**Confident, valued and supported:**

**Examining the benefits of employment support for military spouses**

**Authors and affiliations**

Lauren R. Godier-McBarda, Research Fellow (Corresponding author: [lauren.godier-mcbard@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:lauren.godier-mcbard@anglia.ac.uk); William Harvey Building 2nd Floor, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, CM1 1SQ, 01245 684824)

Nick Caddicka, Senior Research Fellow ([nick.caddick@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:nick.caddick@anglia.ac.uk))

Matt Fosseya, Director ([matt.fossey@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:matt.fossey@anglia.ac.uk))

b Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research, Anglia Ruskin University, William Harvey Building, Bishop Hall Lane.

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**Abstract:** Military spouses face numerous challenges in obtaining employment as a result of their connection to the military. Previous research has linked military spouses underemployment to reduced well-being and satisfaction with military life, which in turn impacts on retention of the service person. In response to this the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) trialled a 2 year programme of employment support for spouses in 2015. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative evaluation of this programme and its impact on spouses. Interviews were carried out with 30 spouses and 23 of their serving partners to examine the benefits and impact of the support provided. The majority of spouses and their serving partners perceived the employment support as providing a positive contribution from the military to help spouses get back into employment or improve their employability. Additionally, spouses felt invested in by the military and valued as constituents in their own right. No impact of employment support for spouses on the intention to remain or leave the Armed Forces was identified. Longitudinal follow up will be required to determine any long-term impact of employment support on employment outcomes and retention.

**Keywords:** Employment Support, Military Spouses, Military Wives, Evaluation, Retention.

**Public significance statement:** This study suggests that employment support targeted specifically at military spouses is positively received, and helps them to feel more confident in job seeking and valued by the military as an organisation.. Continued research – including long-term follow-up – with military spouses is required to ascertain whether support improves the likelihood of securing employment and influences families’ intentions about retention in service.

**Introduction**

There is a growing international literature exploring the systematic disadvantage experienced by military spouses in obtaining and maintaining employment as a result of their military lifestyle. Literature from the US consistently shows that military spouses are more likely to be unemployed, earn less, and be undervalued by their employers in comparison to their civilian counterparts, despite having on average higher levels of education (Booth, 2003; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Maury & Stone, 2014). In the UK, employment rates in military spouses compare favourably to the general population (Ministry of Defence, 2019b). However, the majority of spouses report feeling as though military life has a negative effect on their career (Dandeker, French, Birtles, & Wessely, 2006; Ministry of Defence, 2019b).

There are a number of challenges and barriers to employment associated with service life. Service families often experience frequent relocation to new bases, particularly Army families (Ministry of Defence, 2019b), which can interrupt both current employment and completion of higher education (Blakely, Hennessy, Chung, & Skirton, 2012; Borah & Fina, 2017; Burke & Miller, 2016; Lyonette, Barnes, Kispeter, Fisher, & Newell, 2018). Furthermore, frequent moving may make it hard to plan for and achieve career progression (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008), as well as creating a number of gaps in employment (Payne, Warner, & Little, 1992), and a drop in earnings following relocation (Burke & Miller, 2016). As a result, military spouses spend less time in paid employment (Payne et al., 1992), and are less likely to have the type of job they desire (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Employment that is flexible or part time, is often in the service or retail sectors, which provide lower wages than other sectors (Booth, 2003; Harrell, Lim, Castaneda, & Golinelli, 2004). Employers perceptions of the transient and inflexible nature of the military lifestyle may create further challenges for military spouses. Organisations may not want to commit to training military spouses if they are expecting them to leave within a few years, and those who do employ them may not invest fully or see them as having a long term future with the organisation (Booth, 2003).

Frequent separations from their serving partner due to deployment and long unpredictable working hours provide further barriers to employment for military spouses (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Lyonette et al., 2018). Being solely responsible for childcare and household affairs, particularly if formal childcare is unaffordable, may limit the possibility of finding employment that is flexible to their circumstances (Dandeker et al., 2006; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Lyonette et al., 2018; Maury & Stone, 2014). The availability of affordable childcare presents a further major barrier to seeking and obtaining employment for military spouses (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Lyonette et al., 2018; The Centre for Social Justice, 2016) as does separation from the support that established networks of family and friends may have provided with regard to child care (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; The Centre for Social Justice, 2016).

Despite these difficulties, military spouses report wanting to work for both financial and psychological reasons, such as personal fulfilment, maintaining their own personal identity, social connectedness and increased self-confidence (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Gribble, Goodwin, Oram, & Fear, 2019; Harrell et al., 2004; Lyonette et al., 2018). Being unable to obtain their desired employment and contribute financially to the household can lead to reduced feelings of self-worth, self-esteem and independence in military spouses (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Kroska, 2008). Indeed, spouse underemployment has been linked to lower psychological well-being and reduced quality of life compared to their employed counterparts (Trewick & Muller, 2014). Trewick and Muller (2014) explain this in terms of the latent and manifest benefits (LAMB) associated with meaningful employment. They report that the latent benefits (i.e. having a time structured day, status associated with employment, collective purpose, social contact with colleagues and enforced activity) and manifest (i.e. financial income) benefits associated with working were key indicators of psychological wellbeing and quality of life in military spouses.

