefly spoken to my neighbour next door on occasions, but that's about it... and then we all working in different places, it makes it much more difficult [to meet people]."* Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months

There could also be tensions with pre-existing social groups because of a lack of understanding among civilian friends.

*"The other thing that I also found was you know where you've got friends that are with their partners [during the week]... and then say 'Oh do you want to go into town for a drink on Saturday', I think no cause [partner]'s home... that was the only time I had with him... sometimes... you find that you get excluded from certain social circles because of that. And people move on without you."* Caroline, RN, junior NCO/rating, 13 years

As a result of these difficulties in accessing social support, some participants explained how they came to feel lonely and bored, particularly at night-time when children were in bed, with potential implications for health and well-being as previously discussed.

*"I actually found [it] quite lonely at times... because we moved here... a lot of the mums had kinda already made their own little friendship groups... I probably have two friends from [child]'s school year, one of them I would invite round like to my house for a cup of tea and she'll come round and myself I'll go to hers. But all the other people I know round here are just more kind of mums that I'll say hello to in the playground and that's kind of it."* Amy, RM, senior officer, 1.4 years

*"It's boring! It's boring cause there's nobody to talk to... And, for me although my job is quite varied, I don't see a lot of people throughout the day so for me I lack interaction... I sit in an office on my own with the door shut... I can go all day and just see one person. So for me it's... quite boring because then you're kind of stuck."* Katherine, RM, junior NCO/rating, 1 year

### ***3. Childcare and schools***

Childcare support, both formal and informal, was crucial for spouses wishing to work or seek out further education and alleviate work-family conflict. However, formal childcare was described by some spouses as being prohibitively expensive or unavailable for the hours they required or for multiple children of varying ages. A lack of formal childcare options,

especially when informal options were not available, contributed to work-family conflict and resulted in some participants postponing work until their children reached school age.

*"We can't afford the childcare for three of them... it's just too much to be honest. If she's sick, it's not like he's going to be home at five and he could nip and pick her up from the childminders for me... it's just easier if I just don't work."* Lucy, RM, other ranks, 15 months

*"... I have to use two different childminders at the moment because they couldn't cater for all of them at the same time which made life a little bit difficult. So the girls go to one childminder... [and] the baby goes to two different childminders... I've got like three different lots of childcare that I'm juggling all at the same time because it was difficult to find you know all the right people."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

As previously discussed, members of the wider family, and to a lesser extent friends, provided a large amount of informal childcare. Spouse who were in receipt of this support often referred to how 'lucky' they were to be able rely on these networks but described sometimes feel guilty about having to rely on retired parents.

*"The reason we moved here was so... I had family support as well when [partner] was away. And my mum was helping a bit with childcare... but then sadly she became ill... I am lucky at the moment that my brother and his wife, they'll take my children on a Sunday [when she works] if [partner] can't come home."* Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"I think I'm very lucky... there isn't many occasions where [her parents] would say 'No' if I said 'Can you do this or can you do that or?' But I do feel sometimes that I take them for granted... I ask so much from them so that I can go to work... she's retired, she's meant to be enjoying life and relaxing and actually she's having to support me and the kids."* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

Schools also played a key role in helping spouses manage *work-family conflict*. The provision of breakfast, after school and holidays clubs at schools was a steady and cost-effective form of childcare for spouses and could provide emotional support for children, helping them to adapt and adjust to deployment as well as non-operational separations.

*"... the school that they go to is pretty much... 90% military children... they've got amazing teachers, they've got a pupil support advisor who, her [partner] is ex-army and she has children herself... she's done married unaccompanied herself so [child] sees her once a week just to go and talk about things that he might... not necessarily want to talk to me about and stuff."* Crystal, RM, Senior NCO/rating, 3.5 years

*"... our children go to private school. Because of [childcare], because I can leave them... if anything were to happen I couldn't get back to them, they are absolutely fine, they're at school 24/7. So that was a conscious decision that, to support me and to support the*

*children... mainly for the emotional support and the reassurance and the peace of mind that they're always there if we need them."* Katherine, RM, junior NCO/rating, 1 year

#### 4. Financial resources

While not an issue for all participants, the financial resources of families could also assist or hinder adaptation to non-operational separations. Allowances provided by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines were commonly described as sufficient by the spouses of senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) but were seen as insufficient by many spouses of lower ranked personnel such as other ranks or junior NCOs/ratings. This was especially true in households with lower overall family income, those experiencing financial problems or where personnel were attempting to return home more frequently than allowances provided for. Despite these problems, most participants reporting difficulties managing well.

