



Family Life and the Armed Forces Community Evaluation Beneficiary Survey Update

Dean Renshaw

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About the Directory of Social Change

At the Directory of Social Change (DSC), we believe that the world is made better by people coming together to serve their communities and each other. For us, an independent voluntary sector is at the heart of that social change and we exist to support charities, voluntary organisations and community groups in the work they do. Our role is to:

- **provide practical information** on a range of topics from fundraising to project management in both our printed publications and our e-books;
- **offer training** through public courses, events and in-house services;
- **research funders** and maintain a subscription database, *Funds Online*, with details on funding from grant-making charities, companies and government sources;
- **offer bespoke research** to voluntary sector organisations in order to evaluate projects, identify new opportunities and help make sense of existing data;
- **stimulate debate and campaign** on key issues that affect the voluntary sector, particularly to champion the concerns of smaller charities.

Visit our website www.dsc.org.uk to see how we can help you to help others and have a look at www.fundsonline.org.uk to see how DSC could improve your fundraising. Alternatively, contact our friendly team at **020 4526 5995** to chat about your needs or drop us a line at cs@dsc.org.uk.

About DSC's research

DSC undertakes bespoke and commissioned research and evaluation work for a wide range of charities and organisations. Our research and consultancy service includes:

- **strategic advice** for grant-makers, charities and companies;
- **sector surveys**, such as membership surveys of charities and funders;
- **impact evaluation** of giving by large grant-makers and companies;
- **topical research** on sector developments and sub-sectoral analysis;
- **case studies**, highlighting the work of our clients and other organisations in an accessible way.

Our bespoke and commissioned research is led by the needs of our clients, but our policy work also informs our research for the benefit of the wider voluntary sector. This policy work includes campaigns such as Everybody Benefits, which raises awareness of the benefit of charities and the voluntary sector, and the recently introduced #NeverMoreNeeded campaign, which highlighted the vital work of charities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the crucial support they themselves needed during the crisis.

An important part of our work is providing research, insight and evidence on UK Armed Forces charities. This award-winning research,¹ funded by Forces in Mind Trust, has to date seen DSC publish ten accessible reports which provide analytical data, trends and commentary and are used by policymakers, government and charities alike. DSC is now recognised as the premier source of research and information on charities which support the armed forces community, and our evidence to Cobseo (The Confederation of Service Charities) on how the sector needed state assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic led to the government providing financial support to armed forces charities in 2020.

¹ DSC received the 2021 Forces in Mind Trust Research Award.

About the author

DEAN RENSHAW



Dean joined DSC in 2019 as a Senior Researcher and works on commissioned research projects in DSC's research team.

Dean has worked with a range of charities to help them better understand their existing data and gather new data from stakeholders in order to improve their vital services, projects and programmes. He uses a wide range of quantitative and qualitative research methods and enjoys working with charities to tailor DSC's methodology to their needs.

Dean's interests in the charity sector include charities that support mental health and well-being as well as charities that use gardening and horticultural activities to support their beneficiaries. Dean volunteers as a mentor at the Open Door Charity on the Wirral, which is one of the largest independent providers of talking therapies in Merseyside.

Prior to joining DSC, Dean worked as a Data Analyst in the fast-moving consumer goods industry. He holds a BSc (Hons) in Psychology from the University of Sheffield.

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report follows on from *Family Life and the Armed Forces Community Evaluation* by analysing the findings from a survey of beneficiaries of projects under the Removing Barriers to Family Life funding programme from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

The survey asked beneficiaries about their perceptions of the projects, including questions such as if they felt that they would benefit and if they thought the project could be applied to similar Armed Forces families, and also questions on their experiences of accessing these projects during the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions of the projects

