



Reservist families and their understanding of military welfare support as a (non)military family

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Many nations rely on volunteer reservists willing to train in their spare time and deploy on military operations. This willingness is influenced by familial support. The authors sought to better understand the expectations of, and experiences with, welfare support to UK reservist families for routine training and deployment. **Methods:** A bespoke survey for family members of reservists was constructed to investigate awareness, use, and experience of both routine and deployment-related welfare support; 140 family members participated. In addition, 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted and deductively coded. Most participants in the survey and interviews were spouses and parents of part-time reservists. **Results:** The survey and interviews reported low awareness and use of available family welfare services. Most participants did not know how to access support, even during deployment, and had inconsistent local experiences of welfare support. There was a desire for more welfare information and personal contact with unit welfare staff. The key role of the reservist as a barrier or facilitator of information was highlighted. **Discussion:** Most families of reservists do not identify as military families, have low awareness of family support and welfare, and do not require routine access to support. This contributes to an under-used family welfare and support system that also suffers from localized unit variation. More access to information online, more contact with better trained welfare staff, and increased reservist awareness of welfare and support should reduce inconsistencies and improve family satisfaction and reservist retention.

Key words: deployment, family, military, military family, reservist, reservist family, support, United Kingdom, welfare

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction : De nombreuses nations comptent sur des réservistes volontaires prête(s) à s'entraîner dans leurs temps libres et à être déployés lors d'opérations militaires. Cette volonté est influencée par le soutien familial. Les auteur(e)s ont cherché à mieux comprendre les attentes et les expériences relatives à l'aide sociale que les familles de réservistes britanniques reçoivent pour l'entraînement régulier et le déploiement. **Méthodologie :** Une enquête sur mesure a été préparée pour les membres de la famille des réservistes pour explorer la connaissance, l'utilisation et l'expérience d'aide sociale de routine et liée au déploiement; 140 membres de familles ont participé à l'enquête. De plus, 33 entrevues semi structurées ont été réalisées et codées de manière déductive. La plupart des participant(e)s au sondage et aux entrevues étaient les conjoint(e)s et les parents des réservistes à temps partiel. **Résultats :** L'enquête et les entrevues ont fait état d'une faible connaissance et d'une faible utilisation des services d'aide sociale disponibles aux familles. La plupart des participant(e)s ne savaient pas comment obtenir de l'aide, même pendant le déploiement, et avaient des expériences locales inégales à l'égard de ce type de soutien. Il y avait un désir pour obtenir plus d'information sur le sujet et avoir un contact personnel avec le personnel d'aide sociale de l'unité. Le rôle important des réservistes comme obstacles ou facilitateur(e)s de l'information a été souligné. **Discussion :** La plupart des familles des réservistes ne se considèrent pas comme des familles de militaires, connaissent peu les mesures d'assistance et d'aide sociale pour les familles et n'ont pas besoin d'un accès régulier à ce soutien. Ces facteurs contribuent à une sous-utilisation du système d'assistance et d'aide sociale, également entaché par des variations selon les unités locales. Un meilleur accès à l'information en ligne, davantage de contacts avec un personnel d'aide sociale mieux formé et une sensibilisation accrue des réservistes à l'aide sociale et au soutien devraient réduire les incohérences et améliorer la satisfaction des familles ainsi que la rétention des réservistes.

Mots clés : déploiement, famille, famille de militaires, famille de réservistes, militaire, réserviste, Royaume-Uni, soutien, aide sociale

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LAY SUMMARY

The effectiveness of part-time volunteer reservists relies on their willingness to train in their spare time and be deployed, which is influenced by family support. The military can provide reservist families with welfare and support, but the authors wanted to understand the expectations of, and experiences with, welfare support to UK reservist families. A total of 140 family members (mainly spouses and parents) of part-time reservists completed a bespoke survey, and 33 family members were interviewed in depth. Results confirmed there was low awareness and use of available welfare services. Most did not know how to access support, even during a reservist's full-time deployment, and had inconsistent local experiences of support. Most reservist families do not identify as military families, have low awareness of family support and welfare, and do not require access to support routinely. More access to information online, more contact with better trained welfare staff, and increased reservist awareness of welfare and support should reduce inconsistencies and improve family satisfaction and reservist retention.

INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years, many nations have increased operational deployment of part-time Reserve Forces.¹⁻³ This commitment depends on reservists' willingness to be mobilized and their availability to train part-time when not mobilized. Such commitment requires reservists to routinely negotiate time away from their families for both routine training and for deployments.⁴⁻¹² This can put stress on families,^{4,13} and "personal or family pressures" rank highly as a reason reservists consider leaving the military.^{14,15} Reservists are more likely to be open to mobilization and deployment if they feel their families are well supported during a long separation,¹⁴ even if the family is willing to "pick up the slack."¹³

It is well known reservists and their families in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom must make significant changes to family life during deployments, in particular, such as changed roles in the family affecting household management,^{7,16-18} single parenting of children,^{4,19} difficult income adjustments,²⁰⁻²² and changed communication levels.^{16,23-25} These adjustments may positively or negatively impact reservists' deployment stress²⁶⁻³² and family members' stress and ability to cope.³³⁻³⁶

Reservists generally do not live in military communities, are dispersed geographically, and may not have close ties to other military families.³⁷ Reservists, and their families, are often marginalized from the military establishment,³⁸⁻⁴⁰ may not identify as military families, be less likely to seek help for a service-related issue, and have less knowledge about available support and welfare services.^{28,29,34} Reservist families must reorganize family life before, during, and after deployment, and help reservists deal with civilian employment transitions, yet are likely to face these challenges with fewer resources than military families of Regular Force personnel.⁴¹

Although the UK government is obliged to provide support to all members of the armed forces and their families through the Armed Forces Covenant,^{42,43}

the most recent internal survey found less than 50% of UK reservists thought their families were well supported during full-time deployment.¹⁵ UK reservists experienced more difficulties at home and less marital satisfaction, compared to Regular Force members when deployed.^{26,39} Those who considered military support to families as poor were less likely to be retained in service.⁴⁴ These aspects are likely to detract from reservist motivation to be deployed, negatively affecting the ability of the military to best use reservists.

It is important to note there is no UK literature that examines routine welfare support to families of UK reservists. The extant international and UK literature is focused on deployment support.

Welfare support for UK reservists and their families

Each single service within the UK Armed Forces — Royal Navy including Royal Marines (RN), army, Royal Air Force (RAF) — has its own system of welfare policy and provision within the context of overarching Ministry of Defence (MOD) welfare policy. The chain of command (COC), advised by local expert unit welfare staff, is the first point of contact (first line) and a key enabler for welfare access for family members. The COC has responsibility to ensure communication with reservists and their families about welfare provision. A second line of more specialized welfare and support provision is available for more complex welfare needs. Integrated through both first- and second-line services are links to national statutory and charitable welfare and support. Thus, the model of family welfare and support to UK reservists comprises centralized policy direction and oversight with decentralized control and execution.⁵ When UK reservists are deployed on full-time service, their family welfare and support should match that of Regular Force personnel. When not deployed, there is a narrower package of routine and emergency crisis support available.

Although welfare policy highlights what is available, it was noted local practice may not always be consistent with policy.^{9,10,11,45} The current UK Armed Forces Families Strategy⁴³ includes workstreams to improve welfare support provision to reservist families. Since support for reservist families is likely to improve retention, and the willingness of reservists to be deployed, the authors aimed to achieve an in-depth, more nuanced understanding of the military welfare support expected and experienced by reservist families in the UK and to:

1. Understand and explore awareness and expectations of non-deployment and deployment-related military welfare support among reservists and their families;
2. Identify the support needed by reservist families, including any specific deficits and inconsistencies in current provision; and
3. Explore awareness of, and satisfaction with, experiences of deployment-related military welfare support before, during, and after deployment.

METHODS

Participants

The authors used a broad understanding of the term family member and included anyone who considered themselves family to a reservist.

Table 1. Survey family member demographics (n = 140)

Family member characteristic	Response	Number of responses	%
Gender	Male	31	22
	Female	107	76
	Prefer not to say	2	2
Relationship to the reservist	Spouse or long-term partner	93	66
	Parent	29	21
	Sibling	6	4
	Other family	5	4
	Friends	7	5
Children living in the household	Yes	57	41
	No	82	59
Highest level of education	No formal qualifications	4	3
	O levels, GCSEs, or equivalent	29	21
	A levels or equivalent (BTEC, etc.)	34	24
	University degree or higher	72	51
Employed (full or part-time)	Yes	104	74
	No	36	26
Current or former member of the Regular Armed Forces	Yes, current	5	4
	Yes, former	19	14
	No	115	82
Current or former reservist	Yes, current	18	14
	Yes, former	6	4
	No	115	82

Survey

A total of 140 participants (53% of those who started) completed a survey on the website (see [Table 1](#) demographics). Most were female spouses/partners and parents with a mean age of 46 years. Most reservists in their families ([Table 2](#)) were male, mean age of 42 years, from the army, and one-third had previous Regular Force service. These proportions are typical of the reported UK reservist population.¹⁵

Interviews

Thirty-four interviews were conducted with reservist family members. Of these, 22 were from website registrations (another 88 registered interest but did not reply) and 12 were recruited via unit staff advertising the study. Most interviewees were female spouses/partners (n = 24), two were male spouses/partners, two mothers, two fathers, one sister, one adult daughter, and one grandmother, drawn from all services (9 RN, 15 army, 9 RAF).