Research suggests that military outcomes such as operational readiness and preparedness are associated with spouse employment, mediated by its association with spousal quality of life (Decision Engineering Associates, 2002). Spouses who are psychologically healthier are more likely to be able to support their serving partner and their family (Trewick & Muller, 2014). Military spouses who are not satisfied with their career options may encourage, or put pressure on their serving partners to leave the service. This was highlighted by Harrell et al (2004), who found that the non-serving spouse’s influence on retention increases in line with the number of spouses who aspire to have their own career. Indeed, in the UK, spouse employment and the impact of service life on the family are consistently found to be predominant factors influencing serving personnel’s intention to leave the Armed Forces (Ministry of Defence, 2016b, 2017a, 2018, 2019a).

Considering the importance of employment to the wellbeing of military spouses, and the potential link to retention described above, it has been suggested that military institutions should provide employment support to help counteract the barriers experienced as a result of the military lifestyle and minimise their impact on career development (Gribble et al., 2019; Trewick & Muller, 2014). Indeed, work has been done in the US to link military spouses with appropriate employers. The Military Spouse Employment Partnership programme was implemented in by the US government in 2011 with the aim of developing a “targeted recruitment and employment tool that serves military spouses and companies that are seeking to hire them” (Gonzalez, Matthews, Posard, Roshan, & Ross, 2015). In 2015 the Military Spouse Employment Partnership had 288 partner organisations offering employment to military spouses. An initial evaluation of this programme suggested the available jobs were geographically diverse and aligned with the types of jobs that military spouses were searching for, as well as their experience and education (Gonzalez et al., 2015). A full evaluation of the impact of this programme is currently underway.

*The current study*

In response to the need for provision of employment support for military spouses, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) launched the Spouse Employment Support (SES) Trial in 2015, to help spouses optimise their access to employment and to help them find better employment at a level that is commensurate with their skills, knowledge and experience and/or in accord with their aspirations and ability. As outlined above, surveys carried out by the MOD suggest that spouses feel military life negatively impacts on their careers, and difficulties with spouse employment are consistently found to be predominant factors influencing serving personnel’s intention to leave the Armed Forces (Ministry of Defence, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). As such, the aims of the SES Trial, as outlined by the MOD, were as follows:

1. To overcome the employment disadvantage inherent in being mobile;
2. To increase the income of Service families, thereby increasing the likelihood of them being able to afford their own home; and
3. To improve the retention of serving personnel through supporting their spouse’s employment.

In order to support spouses to build their knowledge and resilience to develop a sustainable career, those participating in the Trial were given access to job readiness support in the form of careers counselling and workshops, a job-finding service, as well as a training grant with which to pursue employment-related training in their chosen field. Ultimately it was hoped that this support would enable spouses to gain meaningful and lucrative employment that would increase their ability to support their family, and improve their satisfaction with military (and in turn the retention of the serving person).

The current research was commissioned as an independent evaluation of the MOD Spouses Employment Support Trial. In light of the barriers to employment for military spouses described above, we sought to investigate the short to medium-term impact of employment support services for military spouses by interviewing the spouse who took part in the Trial and their serving partners. It was beyond the remit of this two year project to investigate the latter two aims of the SES Trial outlined above, and long-term controlled follow up will be needed to quantify any change in income and retention as a result of the Trial. This was an early-stage Trial programme, developed by the MOD without the inclusion of a formal programme theory. As such the qualitative investigation was based on the following research questions:

* What was the impact of employment support services on spouses’ intention and ability to seek and maintain employment?
* What was the impact of employment support services on spouses’ satisfaction with military life and the service families’ intention to remain in the Armed Forces?

**Methods**

*MOD Spouse Employment Support Trial*

Participants in this research were all taking part in the MOD’s two-year SES Trial launched in October 2015. The Trial was conducted in recognition of the importance of spouse employment and the challenges around it. It was open to 195 spouses of Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel stationed across 22 bases in the UK and 240 spouses of personnel working within Joint Forces Command (JFC), across four locations in Cyprus[[1]](#footnote-1). The primary purpose of the Trial was described as ‘to help spouses optimise access to employment and to help them find better employment at a level that is commensurate with their skills, knowledge and experience and/or in accord with their aspirations and ability’ (MOD, 2014). The Trial was delivered by the Career Transition Partnership (CTP), an employment readiness and job finding service currently available to UK Service Personnel as they exit the military as part of CTP’s contract with the MOD.

The Trial consisted of two main elements:

1) Job readiness and career support (similar provision to the support that UK Service Leavers receive from CTP when exiting the military).

2) Training grant up to the value of £879 for spouses to pursue training and skills-based qualifications in their chosen field of employment.