- The survey received 143 responses from a range of organisations, with the most responses coming from Improving Lives Plymouth (N=34), The Family Foundation (N=24) and The Warrior Programme (N=15).
- A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt that the people running the projects understood their challenges, with 65.03% (N=93) of respondents strongly agreeing with the statement.
- Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the project they were in could be applied to similar Armed Forces families, with 77 (53.85%) strongly agreeing with the statement. This suggests that the projects in the Removing Barriers to Family Life programme may be able to be used as templates for future projects.
- A large majority of respondents (N=123, 86.01%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they thought they would benefit from the project.
- There was slightly more variation in response to the statement 'This project will still benefit me after it has ended' and although most either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (N=99, 69.23%), the slightly higher incidence of disagree and strongly disagree responses suggests that there is some concern from the beneficiaries as to whether the outcomes of the projects are sustainable.
- Respondents noted that the availability of projects online was positive and suggested that this should be continued in the future, while others suggested face-to-face contact. Future projects may benefit from adopting a hybrid model of digital delivery, in which some services are delivered digitally and others are delivered face-to-face.
- Some respondents gave examples of where more funding could be beneficial, such as funding for transport to allow individuals to access drop-in sessions.

- One respondent suggested that their project (which was unspecified) would benefit from providing sessions 'off the patch' for Armed Forces families that don't live in service family accommodation.

Perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

- The majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (N=90, 66.18%) that the COVID-19 pandemic made them need the project more than they did previously, but this wasn't necessarily true for all survey respondents, with 30 (22.06%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement.
- The pandemic affected the beneficiaries to varying degrees, with the most common response being that the pandemic slightly affected how they participated in the project (N=37, 30.33%), while 14.75% (N=18) were severely affected. A total of 31 (25.41%) of respondents stated that the pandemic did not affect how they participated in the project at all.
- Respondents gave a range of positive experiences as a result of digital service delivery during the pandemic, including not having to physically travel to the project, being able to access the project while also having caring responsibilities and how digital services helped some of the beneficiaries experiencing social isolation and loneliness as a result of the pandemic.
- Some respondents noted that digital service delivery had been a negative experience for them, for reasons including not wanting to go on the internet, accessibility issues due to disability, and digital poverty, which may mean that some Armed Forces families do not have any internet access at all.

Introduction

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report follows on from *Family Life and the Armed Forces Community Evaluation*, a report from DSC that explored the impact of funding made under the Removing Barriers to Family Life theme by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

The original report intended to include the findings from a survey to assess the Removing Barriers to Family Life funding programme from the perspectives of the beneficiaries of the projects. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not practical or appropriate at the time of the release of the report in March 2021 as a number of the projects in the funding programme experienced delays, and would therefore be unable to provide useful data. This report presents the findings from that survey, and is intended to supplement the findings from the original report.

METHODOLOGY

DSC's researchers designed and deployed a survey to be completed by the beneficiaries of the organisations in receipt of grant funding from the Removing Barriers to Family Life funding programme.

The survey asked questions across two main themes. The first theme consisted of questions to assess how the beneficiaries perceived the outcomes and support from the project, the sustainability of the outcomes from the project and how applicable the project was to other Armed Forces families, in addition to an opportunity for the beneficiaries to offer suggestions to improve the project they were in. The second theme related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this had affected their participation in the project. The questions within each section were randomised for each respondent in order to limit the impact of order effects, which are potential negative effects (e.g. boredom or fatigue) as a result of the order of the questions which may influence the responses.

This survey launched on 12 April 2021 and closed on 30 June 2021. It received 143 responses.

A NOTE ABOUT THE DATA

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the projects under the Removing Barriers to Family Life funding programme to varying degrees and some were delayed. As a result of this, not all of the projects under the funding programme were able to deploy this survey to their beneficiaries. It should be noted that the data presented here represents only a proportion of all of the projects under the funding programme. One organisation provided a case study as an alternative to the survey, and this is presented in this report.