*"... his salary's good, I'm not going to lie, [partner] is on a very good salary and I've been lucky that I could afford not to work...whatever I earned... it all went towards the nicer things like holidays... or it would go towards doing Christmas and stuff like that... I wouldn't have said... it put too much of a financial strain on [us]."* Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

*"we've had times where... I know they get the back-home pay. But we have had times where he's just gone 'I can't afford to come home'... it costs the best part of £50 a round trip... it's expensive isn't it?"* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

The inability of lower income Naval Service families to afford transport for personnel could lead to longer periods of separation, compounding issues of family functioning and relationships as well as the mental health and well-being of spouses struggling to manage in their partner's absence.

*"We literally we've got no money at the moment. None... so he's worrying about coming home because that £30 is £30 that could feed the children. But I'm exhausted, our eldest has night-time care needs, obviously the baby still wakes... there is no break because the money is just not there."* Lucy, RM, other ranks, 15 months

The issues with work-family conflict and career progression spouses previously described experiencing during separation could contribute to a lack of financial resources within the family and potential earnings. This could have long-term ramifications for the financial well-being of Naval Service families during non-operational separation as well as the pensions of military spouses.

*"... [not working has] probably a very small effect on our family finances... I just don't have the availability in my time to... do any more than part-time, it just wouldn't be possible for me at the moment... it's had more of an impact on what my planned family's finances would have been!"* Sue, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 2 years

*"I kind of think a lot about our future and the fact that you know my own pension has now massively reduced... if for some reason something was to happen to my [partner] or even just we decided to go our separate ways... what on earth would I do?... I'm in*

*quite a difficult position... I'm kind of completely reliant on somebody else."* Mary, RN, officer, dual-serving, 4 months, prev. exp.

Limited financial resources were described by some participants as preventing families experiencing separation from taking part in activities at the weekend and creating memories for younger children. This could lead to some frustration among spouses about the lack of variety in weekend activities. However, personnel who felt they should make up for their absence during the week by increasing spending on family activities at the weekend could add extra pressures to family budgets.

*"You don't have the money that you would normally have to support yourself in doing the nice activities. So you often have to choose something different... we haven't really had a holiday for a couple of years because we can't afford to... we have to be a bit more careful about the things we do on the weekend because we can't really justify spending the money."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

*"He wants to go out and do stuff [at the weekend]... he's trying to go out and do stuff he hasn't been able to do, but we... still can't really afford to do it. But because he's not been home... he wants to go out and spend some time together. So it's like a double-edged sword."* Sarah, RN, other ranks, 5 months

## 5. Naval Service support

Support from Naval welfare services was described by participants as varying in quality across individual welfare officers and bases, between services and units and limited in relation to geographically dispersed families (Figure 17). How spouses experienced this support could influence how they came to view the Royal Navy and Royal Marines as institutions, with implications for retention.

### a. Provision of welfare support and information

Some spouses reported receiving good or excellent support from Naval welfare services, although it was acknowledged that this could be limited by budgets and the type of support that could be realistically provided. Others explained how the quality of welfare support varied between different patches according to the ability and dedication of individual members of welfare staff.

*"All of them have actually been very good... It's always been really positive, everyone's always been very friendly... the feeling that I've got is if they can help, they will. It's not always possible, you kind of have to accept that it's not always possible... it is what it is and you make the best of it where you can. But I've always found them to be very approachable and very friendly."* Vicki, RN, officer, 16 months

*"we've had numerous welfare officers over the time that my [partner's] obviously been in the military... the current welfare at [XXXX], he is like a little ray of sunshine in a really, really dark crappy place. And he is really, really good. If there's like anything he can do, he'll do it to help you. If he can't help you, he'll find something that can... he's like God in a man basically!"* Lucy, RM, other ranks, 15 months

Other participants described receiving no or little welfare support. For some, this was through choice as they felt able to manage on their own, did not feel connected to the military, perceived that their partner would not want them to access such services or had access to preferred sources of support such as family. Others explained how changes to the provision of services meant there was no longer a member of welfare on base to support families.