The support provided by the Trial was intended to provide flexibility for spouses to use one or more of the employment support services available, depending on their individual needs. Remote support was provided where possible to suit spouses who are in remote areas or unable to travel.

Spouses (including civil partners) could apply to take part in the SES Trial if they were employed, self-employed, unemployed or currently in training/education. To be eligible to take part the serving partner needed to have served at least six years in the UK Armed Forces (spouses of full-time Reservists, Wounded, Injured and Sick, and Foreign and Commonwealth Service Personnel could also apply as long as they fulfilled the length of service requirement).

This study was commissioned and funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT), a UK-based charity that aims to “provide an evidence base that will influence and underpin policy making and service delivery in order to enable ex-Service personnel and their families to lead successful civilian lives.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The evaluation was commissioned following the commencement of the trial, limiting the collection the baseline data, and covered a two-year period only. As such it was beyond the remit of this project to assess quantitative employment outcomes.

*Sample*

Participants were recruited from the 435 UK military spouses who took part in the MOD’s SES Trial (240 from JFC in Cyprus and 195 from the RAF the in the UK). Participants were identified using a purposive sampling strategy in order to reflect diversity among spouses across a number of categories including Trial location (Cyprus or the UK), branch of service (Army/RAF)[[3]](#footnote-3), and rank subset (commissioned/enlisted).

A total of 30 spouses took part in interviews, including 13 from the UK and 17 from Cyprus. Of these spouses, 13 were classified by CTP as ‘unemployed seeking work’, 10 were ‘employed seeking betterment’, and 7 were ‘economically inactive’. All spouses who took part in the interviews had engaged with the support provided through the SES Trial. There were no other inclusion or exclusion criteria for participants. Additionally, 23 Service Personnel with spouses taking part in the SES Trial (11 in the UK, and 12 in Cyprus) were interviewed as part of this research and were sampled in the same manner as the spouses. Service personnel who took part in the interviews were sampled separately and therefore were not necessarily partnered with the spouses who were interviewed.

Demographic information was collected from the SES Trial application forms completed by the spouses who took part in the Trial. A demographic profile of interview participants and Trial participants is provided in Table 1 below.

The interview sample was not representative of the wider UK military spouse population, in which 74-75% reported being employed, over the period in which the interviews were carried out (compared to 33.3% in the interview sample) (Ministry of Defence, 2016c, 2017b). Furthermore, the RAF were overrepresented in the sample, due to the SES Trial being available only to RAF spouses in the UK. However, this sample does represent the demographic profile of the wider military spouse group who took part in the SES Trial (see Table 1), and as such eligible military spouses seeking employment support.

Spouses in the interview sample had all engaged with CTP support following registration on the SES Trial, and 53% had made use of the training grant. This is in comparison to 87% engagement with CTP support and 57% access to the training grant in the wider spouse group who took part in the SES Trial.

[Table 1]

*Procedure and materials*

Semi-structured interviews were carried out on military bases in the UK and Cyprus. Interview protocols were developed by the research team with open-ended questions focusing on participants’ background, employment support needs, feedback on the Trial and its impact, as well as broader discussions on satisfaction with military life and intentions of staying in or leaving the military. See Appendix 1 for interview protocols for spouses and serving personnel. Interviews took place on average 8 months (ranging from 3 to 11 months) into participants’ engagement with the one-year Trial. Interviews were conducted face-to-face on military barracks in Cyprus and the UK, were recorded digitally for the purposes of transcription, and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were carried out and analysed by independent researchers who were not involved in the design, delivery or management of the Trial.

*Data analysis*

Three members of the independent research team collaboratively carried out transcription and data analysis. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into a qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo 11). Data were then submitted to a rigorous thematic analysis following the widely used procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with reading and re-reading the transcripts for familiarisation. Line-by-line coding, followed by the development of initial codes was then carried out independently by three researchers, each of whom analysed an equal portion of the transcripts. Researchers then cross-referenced these codes collaboratively to ensure consistency in the emerging themes, and grouped the codes together to form themes and subthemes.

The analysis of the transcripts formed part of an independent evaluation of the SES Trial, in which a number of themes relating to barriers and challenges to employment, as well as feedback on the SES Trial and its impact were identified. As research outlining the barriers and challenges to employment for military spouses is fairly consistent and well-known, the focus of the current paper was restricted to looking at the impact of employment support and how it might help military spouses to overcome these barriers. As such, for the purpose of this paper, themes relating to the research questions only (i.e. the impact of the Trial on spouses and their families) were extracted and are reported below.

*Research quality*

Given that qualitative research operates on different epistemological and methodological assumptions to quantitative or statistical research, it is acknowledged that applying quantitative criteria (such as validity and reliability) is inappropriate for judging the quality of qualitative research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Qualitative judgment criteria – specifically, rich rigor, credibility, and resonance (Tracy, 2010) – were thus used to guide the research and analytical process. Rigor was achieved through continuing data collection until saturation (i.e., the point where no new information was received from additional interviews) was reached, and by consistently employing the interview protocol across interviews. Credibility was ensured by encouraging detailed, thick descriptions from participants during interviews (Tracy 2010), and by cross-referencing of themes and codes by the researchers during the analysis process. Finally, resonance (i.e., the degree to which findings resonate with current knowledge on the topic), was considered in relation to known challenges of spouse employment (examined later in the discussion).