Analysis of the survey data

1.1. OVERVIEW

In total, the survey received 143 responses from a range of organisations. The most responses were received from beneficiaries attending the Focus on Families and Carers project from Improving Lives Plymouth (N=34), followed by the #FamilyConnectors project from The Family Foundation (N=24). A total of 11 responses were categorised as unknown, and this was the result of either an error from the respondent that made it impossible to match the response to a specific project (for example, some respondents listed only 'Removing Barriers') or due to respondents withholding the project or organisation running the project to protect their anonymity. Figure 1 shows the number of respondents according to the organisation which ran the project.

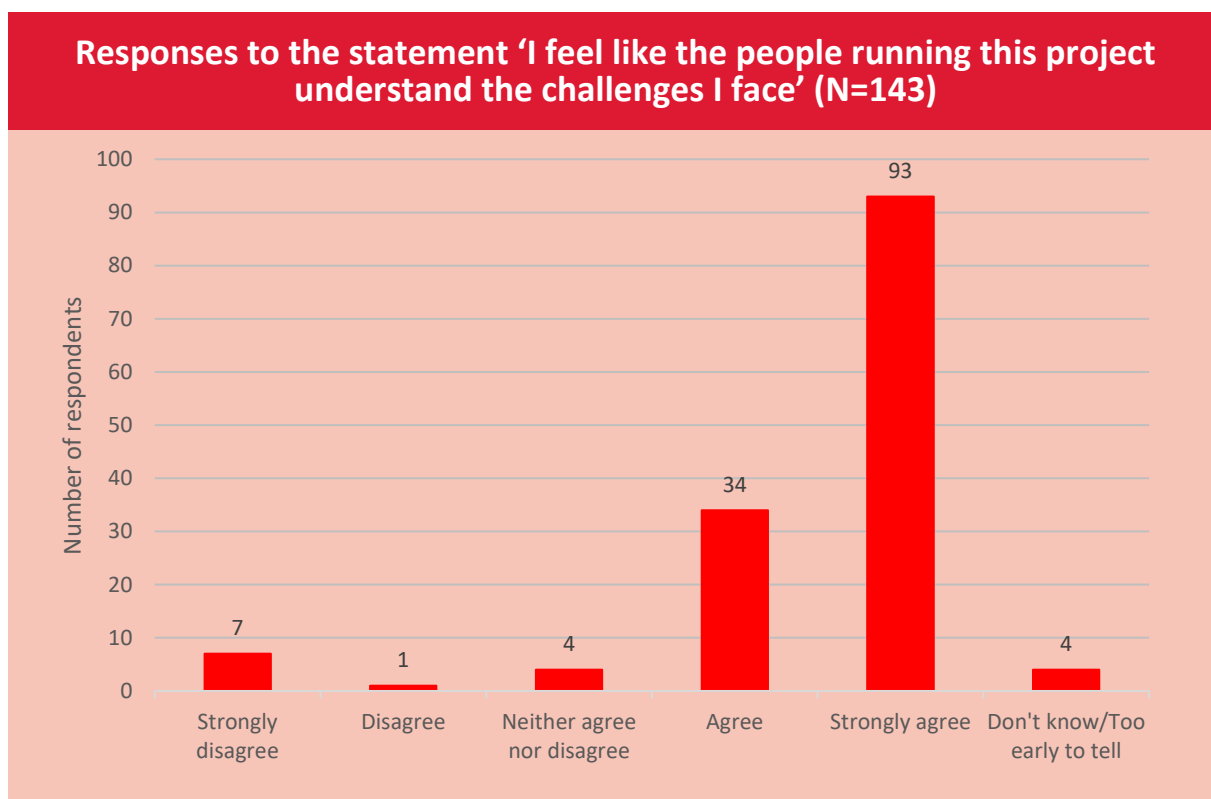
Figure 1



1.2. PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROJECTS

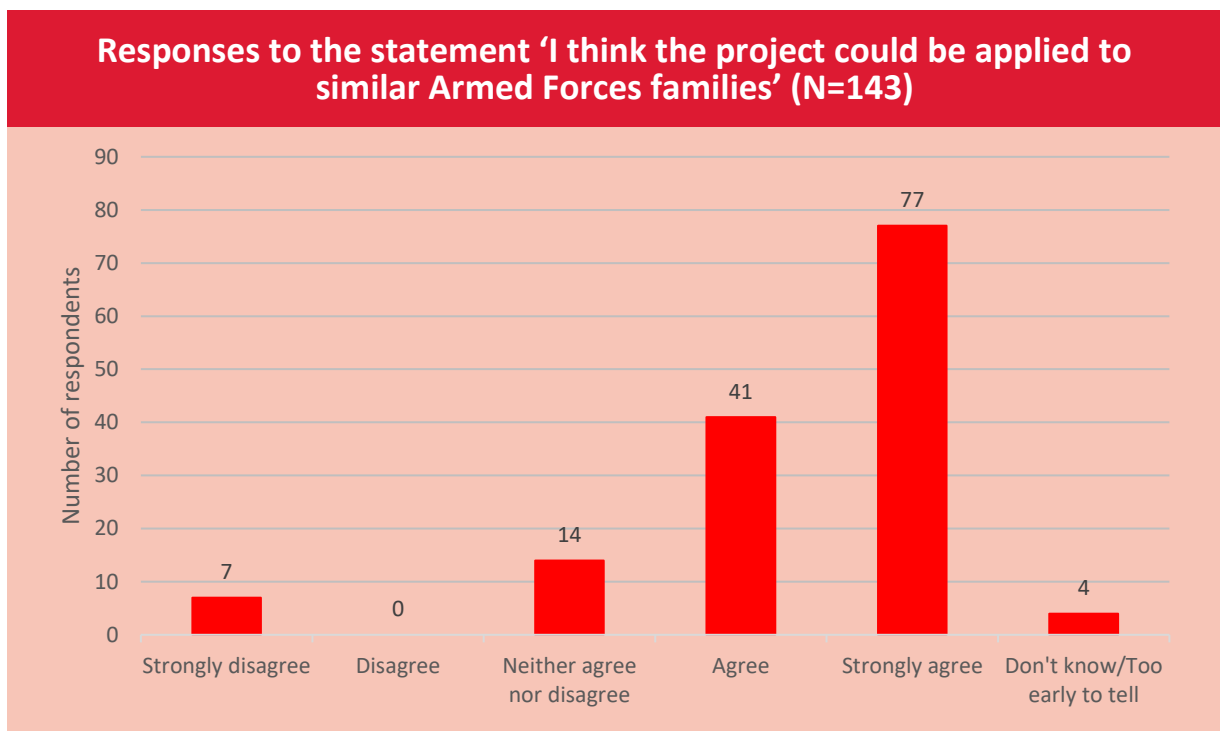
In response to the statement 'I feel like the people running this project understand the challenges I face', the vast majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, with 65.03% (N=93) strongly agreeing with the statement, suggesting that the organisations running the projects have the expertise and understanding required to work with Armed Forces families.

Figure 2



Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I think the project could be applied to similar Armed Forces families', and the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This statement also saw a majority of respondents strongly agree with the statement (53.85%, N=77), which suggests that the projects featured in the Removing Barriers to Family Life funding programme can be applied to similar Armed Forces families that may require these projects in the future, and the current projects may be used as a template for future work. Figure 3 shows the full range of responses to this statement.

Figure 3



When asked if they agreed or disagreed that they would benefit from the project they were in, Figure 4 shows that the respondents overwhelmingly agreed that they would benefit, with a total of 123 respondents (86.01%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. A majority of respondents strongly agreed that they think they will benefit from the project (N=86, 60.14%).