Study design

This was a mixed methods study, including a quantitative survey and semi-structured interviews with family members of currently serving UK Armed Forces reservists. It was conducted between November 2016 and March 2017 with ethical approval from the MOD Research Ethics Committee (748/MODREC/16).

Table 2. Survey family members reservist demographics (n = 140)

Reservist demographic	Response	Number of responses	%
Reservist gender	Male	109	79
	Female	28	20
	Prefer not to say	3	1
Reserve service	Royal Navy	25	18
	Royal Marines	2	1
	Army	84	61
	Royal Air Force	26	18
	Don't know	3	1
Reservist rank	Commissioned officer	45	32
	Non-commissioned officer	47	33
	Other rank	38	27
	Don't know/not sure	7	5
Length of reservist service	Less than 1 year	6	4
	1 to 4 years	52	37
	5 years or more	79	56
	Don't know/not sure	6	4
Civilian employment	Yes	105	75
	No	35	25
Reservist former member of the Regular Armed Forces	Yes	50	36
	No	84	60
	Don't know/not sure	6	4

Recruitment

A study-specific webpage was designed to attract participants to complete the online survey or volunteer to participate in an interview so members of reservist families could choose their preferred route to participation. Previous work showed reservist families to be difficult to reach,²⁸ so a multi-faceted recruitment strategy with six overlapping approaches was adopted.⁴⁶ These included leveraging recruitment through existing groups, such as reservist units and military welfare organizations, offering participants options for preferred methods of communication (e.g., phone or in-person interviews), rapidly responding to participant interest, understanding participant geography and targeting social media and other advertising appropriately, starting big by contacting all UK reservist units, and staying in contact with participants through the recruitment process. Snowball sampling was also employed. Study-specific Facebook and Twitter pages with notifications and announcements were linked to the website alongside paid Facebook and Twitter advertising campaigns. UK welfare charities, defence and family bloggers, local newspapers, and employers of reservists registered with the MOD also advertised the study.

The survey

A survey was designed to be completed by reservist family members about their knowledge and awareness of welfare and support, perceived utility, willingness to use, and previous use of routine and deployment-related welfare and support, expectations of what support should be provided, and gaps in current provision. Participants could provide more information in open text items (but only small numbers did). The survey was developed in collaboration and agreement with key MOD stakeholders. The Qualtrics-hosted survey linked to the study webpage for secure data collection. Median time to complete the survey was 19 minutes. The survey included an item about how the respondent learned about the survey. Recruitment via reservists was the most successful recruitment route and social media the next most successful. Survey data analysis comprised descriptive and summary statistics completed in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

The interviews

Interviews with reservist family members were conducted to investigate the lived experience of welfare and support to reservist families. Questions were framed

around the main themes in the survey as consistent with research questions. The authors constructed an interview schedule using interview questions based on the structure presented in the survey. Participants were free to respond to the questions in any way, and the interviewer then went on to probe responses to gain a more nuanced consideration of perspectives. This semi-structured approach allowed the interviews to remain relevant to the subject of investigation while also allowing flexibility to fully engage with participants.⁴⁷ Interviews allowed participants to share, in detail, their perspectives on knowledge, perceived utility, willingness to use, and experience of using welfare services, ease of accessing services, including perceived barriers, unmet needs, priorities, ideal service provision, their identity as military families, and on pertinent topics they chose to raise. Support was considered in its broadest sense and did not simply focus on formal welfare. This approach allowed the authors to make sense of the lived experience but without losing sight of complexity or richness.

Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours and were conducted by two members of the research team with previous experience interviewing on sensitive topics. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted by telephone and five were conducted in person. Telephone and in-person interviews had the same question schedule and a similar length, and there were no obvious thematic or other differences in the answers provided between modes. Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and were professionally transcribed verbatim from the recordings. Transcriptions were verified by the interviewer. One interview was not useable because of transcription difficulties, leaving a final total

of 33 interviews used as data. The authors conducted a theoretical thematic analysis, coding the data for specific research questions as consistent with the pragmatic methodology.⁴⁸ A limitation of this deductive approach is it can provide a less rich description of the data overall.

RESULTS

Welfare support

Most respondents did not know about welfare support available to them, nor welfare support available for reservists. Only one-quarter knew about their reservist's welfare organization. Only half were confident their reservist would inform them about reservist family support services.

Participants showed very high support and value for reservist service (Table 3). However, most family members did not regard themselves as part of the armed forces community, and only half agreed their reservist was a member of the armed forces community.