**Results**

There was a strong indication from the qualitative analysis that employment support was of a perceived benefit to military spouses. Two overarching themes were identified that represent the impact of employment support on spouses’ ability and intention to seek, obtain and maintain employment commensurate with their skills and aspirations: *personal attributes* and *employability.* These refer to benefits spouses reported as a result of receiving employment support that had an impact of the personal attributes that helped them to seek and gain employment, and those that had a direct impact on employability. Personal attributes impacted by participation in the Trial included increased confidence, and feeling valued and supported by the military, whereas the impact on employability included gaining skills, knowledge and qualifications, access to opportunities and training, and preparation for return to the UK (for Cyprus spouses). A third theme was identified describing the impact of employment support on spouses and serving families intention to stay or leave the Armed Forces. Table 2 shows the prevalence of the themes in terms of how many spouses and service personnel cited them in their interviews. These themes are explored in further detail below.

[Insert Table 2]

Analysis also confirmed a number of challenges and barriers to employment reported previously in research with military spouses. These included challenges associated with affordable childcare and being a ‘single parent’, mobility and frequent relocation, being stationed in remote and overseas locations, social isolation, employer perceptions and Curriculum Vitae (CV) gaps, and a lack of job opportunities (Booth, 2003; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Harrell et al., 2004; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Lyonette et al., 2018; Payne et al., 1992). However, as the focus of this paper is on the impact of employment support, these findings will not be covered in detail. The majority of the spouses’ feedback on the support they received was positive, and negative feedback related to process and administration issues associated with the SES programme itself. As such we do not report these themes in this paper, although they can be found in the main evaluation report [redacted for peer review].

***Personal attributes***

As a result of the support provided by the SES Trial, spouses and serving personnel reported an increase in personal attributes that promote their ability to seek and obtain employment: Improved confidence and feeling valued and supported by the military.

*Improved confidence*

The most commonly cited benefit of receiving employment support was improved confidence to seek and obtain employment. Some spouses reported feeling as though the support they received had given them the confidence to go for a job or career that they had previously felt unable or lacked the confidence to go for.

“I’ve always wanted to teach. I’ve always wanted to teach but its jumping off that ladder and getting back into the training. Having the confidence to do it, and things like that to do it. And it made me jump, and I’m loving it.” (Cyprus Spouse, aged 48, husband an RAF Sergeant with 23 years’ service)

Spouses and their serving partners reported that the job finding skills workshops and the one-to-one career consultancy in particular led to improved ability to produce a good CV, to present themselves effectively at interviews, and to work towards securing their ideal job. Spouses felt as though this support helped them overcome a lack of confidence associated with gaps in their CV and being absent from the workforce due to frequent moves and childcare needs.

“I think that the Trial has definitely helped, in the sense of giving some ideas of how to change your CV so it does not look so obvious that you have had a massive career break. It has been really helpful, it has given me a lot of confidence as well actually, to think that I can do it and that I should do it.” (UK Spouse, aged 37, husband an RAF Wing Commander with 16 years’ service)

*Feeling valued and supported*

An unanticipated benefit of employment support (from the MOD’s perspective) was a feeling of being valued and invested in by the military. Spouses described feeling recognised and appreciated for numerous personal and career sacrifices they had made to enable their partners to pursue a military career and lifestyle. They described the employment support they received during the SES Trial as some recompense for these sacrifices.

“I think there are so many spouses who, any sort of recognition, of the fact that it’s difficult to find work makes people feel better. It’s like, it takes away some of the frustration. It’s the feeling somewhat appreciated, and actually an acknowledgement of the fact that you do sacrifice stuff. I think any recognition is good and positive. Especially because I don’t think people realise the fact that you sacrifice your family, your career, your personal life essentially. Because you’re forced to move around constantly.” (Cyprus spouse, aged 32, husband an RAF Corporal with 9 years’ service)

Spouses’ serving partners echoed this sentiment.

“I have benefited quite a lot as a military person from the training opportunities in the Military, whereas the spouse, although she has had to make all the same moves, has never got any direct benefit, so it is actually a really nice opportunity to say, here is something for you, that you can benefit from” (UK RAF Flight Lieutenant with 15 years’ service)

Spouses also reflected on previous feelings of being undervalued or less important than their serving partners, and how their perception had changed as a result of the employment support they received.

“it did change my opinion a little bit because when I came it was all about the men. You are privileged to be here, how dare you ask for things, you’re a dependent. Then when this came ‘Oh my God, you can actually get a grant to do something, that’s amazing’. At least it’s sort of thought of, and the spouses are thought of a little bit.” (Cyprus Spouse, aged 36, husband RAF Corporal with 10 years’ service)

***Employability***

Spouses and their serving partners described how the employment support services they received enabled them to increase their employability. This was through the new skills and qualifications they developed as a result of the career workshops and funding for training.