Figure 4

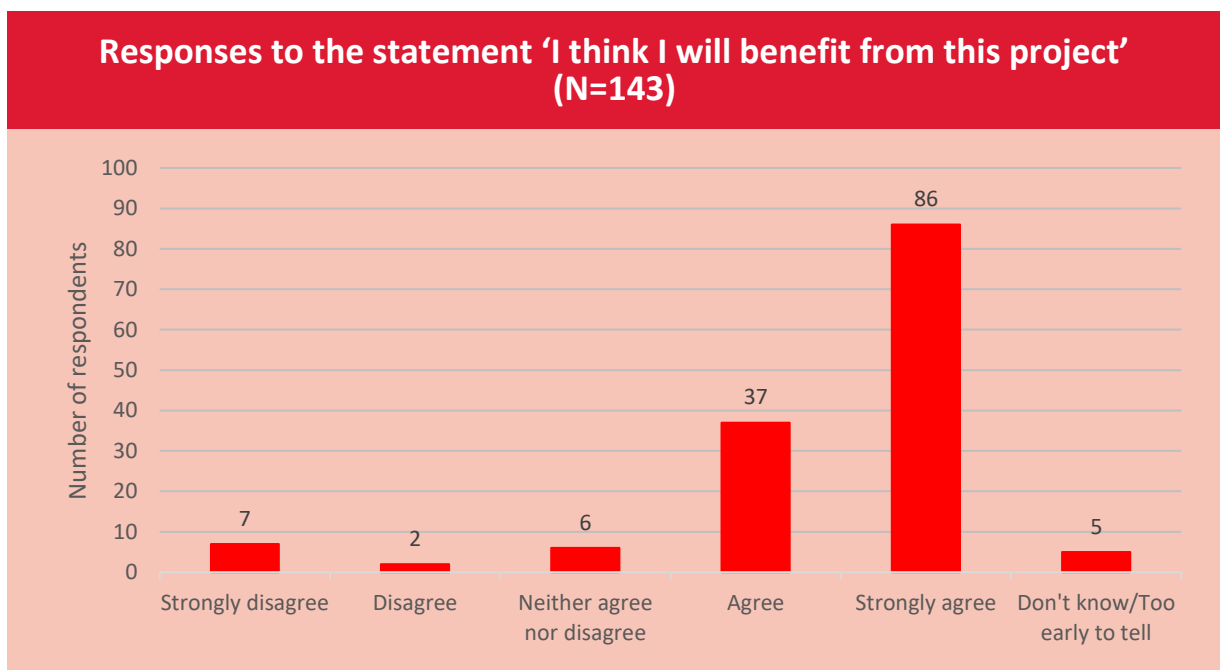
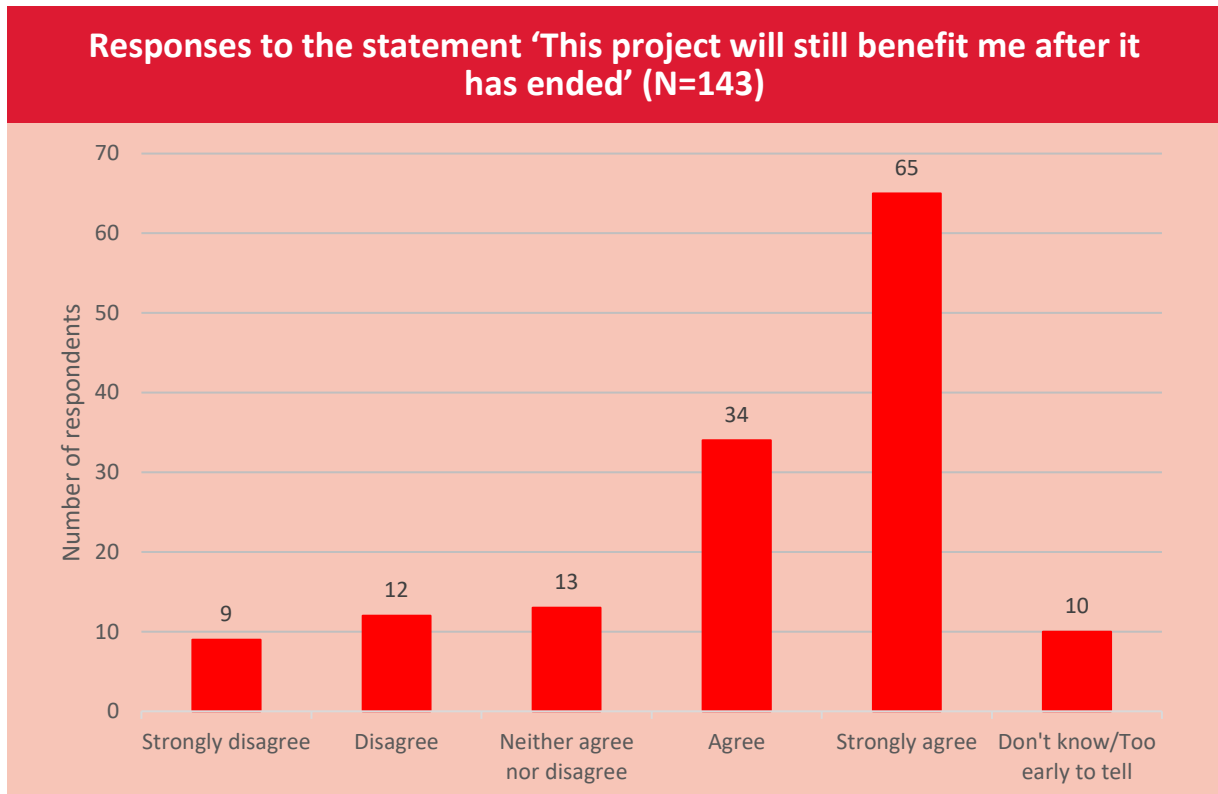