Most claimed to be unaware of the specific welfare services listed in Table 4 and only small numbers had used them. Discount services and the armed forces railcard had much higher awareness and higher use (Table 4). However, only approaching half predicted the welfare services offered were likely to be useful to them.

Many survey respondents had met other reservists, family members, and the reservist COC (Table 5). Far fewer met the welfare staff and/or attended welfare briefings. Very few claimed they had access to written guides (even though some are online) or support networks. Survey respondents thought written reference guides for reservist family welfare and support had the

Table 3. Survey family member views about their reservist's service, being a member of the armed forces community and their general knowledge of welfare support

Statement	Agree	Neither	Disagree
I know about the welfare support my reservist is entitled to.	29 (23%)	16 (13%)	82 (65%)
I know about the welfare support that is available to me.	24 (19%)	14 (11%)	89 (70%)
I know about my reservist's welfare organization.	33 (26%)	12 (9.4%)	82 (65%)
I am confident that my reservist will inform me about reservist family support services.	67 (53%)	35 (28%)	25 (20%)
Improved access to family support would change my feelings about my family member being a reservist.	53 (42%)	53 (42%)	19 (16%)
I support their reserve service.	118 (93%)	7 (5%)	3 (2%)
I value their reserve service.	113 (89%)	12 (9%)	2 (2%)
I would prefer that they were not a reservist.	16 (13%)	32 (26%)	74 (61%)
My reservist is a member of the armed forces community.	68 (54%)	34 (27%)	23 (19%)
I am a member of the armed forces community.	25 (20%)	26 (21%)	74 (59%)

highest potential usefulness, followed by attending family briefings on deployment welfare support. These, and meeting unit welfare staff, were predicted to be more useful than more general support listed in Table 4. Most respondents indicated they would be willing to travel to deployment briefings.

In free text, family members identified any additional day-to-day support that might be of benefit. The most frequent suggestion was for direct communication and information from providers, that is, straight to the family members, bypassing reservists, at all the stages of a reservist's career, and right from the start. One person

commented on the wider impact of the importance of support to families:

The support network for families does not exist and is not communicated. Get this right, and it will retain and attract talent.

— Male spouse, army reservist

Interview data: Knowledge and awareness of welfare and support

Almost all the interviewees claimed they did not know about available welfare support. Brief answers, such as “No, no, not at all,” were the most common response

Table 4. Survey family members awareness, willingness to use, predicted usefulness, and usage of general welfare and support provision

Provision	Overall aware	Overall willing to use	Overall predicted as useful	Overall used
Signposting and advice about welfare services	27 (19%)	96 (69%)	76 (54%)	10 (7%)
Family support relating to reservists' mental health	26 (19%)	101 (72%)	70 (50%)	0
Family support relating to reservists' rehabilitation	24 (17%)	99 (71%)	58 (41%)	0
Support for bereaved reservist families	27(19%)	101 (72%)	62 (44%)	2 (1%)
Advice and support for parents and carers of reservists' children	8 (6%)	51 (36%)	58 (41%)	2 (1%)
Activities/breaks for reservists' children and families	7 (5%)	55 (39%)	60 (43%)	3 (2%)
Discounts on tickets, goods, and services	64 (46%)	83 (59%)	80 (57%)	49 (35%)
Armed forces railcard	67 (48%)	80 (57%)	78 (56%)	36 (25%)
Hotel rooms at military Members' Clubs	55 (39%)	75 (54%)	77 (55%)	23 (16%)
Relationship support	9 (6%)	46 (33%)	62 (44%)	2 (1%)

Table 5. Survey family members predicted usefulness of informal and formal welfare and support provisions, alongside the willingness to travel for each

Welfare and support	Experienced	Never experienced	Predicted as useful	May or may not be useful	Predicted as not useful	Willing to travel for
Meeting other reservists' family members at social events	66 (61%)	42 (39%)	68 (59%)	26 (32%)	8 (10%)	72 (70%)
Meeting other reservists	84 (76%)	26 (24%)	62 (60%)	29 (28%)	10 (10%)	62 (61%)
Meeting your reservist's chain of command	60 (55%)	49 (45%)	65 (63%)	26 (25%)	13 (13%)	65 (64%)
Meeting the chaplaincy staff	22 (20%)	88 (80%)	43 (42%)	36 (35%)	23 (23%)	43 (44%)
Meeting the unit/squadron/branch welfare staff	16 (15%)	93 (85%)	66 (64%)	21 (20%)	16 (16%)	62 (60%)
Attending families briefings on mobilization welfare support	10 (9%)	99 (91%)	75 (74%)	20 (20%)	7 (7%)	74 (73%)
Having a written reference guide to reservist family welfare and support	16 (15%)	93 (85%)	79 (79%)	15 (15%)	6 (6%)	-
An MOD online family members network	7 (6%)	102 (94%)	61 (60%)	26 (25%)	15 (15%)	-
A social media group for military family members	9 (8%)	101 (92%)	55 (54%)	26 (26%)	20 (20%)	-