“So she’s said that she wanted to do a course that was going to make her more employable. So her hair extensions course – she could walk into a hairdresser and say “right, in my first year in Cyprus, I did level two, in my second year in Cyprus I did level 3, I then did it mobile around camp. I did a hair extensions course, here’s all the work that I’ve done” (Cyprus RAF Corporal with 10 years’ service)

Furthermore, simply accessing this support and beginning to think about employment and their career aspirations prompted a number of spouses to become more proactive in engaging with the job market and planning their career. As such it got spouses thinking about work again, even if they were not yet ready to go back to work yet.

“I used to panic about “God, I’ve not got – pensions and that, or I’ve not got any money in my pot, what do I do . . .” but slowly I’ve started the Trial and then this placement and I’ve started going for interviews and I know that I can get employment I just need to try.” (Cyprus Spouse, aged 32, husband an Army Lance Corporal with 16 years’ service)

“I suppose I am definitely committed to return to work, whereas before the Trial started, I was wavering on the edge…” (UK Spouse, aged 47, husband an RAF Wing Commander, service length unknown)

*Gaining new skills, knowledge and qualifications*

Spouses developed new skills and acquired new knowledge and qualifications as a result of the employment support they received. This was partly as a result of the training grant they had access to, which enabled them to complete training courses of their choosing, and partly as a result of the job skills workshops they attended. These skills, knowledge and qualifications were acknowledged by both the spouses and their serving partners as direct resources that would help them obtain employment or better employment.

“The course has provided me extra knowledge in order to do what I want to do, but I would never have had this knowledge had it not been for the SES Trial, because I would have just been here [Cyprus] seeing out my three years until I could go to college maybe when I got back to the UK. So it is, it’s fabulous. (Cyprus spouse, aged 33, husband an RAF Senior Aircraftsman with 7 years’ service)

Spouses and their serving partners described how these additional skills and qualifications helped them feel competent in applying for jobs they may not have done previously and in developing their career or taking it in a new direction.

“It’s made a difference in the fact that she’s able to – she more in contention for those jobs than what she would have been without doing it… and it’s given her that boost.” (Cyprus RAF Corporal with 10 years’ service)

*Access to funding*

Having access to funding for training was seen as a central benefit of participation by spouses and their serving partners. Spouses expressed how much they valued the opportunity to access training with this grant. They perceived the training grant as a tangible benefit that would help them in pursuing a career and an essential component of the employment support, since it enabled spouses to access training that they may otherwise not have been able to afford.

“it can help you move onto things that you’ve perhaps always wanted to do but haven’t had the confidence to do maybe. And of course as soon as they see the prices of courses over here anybody is likely to think ‘no way am I doing that’. But it just makes life that little bit easier.” (Cyprus Spouse, aged 48, husband an RAF Sergeant with 23 years’ service)

“I think it’s been great. You know, cos the allowance she had to get her into driving, to enable her to get a job and get to and from a job is brilliant. And it’s such a lot of money to fork out as well with everything else you gotta pay. Yeah I think it’s great, great support.” (Cyprus RAF Corporal with 17 years’ service)

*Preparation for return to the UK (Cyprus Spouses)*

Spouses and their serving partners reported a lack of employment opportunities for spouses based overseas, and legislation largely prohibits spouses working off base in Cyprus. As such, a number of the Cyprus-based spouses used the employment support opportunities to gain new skills in preparation for seeking employment on return to the UK.

“I think I chose these qualifications that I’m doing because they are linked to jobs that I’m interested in for when we go back to the UK. So I’m hoping it will help.” (Cyprus spouse, aged 26, husband an RAF Corporal with 15 years’ service)

“So the things that she’s doing here, certain courses with the school, will benefit her when she goes back. Now with the employment trial, if there’s courses that could provide to bolster that when she goes back, bonus.” (Cyprus Army Sergeant with 13 years’ service)

Spouses felt that this opportunity to undertake training whilst overseas helped them to avoid gaps in their CV that might disadvantage them when looking for employment.

“It’s all about – I think for her it’s all about the qualifications to allow her to apply for jobs when she goes back to the UK, or keep herself busy. Keep herself in work so that when she does go back to the UK she’s got that to rely on. So I wasn’t just in Cyprus for 3 years doing nothing, this is what I’ve done.” .” (Cyprus Army Sergeant with 17 years’ service)

***Retention or transition? Impact on intention to stay or leave the Armed Forces***

A varied response was received in relation to whether the employment support had any impact on spouses’ and serving partners’ intention to remain in or leave the military. We considered whether employment support for spouses could have a positive impact on their families’ satisfaction with military life and thus aid retention (retention-positive). Alternatively, we considered the possibility that improving spouses’ future career prospects may empower military families to pursue civilian careers and lives by leaving the military (retention-negative). As shown in the quotes below, we found evidence that employment support could be both retention-positive, (i.e. supporting families to stay in the military), retention-negative, (i.e. enabling families to leave sooner with more stability).