Figure 5 displays the responses to the statement ‘This project will still benefit me after it has ended’ which shows slightly more variation across the responses in comparison to the previous statements. While most respondents still agree or strongly agree that the project will benefit them after it has ended (N=99, 69.23%), some respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (N=21, 14.69%).

Figure 5



The survey respondents were offered an opportunity to provide any suggestions as to how they believe their project could be improved in the future. The online element of some projects made necessary by the pandemic was cited as a positive element as it tackled the barrier of having to travel to a physical space for the project.

I benefitted from the course being available online, I'd not have been able to attend had it been in person like it usually is. I'm sure it is probably best in person and I'd have liked the interaction with others but perhaps having an option for it to run a couple of times per year online would help some people access it who would otherwise miss out. The benefits I received from the course are immense [and] I want as many people as possible to have access to it!

Survey respondent

In contrast, some respondents suggested that they would prefer face-to-face contact for their project. The mixture of responses may suggest that future projects would benefit from a hybrid model in which the project could be delivered both virtually and in a face-to-face environment.

I would have preferred to have met the team in person - it was very emotional and being remote made that an additional challenge, but other than that I found the course incredibly valuable.

Survey respondent

Now that restrictions are lifting, [provide] more opportunities to meet.

Survey respondent

Being [able] to meet in person after the lockdown is over.

Survey respondent

One of the most common suggestions made by respondents related to funding, and while some respondents stated this in more general terms, some respondents gave specific examples of where funding could have the most benefit, such as funding for transport for projects that required drop-in sessions.

More funding for transport [for] drop-in [sessions].

Survey Respondent

More funding to allow more outreach to more people.

Survey Respondent

[Aggie Weston's] have been amazing and their events and craft packs have made such a difference to our lives. Further funding would allow more events to happen around the military patches and to buy equipment and books.

Survey Respondent

One respondent stated that they believed that their project (the project or organisation was not made available by the respondent) would benefit from providing sessions for Armed Forces families that don't live in service family accommodation in locations that could be easily accessed.

It would be lovely for [Armed Forces] families that don't live on the patch to have regular family groups in easy-to-access locations. Particularly when partners [are] deployed.

