

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (the Trust) has released the findings from new research into the needs of the Royal Navy submariner community and the impact of separation on family life.

The Trust commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to undertake further research following an event they attended in April 2024, hosted by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity (RNRMC) and Greenwich Hospital.

Over two days, they heard from the Armed Forces community located in Helensburgh, Scotland, to understand more about the support available for Naval personnel and their families; and identify any gaps and opportunities.

Listening to the submariner community

The research highlighted that personnel and families can suffer poor mental health and emotional strain due to unpredictability, frustration, separation and feeling unprepared for deployment. This can also include a period of pre-deployment anxiety as well as the deployment period itself. Reintegration following deployment can also be a challenge as routines are disrupted. An enduring stigma around mental health can deter some from seeking the help they need.

This wasn't limited to immediate family members, with extended family not feeling included in the support networks available.

Availability and accessibility of services was raised. Families reported a low awareness of support available and there was some hesitancy in accessing statutory services affiliated with the Royal Navy, in case of impact on the submariner's career. There were added issues for those living in remoter areas, further from the base, with fewer activities and services available.

For the organisations themselves, the research found that collaboration could be better. Especially between military and non-military organisations, where there can be a lack of integration for military families into services designed for civilians.

Other issues included impact on the spouse's career. However, those who took part in the research talked about the importance of coping strategies such as focusing on work, staying busy and maintaining routines.

Recommendations from the research included:

- Tailored mental health support
- Improved communication and practical advice for managing deployment challenges
- Fostering community connections and encouraging peer support initiatives
- Help with adjusting post-deployment, and the complexities of being away for a long time
- Initiatives that enhance career development for spouses.

Anna Wright, Chief Executive of the Trust said: "Lots of work on these recommendations is already underway under our three-year Covenant Fund framework. Our Hidden Needs programme focuses on tailored and specialist mental health support, while our Apart not Alone programme centres on reducing the impact of long or frequent separation for military families. However, until now, we have not focused this support on any particular service or location. This important research has informed what will come next and we are excited to share more about that very soon."

Dr Jasna Magić, Research Director, the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen): "This research has given submariners' families a vital voice, highlighting the emotional and practical challenges they face due to long separations, uncertainty, and stigma around seeking support. By truly listening, we can shape support that genuinely meets their needs. We're proud to have worked with the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust on this important project and hope these findings drive lasting change for the submariner community."

Putting findings into action

The Trust is encouraging anyone in a position to support this community to read the research findings and consider how they too can make a difference.

You can read the report in full on the Trust's website: www.covenantfund.org.uk