“if we can educate the spouses to assist themselves wherever they are, then the potential is you will keep your work force, so I think it is really positive.” (UK RAF Sergeant with 18 years’ service)

“Plus I can see the good for us. Who’s to say in 4 or 5 years’ time she’s completely owns it, gets a really high paid job and I can leave the RAF”. (Cyprus RAF Senior Aircraftsman with 9 years’ service)

However, the most common response indicated that the impact of the trial was retention-neutral (i.e. had no impact on the intention to stay or leave the military), and the majority of the spouses and serving partners had not considered this issue at all.

“It would be good the fact that there’s extra income as well, but I don’t think it has any impact whatsoever on my career in the military” (Cyprus RAF Corporal with 9 years’ service)

“Realistically my husband is the bread winner, that is not going to change any time soon. So I think that really it would be what he decides, or we decide he is going to leave and get a job somewhere else. I don’t think that doing this would make me, have any impact on it at all, to be honest.” UK spouse, aged 37, husband an RAF Wing Commander with 16 years’ service)

Some of the serving partners indicated that their spouses appeared happier with military life as a result of the support and training they had received.

“I think it’s kept her happier in herself, because she’s able to do something for herself.” (Cyprus RAF Corporal with 17 years’ service)

There was also some suggestion that improving their spouses’ employment prospects would make transition to civilian life easier when they did decide to leave.

“yes it will because she got qualifications, she will have a job. She’ll be able to set herself up and then it all depends on what the – what we decide” (Cyprus Army Sergeant with 15 years’ service)

As such, it is possible that whilst many spouses and service personnel had not yet considered the impact on their intention to stay or leave the military, the support received on the SES Trial may have a positive impact on satisfaction with military life and subsequently on transition.

**Discussion**

In this study we investigated the impact of a) employment support on military spouses’ intention and ability to seek and maintain their desired employment/career, and b) spouses and their families’ intention to remain in or leave the services. The results highlighted the positive impact of employment support on military spouses and the value they placed on receiving this support from the MOD. However, there was little indication of an impact on military families’ intention to remain in or leave the services as a result of employment support.

Our first research question related to the impact of employment support on military spouses’ intention and ability to seek and maintain employment that is commensurate with their skills and experience and/or aspirations. A direct impact on employability were reported by spouses and their serving partners as a result of the support they received from the SES Trial. These included new skills, knowledge and qualifications, the opportunity to access funding for training, and an opportunity to prepare for returning back to the UK for those posted overseas (Cyprus). These themes suggest the success of the employment support in providing spouses with new skills, including generic job-finding skills, as well as the opportunity to access vocational training of their choice through the training grant. Access to the training grant provided spouses with the opportunity to develop specific skills to further them in their chosen career, which some spouses suggested would not have been possible without this additional funding. Indeed, this funding was seen by spouses and service personnel as a central benefit from taking part in the SES Trial. This was because it opens the door to not only upskilling in their current careers, but to pursuing new or desired careers, they may otherwise not have been able to. Importantly, this shows the impact of employment support (in particular the training grant) in enabling spouses to pursue a career commensurate with their skills experiences, and/or aspirations, rather than simply pursuing any available employment. Indeed, access to funding for training for military spouses in the US (the U.S. Department of Defense My Career Advancement Account, MyCAA, Scholarship), is associated with increased growth in earnings compared to military spouses who had not accessed this funding (Miller et al., 2018).

An increase in spouses’ perception of their own employability was reported as a result of the employment support they received. This was both in terms of their increased skills, knowledge and qualifications, but also in increased motivation and proactivity in looking for new or better employment. Employability is a well-studied concept (Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet, & Rossier, 2016), and has been defined according to both the individuals perception of their ability to obtain employment appropriate to their qualifications and skills (Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008), and also in terms of certain personal characteristics, such as adaptability and proactivity (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008). Employability is linked to increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, job search behaviour and ultimately re-employment (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007). It has also been linked more broadly to life satisfaction and wellbeing (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; De Cuyper, Bernhard‐Oettel, Berntson, Witte, & Alarco, 2008), and perceived employability is suggested to buffer the adverse psychological effect of job loss (Fugate et al., 2004). As such, fostering this sense in military spouses by providing employment support services and enabling them to upskill in their chosen careers may have both a positive effect on psychological wellbeing, and ultimately on their ability to obtain new or better employment.