MOD = Ministry of Defence.

to welfare and support awareness questions. Accessing support and welfare during part-time training or short-term absences was a less likely occurrence, but this did depend on how far away or accessible the reservist was. It was also related to how much sense there was of the reservist being in their military role at the point of need:

I kind of view it that he's on duty when he's wearing that hat, and he's kind of not when he isn't. It feels very much like taking different hats on and off.

— Female spouse, army reservist

Belonging to the armed forces community

Family interview data also underlined a lack of belonging to the armed forces community:

I don't feel like I'm part of the military family.

— Female spouse, RN reservist

I don't really feel like I'm part of the setup, part of the establishment. I don't really feel that I get anything from the system as it were other than my husband's absences.

— Female spouse, RAF reservist

Partners of those who served in the Regular Force felt they were previously a military family, but no longer, for example:

You would expect to feel part of something and I don't think either of us do like we used to.

— Female spouse, RAF reservist

The part-time nature of service and being away from the family created a divide in perceptions between the reservist and the family:

He thinks he's in the military more than I think he's in the military!

— Female spouse, army reservist

Some interviewees were explicit about not wanting to be part of the armed forces community:

And to be honest I've never wanted to be part of the military family in any way because it's not my career. I've got my own career that is important to me and [partner name]'s got his career that's important to him. But yeah I just don't feel the need to be part of it.

— Female spouse, RN reservist

Accessing unit services and support

The few participants who accessed services and found unit welfare and other support staff, outside deployment, rated them highly:

They were really, really, really reactive and like "Yeah we'll sort it out, we'll make it happen." They were brilliant. So I suppose that has been my instance of support and it has been very good.

— Female spouse, RAF reservist

Many had positive experiences of visiting the reservist's unit, often for social events. Most social events were dinners, parades, or family events situated around "wives and children." Some thought these events did not cater to people without children:

When I have been to family days it has been difficult to mix as they have children and we don't.

— Female spouse, army reservist

Overall, most enjoyed meeting other reservists and the COC at social events and building a sense of community, but few had any recollection of meeting the unit welfare staff. There was a desire, when asked to imagine if they were required to ask for support, that asking would be easier if they previously met someone from the welfare staff:

I'm not sure you can have much support from people that are strangers to you essentially.

— Female parent, army reservist

It would be having a sort of clearly defined person or place that I can turn to for advice and information.

— Female spouse, RAF reservist

Interviews confirmed geographical distance to the unit was a barrier to engagement, but that unwillingness to travel was also linked to feeling psychologically distant from the armed forces, including a few describing themselves as "not interested" and "not relevant to me." Anticipated discomfort, embarrassment, and upset were also pertinent to non-attendance at unit events.

Many interviewees felt they could cope with day-to-day challenges arising from routine training absences, but in an emergency would want to contact reservists. Many thought this would be easy but, when asked, did not know how to contact the unit, and intended to search online should they ever need to access contact details:

I'd be able to look like something up, I know you can search them on there ... (umm) Royal Navy website.

— Male spouse, RN reservist

Other sources of support during training and other absences

A number of reservist family members interviewed talked about their well developed welfare and support

networks that drew on non-military sources, such as geographically close extended families, and their civilian networks:

I'm very self-sufficient really if I'm on my own, with support type thing. And the support that I have, I have from my family like my mum, my dad and that way and you know I just get on with it.

— Female spouse, RN reservist

Hopefully most reservist families like me ... I'm really, really fortunate that I already live in a school community and I have that ... that network there.

— Female spouse, RAF reservist

As these networks might provide their favoured, cost-effective, and more convenient support options, the families of reservists might not consider accessing MOD support. Importantly, some interviewees did not appear to have local support networks available, and so this should not be assumed:

I'm quite a social person and [partner name] is a big part of my social life. So I think with him going, it would ... I would need support from other people who were ... partners who have gone.

— Female spouse, army reservist

Gaps in provision

Family members were asked to suggest any additional day-to-day support that might benefit them. Few suggestions were made regarding first-line service provision but, by far, the most frequent suggestion was for easy-to-access information for family members, bypassing reservists. For example, an email communication and information on being nominated as a next of kin from the start of service:

It would be nice to have a leaflet, it would be nice to have some sort of communication. I don't feel that I should have to go looking for things. I think it would be nice initially when people join the reserves, that you get a little pamphlet or something.