*"I mean I know there's a welfare officer in [XXXX], but I wouldn't know who it is... I don't think I would use it anyway!... I've never been in a position where I've been away from home really. But I've always had my parents, I've had my friends, so if I needed help I would go that route... I don't think I'd actually... use the Navy and I don't think [partner] would want me to! I mean unless something happened to him officially."*

Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

*"I know there isn't a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that we can just access and everybody's happy. But the support isn't forthcoming, you have to look for it... welfare isn't actually on camp anymore, you can't just... knock on the door and ask to see someone for a cup of tea and a quiet chat. You know you have to make a phone call to a number that you know is effectively a helpdesk... you find yourself feeling like you're just a number in a big wheel..."* Faith, RM, other ranks, 18 months

Spouses living away from their partner's registered base or near bases belonging to a different branch of the Naval Services described problems gaining access to services on base, preventing families from accessing not only to welfare support but community-based activities that may allow them to meet other families. There was a perceived lack of welfare outreach to families in this situation. Spouses explained how they would have to contact welfare based at their partner's unit, even if this was some distance from their home, further limiting the support that could realistically be provided.

*"We live right near [local unit], my [partner] doesn't work here... the Family's Day we don't [get] invited to that cause we're not [local unit]. And pretty much anything to do for the wives like they might do a Mother's Day lunch or a barbecue or something like that, because he's not based here, we don't get invited... I like being separate [from the camp] but it would be nice to go to the Family's Day... just to have that connection."*

Katherine, RM, junior NCO/rating, 1 year

*"We are literally a five-minute drive away from [unit]. But what I find here is that if you're a Marine family, the support is there on tap because it's a Marine base. Being a Naval family, away from [XXXX] or [XXXX], you don't exist... their ID cards all say Navy. But there's still very much a fragmented kind of attitude."* Jocelyn, RN, senior NCO/rating, dual-serving, 12 months

Although information is readily available online, spouses who had not lived on patch were unclear about what services they might be eligible to receive through welfare, how to contact them and where they could find out more information. The continual reliance on personnel to deliver information to their spouse and the use of social media as alternative avenues of information contributed to a perceived lack of information dissemination

between Naval Service welfare and geographically dispersed and separated families and a feeling of disconnection from the wider Naval Service community.

*"Where we are living... there are no other Naval areas about... I feel like a civvy, I don't feel like a military spouse... I'm more aware of what's going on in the Naval community through groups I've joined on Facebook. Because otherwise I wouldn't hear anything. My [partner] doesn't tell me anything, I get... Homeport... but... I don't have any other interaction with any Naval community."* Caroline, RN, junior NCO/rating, 13 years

*"I see a lot of it on these Facebook things where they go 'Well, contact welfare'. And it's women who don't live on base and they're 'Contact welfare and I'm like 'Well what is it? What are welfare going to do for me, I don't even know what welfare really is... I'm intelligent enough to find out these things. If I really had to, I could go online and work it out. Not that their websites very good cause I've looked online before."* Karen, RN, other ranks, 2 years

#### **b. Perception of the Royal Navy/Royal Marines**

The perceived quality of the support spouses described receiving from welfare and their experiences with welfare representatives could influence how spouses came to view the Royal Navy and Royal Marines as institutions. Poor outreach or contact from welfare to geographically dispersed families could result in spouses feeling that the Naval Services as an institution had little interest in supporting or helping families. Such beliefs were described as having ramifications for retention among serving personnel.