For those spouses posted in Cyprus, a major theme associated with employment support and training was the ability to prepare for a return to the UK. This was in terms of gaining skills, knowledge and qualifications that will help with gaining employment once back in the UK. Additionally, spouses felt they were able to avoid large gaps in their CVs by filling their time overseas with training, especially if they felt unable to gain employment. Overseas postings can place significant strain on military families (Burrell et al., 2006), and military spouses report financial difficulties and language/cultural barriers, as well as limited employment opportunities (Lakhani, 1994; Manning & DeRouin, 1981; McNulty, 2003). Loss of employment and the impact this has on an individual’s identity and self-worth is associated with decreased well-being in military spouses (Blakely, Hennessy, Chung, & Skirton, 2014). Indeed, employed spouses are shown to adapt better and feel less socially isolated during an overseas posting (Blakely et al., 2012). In this study, the spouses based in Cyprus reported very limited employment opportunities, due to legal and licensing issues associated with working outside of the sovereign military base, as noted in previous studies (Lyonette et al., 2018). As such, the SES Trial provided them with the opportunity to upskill themselves even if they felt unable to pursue their desired career whilst posted overseas. This may in turn have a positive impact on their well-being and highlights the potential importance of targeting employability support to military spouses in remote (overseas) locations with limited job opportunities.

Whilst we are unable to show that these direct benefits are related to increased employment rates in the short span of the project, employment training has previously been linked to increased employment in the long-term (Fitzenberger, Osikominu, & Völter, 2006). Furthermore, participation in employment programs has also been shown to be particularly effective in increasing employment in women (Gritz, 1993). Longitudinal follow up will be required to ascertain the long-term effects of employment support in this population.

In addition to the benefits associated with employability, spouses also reported an impact on certain personal attributes associated with seeking and obtaining employment as a result of receiving this support. One of these was a feeling of increased confidence in their ability to seek and obtain employment. Furthermore, this increased confidence was felt in relation to pursuing their desired career rather than simply obtaining any available employment. These findings suggest a positive psychological effect of employment support on the spouses who took part in the SES Trial. Confidence in the ability to seek and obtain employment could be described in terms of increased job-search self-efficacy in the spouses who took part. Job-search self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief that they are capable of performing behaviour associated with obtaining employment (Nesdale & Pinter, 2000). In particular, it is related to job search behaviours (Moynihan, Roehling, LePine, & Boswell, 2003), such as those associated with job seeking reported by spouses in this study (i.e improved CVs and interview skills). Research has consistently found job-search self-efficacy to be positively related to employment outcomes (Ellis & Taylor, 1983; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Indeed, greater confidence in one’s ability to seek employment is shown to be related to effectively converting job interviews into offers of employment (Moynihan et al., 2003). Furthermore, previous research has shown that employed US military spouses have increased self-confidence and job search self-efficacy compared to unemployed spouses (Trougakos, Bull, Green, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2007). As such, although we are unable to show any links to employment outcomes in this study, increased confidence in the ability to seek and obtain work is likely to be related to improved employment outcomes in the long-term for military spouses.

An unexpected finding in this study was that spouses felt recognised and valued by the military in their own right as a result of receiving employment support. They felt as though the military were showing appreciation for the sacrifices they make for the military, both in terms of their careers and in general, by investing in them in this way. The military is often described as a ‘greedy institution’, placing many demands on the service person in order to support operational readiness (Segal, 1986). This is at odds with the family, another greedy institution, which has historically been required to make sacrifices in support of the service member (Segal, 1986). Military spouses are expected to support and give priority to military life and report many stressors on their family and personal life associated with frequent relocations, deployment and separation from their serving partner and disruption of social networks (Blakely et al., 2014; Borah & Fina, 2017; Burrell et al., 2006; Runge, Waller, MacKenzie, & McGuire, 2014). The results of the current study suggest that the military as an institution may be able to buffer the effects of these stressors and increase satisfaction with military life in spouses by providing them with employment support and investing in their careers. Indeed, the US Marine Corps Quality of Life Study (Decision Engineering Associates, 2002) suggested that military spouses who were completely dependent on their serving partner for financial income were the least satisfied with military life. This study further suggested that the best way to improve spouse quality of life was provide employment and professional development support (Decision Engineering Associates, 2002). Furthermore, research has shown that individuals who identify with multiple roles (i.e. parent, spouse, employee) tend to be psychologically healthier (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). We have yet to see the effect of employment support on long term employment and well-being. However, supporting spouses to pursue their desired careers may foster a sense of independence that they may not otherwise experience as a military ‘dependent’.