— Female spouse, RAF reservist

There was little evidence during interviews that families felt a routine need for family crisis support services outside deployment. However, when prompted, interviewees could envision needing and using casualty and compassionate-type welfare services during routine training absences. There was an expectation among interviewees the armed forces would provide efficient administration and a swift repatriation service for an

injured reservist to a facility the family could visit, and the reservist could travel home if there was a close family bereavement.

Deployment

There were 111 answers to the survey question “Do you know where to go for MOD/Armed Forces provided welfare support and information while your reservist is mobilised and/or on an operational tour?” Only 37 (33%) indicated they would know where to go. The previous sections were about routine welfare and support, and support before a full-time deployment. Forty-two (30%) survey respondents and 18 interviewees reported their reservist had been deployed in the last five years. This section deals specifically with those family members with experience of deployment support from both the survey and interviews. When asked across the survey categories in [Table 6](#), slightly more than half of family members said they had used services before, during, or after deployment. Use of “Lines of communication with your reservist” during the deployment was highest at 69%.

While the number of those who used services during deployment was low, consistently less than 30% of respondents were satisfied with those services. The exception to this was the “Lines of communication with your reservist.”

There were 28 free text responses to the survey regarding deployment. Six were positive about the support received, including one whose reservist was injured, and five were positive about unit/squadron/branch social events, but 18 stated they either had no support ($n = 12$) or no contact during deployment ($n = 6$).

There were 15 free text responses to the question “Are there any additional support services that may benefit you and your family for mobilisation or operational tours?” Responses illustrated the need for better awareness and/or better information, efficient administration of reservist needs, regular contact from the welfare team, and an easily identifiable place or person providing access to information about available help and support.

Interviews

Interviewees who were positive about their experiences of deployment support emphasised the importance of pre-deployment briefings, information packs provided, and highly valued contact from staff during deployment:

When my partner was mobilized his CO [commanding officer] was really supportive — his PSAO [permanent staff administrative officer] kept in

touch and they arranged a welcome home party for friends and family.

— Female spouse, army reservist

Knowing the welfare staff and the staff keeping in touch was very important to all those with a positive experience of deployment support:

Personalization is probably the most (umm) important part of it and the most (umm) sort of the most comforting part of it.

— Female daughter, army reservist

The value of social media posts with images and news of deployments were important and seemed to provide some reassurance to families. Swift and easy communication with the reservist was valued:

Like, I'd go on the app, the app on my phone for sending her an e-bluey and I'd attach a picture of like my daughter or something and then she'd get that and I was quite comfortable with being able to just contact her via those means.

— Female daughter, army reservist

Most noted the provision of emergency contact information, and this was highly valued as providing reassurance of contact in a crisis:

Yeah it was a pack on if she was ... if anything was to happen to her (umm) sort of what the process

would be. I remember reading something like that. (umm) And who to contact and what that process would be. To be honest with you I think that was the only thing that really stuck to me in the pack. Yeah, even to this day I know exactly where it is.

— Female spouse, army reservist

There was a recognition that, sometimes, it was best to not communicate difficulties at home to reservists on deployment and deal with them alone:

I just feel you're better getting on with it because the upset of not being able to come home because our daughter was ... had been admitted to hospital was more upsetting for him, potentially putting him where he was ... because he might not have been able to concentrate ... plus it caused me upset as well because then I was worried about him thinking you know ... potentially he's going to be thinking about our daughter and he's not going to be concentrating so I could end up with another issue where he could be harmed.

— Female spouse, RN reservist

However, being unable to get to geographically distant services presented the risk of leading to feelings of injustice and deprivation:

Sending newsletters to a family many many miles away from the regiment your spouse is attached to is of no use and seeing events organised for families on base is of no use when you live 450 miles away! ...

Table 6. Survey family members use of forms of welfare and support services before, during, and after operational deployment of their reservist. (n = 42)

	Welfare support you used (e.g. information, padre, support staff, welfare organizations)	Direct contact and support from your reservist's COC/ unit/ squadron/branch	Facilities and events to meet other families	Lines of communication with your reservist
BEFORE OPERATIONAL TOUR				
Used	23 (55%)	25 (59%)	22 (53%)	—
Did not use	19	16	20	—
Satisfied	7 (30%)	6 (24%)	4 (18%)	—
Neutral	6	5	5	—
Dissatisfied	10	14	13	—
DURING OPERATIONAL TOUR				
Used	18 (43%)	23 (55%)	19 (45%)	29 (69%)
Did not use	23	19	23	12
Satisfied	4 (22%)	7 (30%)	4 (21%)	17 (59%)
Neutral	7	5	4	8
Dissatisfied	7	11	11	4
AFTER OPERATIONAL TOUR				
Used	16 (38%)	19 (45%)	17 (40%)	—
Did not use	23	19	21	—
Satisfied	4 (25%)	5 (26%)	4 (24%)	—
Neutral	5	5	5	—
Dissatisfied		9	8	—

Maybe a host family being assigned to the reservist attached family would make attending family days at the base less daunting.