*"As a wife who has... not lived in a married patch, the Navy don't know I exist. I mean I have no communication from the Navy whatsoever... every couple of years, they send out one of these surveys... for spouses to fill in. I fill it in every year and I fill it in and tell them the truth, nobody has ever come back to me on it. We don't exist."* Sally, RN, senior officer, 2 years

*"That's another reason why I'm leaving... it's not only for the cost of childcare, but I don't want to be living in married quarters anymore having somebody dictate to us... I just hate the Navy now. I just need to get out and I can't wait for my [partner] to get out... I've said to him 'You've only got four years left, you may as well get you know what pension you're entitled to before they pull the rug under from that as well'."*

Laura, RN, junior NCO/rating, dual-serving, sea assignment

#### **Perceptions of young people**

Family resources were not widely discussed by focus group attendees, possibly due to their age and lack of awareness of such issues. However, some focus group participants discussed the support offered by family members living nearby and how this was beneficial for helping their mothers manage during separation. Only one participant had lived on patch and described the support that other Naval Service families could provide when living within the community.

*“Because [our grandparents] live an hour away so if mum needs them for anything, she can call them and they'll be down like within the hour, so it's actually quite handy having them there.”* Alex

*“When I was growing up we were on a Navy estate, so they kind of pitch in, if that makes sense? Like the different families would pitch in. So if one, say, I don't know, someone's going somewhere, your mum can't get you, then your mum would organise for them to take you... that support network is good... being around people who are in the same boat, almost.”* Aaron

The emotional and functional support family members provided to spouses during separations was reported to benefit young people as well, resulting in closer relationships with grandparents assisting the stay-at-home parent with childcare.

*“I don't know about the others but, for me, my mum wasn't military, my mum had a full-time job as well, so when my dad was away it was, basically, I spent my time with my gran. Living at home, but my gran was there, rather than my parents. When I came home my gran was there; when I went to school my gran was there... I've got a real close relationship to my gran.”* Aaron

## Conclusions

These findings demonstrate how non-operational family separations can influence family functioning and well-being among Naval Service families, with many of the benefits and challenges reported similar to those described by families experiencing deployment-related separations. Spouse employment, family roles and relationships and spouse and child health and well-being could all be affected, although particular resources could alleviate family adaptation to these separations. While this is the first study to focus on this particular experience of Service life, there is an increasing trend towards a greater number of military families settling in civilian communities, potentially leading to an increase in non-operational separations across all three Services. It is therefore important that additional research and resource is focused on understanding of this particular form of military family life and how to support families who may be experiencing it.

Perceptions of the impacts of non-operational separation on aspects of family functioning and well-being were mostly negative among respondents to the online survey. While the survey was not representative of the wider Naval Service community, similar findings are reported in larger surveys of military families, with higher proportions of Naval Service spouses reporting feeling negatively about the effect of separation on family life, children and relationships compared to spouses of Army or RAF personnel (Ministry of Defence 2017). The findings are also comparable to those expressed by Naval Service personnel on routine deployment in the OMNHE (M) study. Together, these findings suggest concern within the Naval Service community about the impact of such separations on a range of different aspects of family life and may have implications for retention and recruitment of personnel.

Greater understanding of these perceptions is provided by the findings from the interview and focus group studies, which indicate how the stressors of separation can accumulate within Naval Service families and lead to poorer family outcomes as seen in studies of spouses and young people during deployments (Mmari, Roche et al. 2009, Jennings-Kelsall, Aloia et al. 2012, Werner and Shannon 2013). Because of the absence of personnel during the week, spouses were required to take on most of the responsibilities within the family home, limiting or restrict their perceived ability to undertake employment or advance their careers. Further family stress was introduced by the reduction in the amount of physical time families were reported to spend together, compounded by disruptions caused by military planning and problems communicating during the week, followed by pressure to have the ‘perfect’ family weekends when everyone was together. In order to manage the household, family roles, for spouses, personnel and children, had to change across the week, expanding to accommodate personnel at the weekend and contracting during the week and changing identities within the family (Verey and Fossey 2013). While differences in perceptions of spouses and young people were explored according to personnel rank and Service but were not evident. Variation in experiences instead related to how experienced families were with military life, perceived individual personality traits and the age of children.