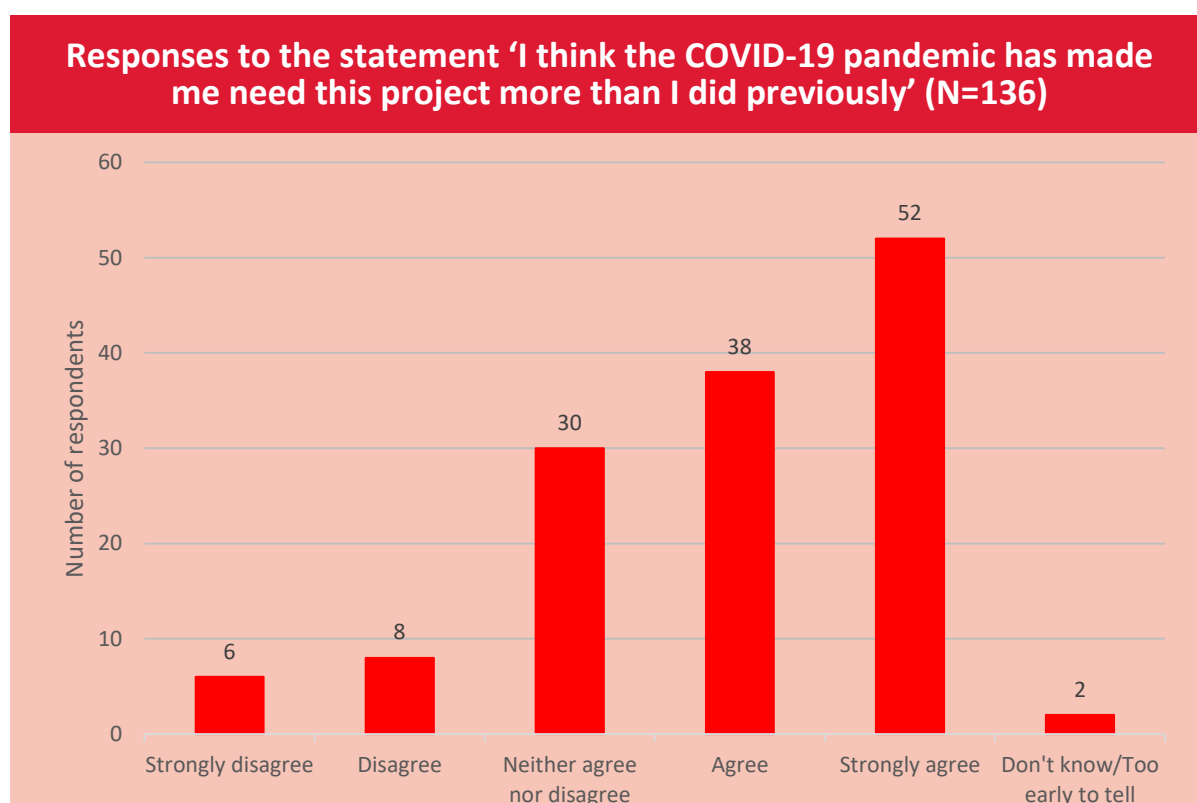
Survey Respondent

1.3. PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The survey provided an opportunity to investigate the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the beneficiaries, and in order to do this DSC researchers asked three questions relating to the pandemic.

Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I think the COVID-19 pandemic has made me need this project more than I did previously', and Figure 6 shows the full range of responses to this statement. The majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (N=90, 66.18%) which suggests that the pandemic has resulted in a greater need for the services offered by the projects under the Removing Barriers to Family Life funding programme. However, 30 respondents representing 22.06% of respondents to this statement neither agreed or disagreed with this statement, and so while the pandemic has resulted in an increase in need, this is not necessarily the case for all of the beneficiaries in the projects.