— Female spouse, army reservist

There were perceptions the needs of reservist families were not understood by regular unit welfare teams:

He was just dealing with his regulars and had these add-ons that he just ticked a box. I just felt that we were just being tick-boxed all the time.

— Female spouse, army reservist

Negative family views of the welfare staff in interviews and open survey comments were mostly associated with no contact, or lack of contact:

So there wasn't much support from ... even from his unit in [removed] at that point. I don't think anybody ... I'm trying to think if anybody's phoned me during the time he was away. No I don't think so. (umm) I remember having to ask.

— Female spouse, army reservist

However, some did mention a lack of contact may have been related to their reservist's preferences:

I don't know whether that's to do with [spouse name], I don't know ... and the fact he just keeps it all very separate. I don't know.

— Female spouse, army reservist

As with the survey, a very small number of participants attended formal deployment support briefings for families. There may be an unmet need to support children during deployment, as one spouse felt her reservist's deployment had a negative effect on her daughter's engagement at school:

She's only just told us quite recently that the school thought that she was quite stressed the whole time that ... her dad was away.

— Female spouse, army reservist

DISCUSSION

Awareness

These findings demonstrate reservist families have low awareness about the welfare and support available to them and make little use of what is available. Most assumed little was routinely available, even during deployment. Data also suggest low awareness is linked to a perception of little support being available. This supports the results of previous studies.^{8,11,17,28,34,49} These findings are concerning, as other studies demonstrated

family perceptions of available support are predictive of family coping during deployment¹⁶ and may, in turn, have a negative impact on the retention intentions of reservists post-deployment.²⁸

Low awareness may be associated with reservist family members not perceiving themselves as members of the armed forces community. They think of themselves as having a member of the family in the military, rather than being a military family. Indeed, nearly half did not see reservists as members of the armed forces community. This lack of identifying with the military may be a psychological barrier to perceiving themselves as eligible for military welfare and support services.

Low family awareness could also be due to a reservist's lack of awareness of the support available. A lack of awareness on the part of the reservist may be related to the marginal status of reservists in the armed forces community.^{38,50} Some family members also revealed a lack of confidence their reservists would inform them about family welfare and support. Other research revealed some reservists adopt a strategy to keep information from their families as part of a compartmentalization of military and civilian lives to allow successful negotiation for time away on military duties.⁴⁰

While reservists may act as gatekeepers to information, it seems they are willing to pass on positive information, such as discounts and railcards, but may be less willing to raise family awareness and openly communicate on difficult topics around deployment, such as potential injury, bereavement, and associated welfare support. Other research showed some UK reservists conceal information about deployment to hide the fact they volunteered.^{6,25,51} Concealment in communication, once revealed, can lead to family difficulties with trust during and after reservist deployments.^{23,24,25} Education for the reservist about communicating and informing their families about welfare support should assist with this issue.

Use, identification, and negotiation

This survey and interviews demonstrated low use of welfare support by reservist families during routine training and deployment. Contact with local unit welfare staff and written welfare guides were rated as most useful. Low use could potentially illustrate good family coping. There is some evidence reservist families can rely on their own support networks, and this was also found in other research.^{17,28,52} Geographic distance was a aspect in use that needs to be factored into welfare provision,⁵³

but psychological distancing was also relevant. Some evidence was found of a lack of interest among family members in the reservist's service, perhaps arising from the compartmentalization of the reservist's military service from family life, but also implying a desire of the family member to separate the emotional life of the family from the military.

Family members expected routine training to be efficient and consider the impact of late diary changes and poor administration on family life and finances. Reservists use various negotiation strategies to bargain with families for time away and the use of pay earned for the family as an offset for time away is common.^{4,51} Welfare and COC staff should be made aware that poor unit administration can lead to welfare and support needs arising among reservists.⁵⁴

Importance of unit staff and informal support

Findings demonstrated the only direct contact with the armed forces many family members experienced was at reservist unit social and informal events. Although some events may be more geared to families with children, events were generally inclusive, contributing to a sense of community. However, these data did suggest a possible disparity between this informal contact and an expectation of more formally meeting unit welfare staff. A personal connection with unit welfare staff was seen by family members as useful and a key enabler of being able to reach out in a crisis.