The accumulation of these stressors has implications not only for family relationships but for family well-being. The sense of resentment spouses felt due to the inability of personnel to share family responsibilities, the exclusion from the family unit some personnel may feel, uncertainty about parental roles among younger children and older children adjusting from being seen as both a child and an adult within the household can all affect family connections. Such experiences may be more common than previously thought, with more than 70% of UK Service families stating that living separately from personnel as the result of unaccompanied postings has harmed the serving person’s relationship with their family (Army Families Federation 2016). As seen in similar to studies of stress and mental health of spouses during the deployment cycle (Rosen 1995, Dursun and Sudom 2009, Mansfield, Kaufman et al. 2010), periods of depression and anxiety were directly attributed to experiences of separation, either emerging as a new problem or exacerbating pre-existing conditions. The physical health and well-being of spouses could also be affected through a lack of physical exercise and poor eating habits. Child adaptation varied by age and experience of living apart from their father. While most reactions ranged from the temporary clinginess and the need for additional reassurance, more extreme issues such as toileting problems, extreme externalising behaviours and stress and anxiety were described.

Resources were important for family adaptation to non-operational separations, in particular support from employers, family and friends and schools to manage *work-family conflict* and financial resources to allow personnel to return home more often. There were certain common perceptions and experiences described by those participants who appeared more adaptable to the stressors of separation. Those that managed to establish what they viewed as ‘quality time’ as a family and as a couple during their time together were better able to manage the lack of family time during separations, as were those who had clearly defined parenting strategies in place. Strong lines of communication were important, in particular honest and open dialogue allowing couples and families to maintain or establish mutual support and understanding about their experiences during separation. Families with poorer

communication skills, spouses who feel greater frustration or resentment about separations and those with limited resources to help alleviate some of the stresses they experienced may be at risk of poorer outcomes and require additional support and information. Of particular note are the perceptions spouses had of Naval institutions and welfare support. There was uncertainty about what support could offer and geographically dispersed families reported difficulties accessing nearby Naval Service communities because of security issues, making it difficult to meet other Naval Service families. The remit of the Naval welfare services and the policy context surrounding military families with the introduction of the Armed Forces Families strategy suggests that families experiencing this type of separation may benefit from targeted support from welfare services and means of accessing information that do not involve personnel.

## Recommendations

Developed from suggestions from participants and the study findings, the following recommendations include ways in which military charities, Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW), Naval Command and the Ministry of Defence can support Naval Service families, and those across the Services, who are experiencing non-operational family separations. While designated to particular institutions, their implementation will require input and support from all parties and should be seen as inter-related, rather than stand-alone proposals.

### Naval Service families

Participants in the interview and focus groups were asked for their recommendations on how to manage during non-operational family separations. Their comments included:

- Work at developing communication skills within, and as, a family
- Have a good network of friends, either military or non-military, for support
- Develop independence and self-sufficiency
- Don't overthink it – "roll with it"
- Try to have a positive state of mind and something to look forward to

### Military charities

- Ensure advocacy reflects the full range of experiences of Naval Service families, including relocation, deployment and non-operational separations.
- Provide information on common experiences and reactions to weekend and simple methods for overcoming these to help families know what to expect when starting non-operational separations. These should include information about:
  - the benefits and challenges of separations for family relationships and roles
  - the possible impacts on health and well-being for all family members
  - the potential for a period of reintegration at the weekend for all family members
  - ways to manage financial stresses
  - low-cost ways for families to spend quality time together
  - accessing the Naval Service community when not living close to base ports or units
- Develop and advertise online platforms specific to the experiences of families undergoing non-operational separations to increase informal information sharing and emotional support and counter the lack of physical Naval communities.

- Investigate innovative ways to expand advice to Naval Service families to include information on easy ways to encourage physical exercise and healthy eating as well as mental health and well-being. This could be combined with welfare services to provide alternative means of encouraging social interaction between spouses in the Naval Service community to complement services that are already in place.

### **Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW)**

- Increase the provision of information about the services RNRMW can provide families and clear contact details that are easily accessible to non-military personnel and do not rely on personnel as a conduit of information. This should include:
  - Increasing awareness of the Royal Navy Forum
  - Identifying extra resources for increased advertising and resources (e.g. online videos and chat) for current services
  - Exploring additional permissions under Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system to allow RNRMW to contact family members directly
- Improve outreach of RNRMW to increase provision for geographically dispersed families, including greater advertisement of outreach programmes and an easily identifiable and accessible central information point to signpost families to the nearest welfare service. This hub could also help aid information dissemination for families living outside military communities.
- Provide varied timings for community events on bases to encourage spouses with childcare responsibilities to improve access to social support.
- Explore alternative events to coffee mornings and mother-toddler groups to appeal to more spouses/partners and accommodate dual-serving partners.