Our second research question related to the impact of employment support on spouses’ and their serving partners’ intention to leave or remain in the Armed Forces. There was a mixed and often ambiguous response from spouses and serving personnel on whether or not leaving the services had even been considered, and there was little indication that participation in this SES Trial had impacted on this (at least over the course of the SES Trial). Previous data has indicated that military spouse employment is a primary factor in deciding when to leave the services (AFCAS, 2016; 2017), and spouses’ influence on this decision is suggested to be increasing as more spouses have the desire to work (Harrell et al., 2004). It is possible that increased spouse employment could lead to increased well-being and satisfaction with military life, and as a result increased ability to support the serving partner to remain in the Armed Forces (Trewick & Muller, 2014). Indeed, evidence from the US suggests that funding support for spouses to access funding for training (MyCAA) is associated with a higher level of retention of their serving partners, compared to spouses who had not accessed funding for training (RAND, 2018). Furthermore, there was some indication in responses from service personnel that they felt the Trial has increased their spouses satisfaction with military life. Alternatively, increased spouse employment could make the decision to leave the Armed Forces easier, based on the financial security of having a spouse in employment. Whilst we found evidence for both of these in the current study and when asked about intention to leave or stay in the Armed Forces, the most common response from participants was that they did not believe that taking part in the Trial, or gaining employment, would have any impact on their intention to leave or stay in the military. A number of other factors were suggested to exert more influence on this decision, such as frequent relocations and proximity to social networks and support. UK policy relating to military families reflects a number of issues that may impact on their satisfaction with military life and intention to remain in the military. The UK MOD has acknowledged the importance of partner employment by including it as one of seven key pillars in the UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2016-2020 (Ministry of Defence, 2016a). This is alongside a number of other areas in which the UK MOD has pledged to provide support to military families (Accommodation; Children’s Education and Childcare; Community Support; Specialist Support; Health and Well-being; Transition). It is likely that long-term follow up of spousal employment outcomes and service partners military career will be needed to ascertain any association between employment support for spouses and intention to remain or leave the services. However, this may be one of many factors affecting spouses and service personnel’s satisfaction with military life and intention to remain in the military.

The results of this study suggest that the impact of the Trial, as a program of supporting spouses to improve their job seeking skills, has been positive. Based on the results of this study we suggest that employment support provides a way in which the military can invest in spouses and promote their wellbeing and satisfaction with military life. However, we did not find any impact of the Trial on intention to stay or leave the military in the short-term, and long-term follow up will be needed to track the impact on retention of service personnel. There are a number of barriers and challenges in obtaining employment for military spouses that are not necessarily addressed by the support provided in the SES Trial, including the need for affordable childcare to enable spouses to attend employment support services and training (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Lyonette et al., 2018; The Centre for Social Justice, 2016). Additionally, work needs to be done to reduce the stigma attached to being a military spouse when seeking employment, and the negative way in which they are perceived by some employers (Booth, 2003; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Lyonette et al., 2018).

*Strengths and limitations*

This study used solely qualitative data to examine the impact of employment support on military spouses. As the evaluation of the SES Trial was commissioned following it’s commencement, assessment of changes from baseline in well-being and job-related self-efficacy were not possible. For the purpose of eliciting answers to our RQs, qualitative data enabled us to capture in-depth experiential data regarding the benefits and impact of employment support. However, quantitative data collected via a longitudinal follow-up study will be required to determine whether or not the direct and indirect benefits of employment support translate into improved employment outcomes for spouses (including both binary job outcomes and an assessment of whether these jobs were commensurate with the skills, knowledge and experience and/or in accord with their aspirations and abilities) and retention of the serving partner.

Our findings are not generalizable in the statistical sense; that is, representative of the whole UK Armed Forces population. The sample was skewed towards RAF spouses (particularly in the UK cohort), and consisted only of spouses who were eligible for and took part in the SES Trial. Rather, we consider the findings in terms of analytical generalisability, or ‘transferability’ (Tracy, 2010), in that our findings appear to resonate with broader literature and challenges identified with military spouse employment (e.g., Gribble et al. 2019) by highlighting how employment support may help to address these challenges.

The development of the support framework provided on the Trial was not grounded in formal program theory, and as such there was a mismatch between the original aims of the Trial (i.e. positive impact on spouse employment, income and retention) and the ability to evaluate the impact on these aims. Future development of employment support for spouses would benefit from consideration of program theory, which outlines the process by which an intervention produces intended or actual impact (i.e. using outcome chains and logic models) (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Furthermore, future expansion of the Trial will need to carefully consider the feasibility of providing training grants to military spouses on a larger scale in the UK.

Finally, as with all evaluations of interventions, it is possible that the increased confidence in job-seeking and employability was the result of being involved in the Trial (i.e. Hawthorne effect), rather than a direct effect of the support that they received. As the feedback was predominantly consistent across spouses and their serving partners (i.e. serving partners similarly reporting observing the positive impact of the Trial on their spouses), we believe this is unlikely.

*Conclusions*

In this study we have shown the positive impact of employment support on military spouses’ belief in their ability to seek and obtain employment commensurate with their skills, experience and aspirations. Furthermore, our results have highlighted the value placed by military spouses of being recognised by the military as valued constituents in their own right. The majority of the spouses and service personnel interviewed saw this as a positive contribution from the military to help spouses either get back into employment, or to improve their employability by means of training and support. However, we were unable detect any impact on decisions by Serving Personnel and their family to leave or remain in the military. Longitudinal follow-up of those who took part in the SES Trial will be required to determined long term employment outcomes and impact on retention.

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1. Providing employment support to spouses in Cyprus was conceived as a way to address particular challenges for spouses posted overseas in terms of access to employment and support. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.fim-trust.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Whilst the Cyprus-based arm of the Trial was tri-service, there was only a small number of Royal Navy spouses and Service Personnel (3%), none of whom were available for interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)