Family expectations

Families were very clear in their desire to have information about available welfare and support services provided directly to them, preferably online, throughout their reservist's service. There were high expectations the armed forces would provide crisis support services when required. These services are available, and although much welfare information was available online, families seemed unaware of this and intended to contact the local unit in an emergency. Local units were reported as sometimes being difficult to contact, and the authors noted few have welfare contact details online. This could be easily remedied and online welfare guides produced.

Deployment

Phone or internet communication between the family and the reservist during deployment was the most highly rated need, and is also reflected in international

research.^{17,28} It was highlighted as a key factor in how families cope with the strains of separation.^{24,25} Familial dissatisfaction with deployment welfare and support was often related to a lack of contact from unit welfare staff. Regular communication by welfare staff or the COC, families knowing welfare staff personally, and recognition of the circumstances of geographically dispersed families was associated with positive comments about welfare support. There was a very mixed range of positive and negative experiences reported, suggesting patchy, localized unit service provision. Host units are often distant Regular Force units, and welfare staff should be briefed on the importance of communicating with reservist families. Clarity on deployment about who has responsibility for the deployed reservist and their family, the home (losing) reservist unit or the host (receiving) unit, will help.⁵⁴

Many families wanted reassurance that welfare support was there to be drawn upon in an emergency or when their usual sources of support failed during deployment. This reassurance could be provided by personal communication from service providers and by ensuring welfare contact details are available online. Attendance at welfare and support briefings were positively received, together with personal connections with welfare staff, but fewer participants than expected participated in such briefings. Briefings could also be held online to increase attendance and welfare staff should stress to reservists the importance of these meetings. Recent work underlines the importance of knowledge and communication during deployment and how well families cope post-deployment with an impact on future reservist retention.⁵⁵⁻⁵⁷

Limitations

This sample represents a small proportion of the potential diversity of UK reservist family members. Families of reservists are a hard-to-reach population, and other studies found similar difficulties recruiting participants.⁵⁸ Even so, the sample represents the largest collection to date of views of UK reservist family members and is comparable with other international study samples. The triangulation of findings between methods suggests their generalizability. The high support for reservist service parallels that reported by reservists when asked about their families' support of their service¹⁵ and suggests lack of support for service was unlikely to be a motivator for participants taking part in this research. However, the sample was not large enough to statistic-

ally examine specific reservist sub-groups with varied terms of service such as sponsored reserves (individuals whose employers provide a contractual service for the UK MOD and where reservist service is part of a civilian employment contract) or those families from minority backgrounds. These groups may have different satisfaction levels with aspects of welfare support.

This study does not consider large-scale deployment on a compulsory mobilization basis for reservists with the return of international tensions in Europe.⁵⁹ However, during the Cold War, it was notable that mobilization plans mentioned the issue of family support for deploying reservists.⁶⁰ The data for this article were collected in 2017, but there have been no relevant policy or practice changes the authors have witnessed since then,^{61,62} and the authors were asked to provide advice to the MOD based on 2017 data on UK reservist families during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020⁶³ and again in 2023. There is no evidence the UK reservist balance of military and civilian employment has changed, nor employer support in relation to UK reservist service that would impact these results.⁶¹ Civilian work has become more home-based since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the changing nature of work may have an impact on family relations and perceptions of support required. During the COVID-19 pandemic, UK reservist duty did move more online, but this was temporary. The number of UK reservist deployments in 2017 and 2023 was broadly similar.⁶² Online communication methods today are more reliable and widespread than in 2017. This could impact satisfaction, but indicators of family support and reservist views on deployment support remained substantively the same in Continuous Attitude Surveys between 2017⁶⁴ and 2023.¹⁵

The study data were unable to reliably discern how gender may have impacted the results due to the low number of female reservists and the low number of male family members who participated. Male reservist service can further bolster gendered divisions of household labour,¹³ and serving female reservists expect to support their families more than male reservists,⁵³ so the interaction of gender and family support remains to be investigated.

Conclusion

The major difficulty with provision of support and welfare to reservist families is a lack of awareness and knowledge of the welfare support available. Families

did not identify as military families and did not envision using services routinely but wanted reassurance of emergency support. Personalized unit support was most valuable but also most inconsistent in practice, even during deployment. More access to information online, more contact with specifically-trained welfare staff, and increased reservist awareness of welfare and support should reduce inconsistencies and improve family satisfaction and reservist retention.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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COMPETING INTERESTS

V Connelly is a serving part-time reservist employed by the Ministry of Defence. The opinions expressed in the paper are his own and do not represent the Ministry of Defence. NT Fear is a trustee for Help for Heroes, as well as a specialist advisor for National Health Services England.

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ETHICS APPROVAL

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