### **Naval Command and the Ministry of Defence**

- Seek opportunities, where possible given operational requirements, to increase consistency around programming, duties and watch-bills to increase the ability of families to plan.
- Improve training and awareness of the similarities in stressors between families separated by deployment and those separated by other military requirements among military leaders and career managers within the Naval Services.
- Improve identification of separated families within military systems to allow welfare services to target support to families during non-operational separations. This could be introduced as a checkbox in personnel records held by the military with consent for contact by Naval Service representatives.
- Raise awareness of the ‘dependant’s’ pass among families living near Naval Service bases.
- Explore ways of improving information-sharing with Naval Service families to increase awareness about current and planned welfare provision, including exploitation of current and planned systems within the military community such as the Royal Navy Forum or development of new systems for families similar to the Veteran’s Gateway.
- Review the Tri-Service operational and non-operational welfare agreement (JSP 770) to ensure geographically dispersed families are able to receive, and are aware of, welfare support from the Service provider closest to the family home. This should also ensure that departmental policy is delivered appropriately at local level.

- With the trend towards an increase in non-operational separations across all three Services, the Ministry of Defence should consider how dispersed military families could be supported to connect with each other to maintain the benefits of the military community.
- The Ministry of Defence should consider the impact of non-operational family separations as well as relocation in spouse employment initiatives and programmes. A recently announced fund has been established which will help spouses and civil partners of serving personnel who wish to retrain or become self-employed which may help some spouses.
- Childcare programmes for both civilian spouses and women serving across the military should be explored under the Armed Forces Families strategy to help alleviate work-family conflict among Naval Service families.

### **Future research**

- Given the differences in the outcomes of military personnel, veterans, spouses/partners and children by Service, future studies should examine military family health and well-being according to Service branch, to ensure differences are explored and to examine changes over time. This includes data from current and future studies within KCMHR.
- Further research should be conducted to expand on the findings of this study, particularly the experiences of family functioning and well-being among personnel and children and young people. This should include the use of robust measures of mental health, well-being and family outcomes as well as qualitative studies to better understand the impact of this particular form of family life on all family members, including personnel.
- A framework of common stressors during deployment and non-operational separation should be further developed to allow for targeted support in key areas for families undergoing such experiences. This should be disseminated to doctors, social workers, local councils, teachers and NHS services to improve understanding of different aspects of military life among service providers and associated professions.
- Interventions to support UK military families undergoing non-operational separations and alleviate stressors and support stronger family functioning, health and well-being should be explored. These could be adapted from existing programs in the US, such as 'Families Over-Coming Under Stress' (FOCUS) (Beardslee, Lester et al. 2011) or the After Deployment Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT) (Gewirtz, Erbes et al. 2011) or newly developed to be specific to the UK military context. Any intervention must include online delivery of these interventions from inception to account for geographical dispersion among military families.
- Research should be undertaken to determine what welfare support Naval Service families are aware of, their sources of information about services and the type of support they would like to receive.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Quantitative findings

Table 2: Prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems among children from Naval Service families compared to children from Army/Royal Air Force families (Maternal reports - Children of Military Fathers' study)

Child emotional and behavioural problems (SDQ)	Children from Army/RAF families % (n)	Children from Naval Service families % (n)	df	X2
<b>Hyperactivity</b>				
Normal	78.5 (409)	77.8 (89)		
Borderline	5.7 (29)	5.0 (6)		
Abnormal	15.8 (80)	17.3 (19)	2	0.89
<b>Emotional problems</b>				
Normal	79.6 (413)	73.9 (84)		
Borderline	7.2 (37)	6.4 (7)		
Abnormal	13.3 (68)	19.7 (23)	2	0.22
<b>Conduct problems</b>				
Normal	76.6 (400)	77.0 (89)		
Borderline	11.5 (58)	12 (13)		
Abnormal	11.9 (60)	11.1 (12)	2	0.97
<b>Peer problems</b>				
Normal	79.9 (415)	74.8 (85)		
Borderline	8.1 (43)	9.1 (11)		
Abnormal	12.0 (60)	16.1 (18)	2	0.43
<b>Pro-social problems</b>				
Normal	90.4 (469)	92.2 (105)		
Borderline	5.4 (27)	3.4 (4)		
Abnormal	4.2 (22)	4.4 (5)	2	0.69
<b>Total difficulties</b>				
Normal	81.7 (426)	76.6 (87)		
Borderline	6.1 (31)	7.3 (8)		
Abnormal	12.2 (61)	16.1 (19)	2	0.45
<b>Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) (11+ yrs only)</b>	<b>Children from Army/RAF families % (n)</b>	<b>Children from Naval Service families % (n)</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>X2</b>
<b>Anxiety</b>				
No	92.0 (186)	86.9 (46)		
Yes	8.0 (15)	13.1 (7)	1	0.26
<b>Panic</b>				
No	96.6 (194)	96.6 (51)		
Yes	3.4 (7)	3.5 (2)	1	0.98
<b>Generalised anxiety</b>				
No	90.2 (182)	90.7 (48)		
Yes	9.8 (19)	9.3 (5)	1	0.92
<b>Separation anxiety</b>				
No	86.9 (175)	88.7 (47)		
Yes	13.1 (26)	11.3 (6)	1	0.73
<b>Social problems</b>				
No	91.4 (184)	86.4 (46)		
Yes	8.6 (17)	13.6 (7)	1	0.28

School avoidance				
No	88.0 (176)	81.8 (43)		
Yes	12.1 (25)	18.2 (10)	1	0.24

Missing n=1-48 ‡p<0.10, \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

## Appendix 2: Qualitative participants

Table 3: Interview study participants

Pseudonym	Age (yrs)	Personnel Service	Personnel Rank	Spouse served	Experience with weekending
Sally	50-54	RN	Senior officer	-	2 years
Amy	35-39	RM	Senior officer	-	1.4 years
Vicki	25-29	RN	Officer	-	16 months
Jean	30-34	RN	Officer	Y	2 years
Rebecca	40-44	RN	Officer	-	5 years, off/on
Mary	35-39	RN	Officer	Y	4 months, prev. exp.
Crystal	35-39	RM	Senior NCO/rating	-	3.5 years
Jackie	55-59	RN	Senior NCO/rating	-	4 months, prev. exp.
Jocelyn	30-34	RN	Senior NCO/rating	Y	12 months
Fran	35-39	RM	Senior NCO/rating	Y	2 years
Laura	35-39	RN	Junior NCO/rating	Y	6 wk sea assignment
Linda	35-39	RN	Junior NCO/rating	-	1 month, prev. exp.
Sue	30-34	RN	Junior NCO/rating	Y	2 years
Katherine	35-39	RM	Junior NCO/rating	-	1 year
Shauna	30-34	RM	Junior NCO/rating	-	6 months, prev. exp.
Caroline	45-49	RN	Junior NCO/rating	-	13 years
Karen	35-39	RN	Other ranks	-	2 years
Faith	35-39	RM	Other ranks	-	18 months
Lucy	25-29	RM	Other ranks	-	15 months
Sarah	18-24	RN	Other ranks	-	5 months

RN=Royal Navy, RM=Royal Marines

Table 4: Focus group participants

Pseudonym	Age (yrs)	Experience of family separation (weekending)	Relationship with other attendees
Stephanie	14	Currently experiencing	Step-sister of Hannah
Hannah	13	Currently experiencing	Step-sister of Stephanie
Daniel	13	Currently experiencing	-
Alex	16	Currently experiencing	Sister of Matthew
Matthew	13	Currently experiencing	Brother of Alex
David	15	Father at home for last year	Brother of Joseph
Joseph	13	Father at home for last year	Brother of David
Aimee	14	Most of her life	-
Olivia	13	Previous experience	Sister of Thomas
Thomas	15	Previous experience	Brother of Olivia
Jacob	14	Currently experiencing	-
Aaron	18	Previous experience	-