Figure 6

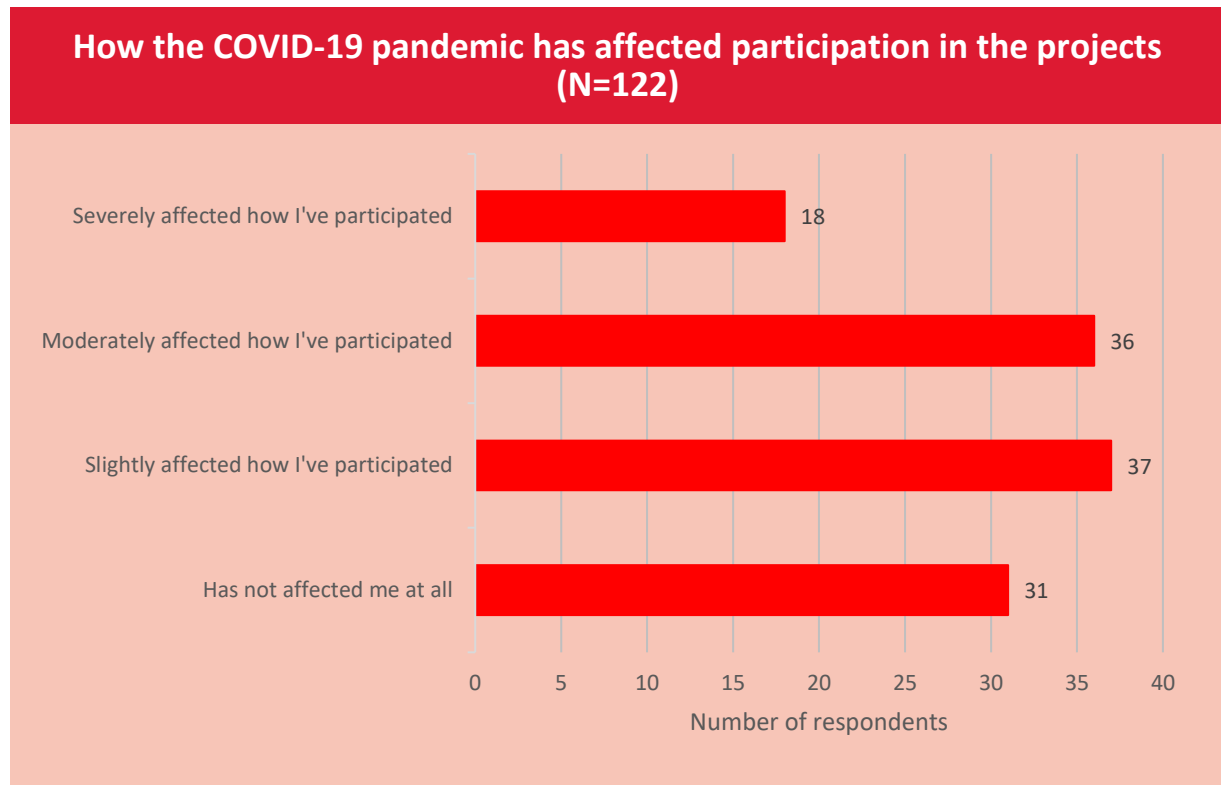


Respondents were asked how severely the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their participation in the project, and examples given in the survey included the increased use of video calls, Zoom and Microsoft Teams and reduced face-to-face contact.

Figure 7 shows the responses to this question which were relatively spread out across the options available. The most common response was that the pandemic had slightly affected how they participated in the project (N=37, 30.33%), and slightly fewer respondents responded that the pandemic had moderately affected how they participated in the project (N=36, 29.50%), while 14.75% (N=18) of respondents to this question found that the pandemic severely affected how they participated. Interestingly, a total of 31 (25.41%) respondents stated that the pandemic had not affected how they participated in the project at all.

Overall, this suggests that while the pandemic did affect how most of the beneficiaries participated in the projects, it was to varying degrees and a large proportion of those were either slightly affected or not affected at all. This may be in part due to the methods put in place by the organisations running the projects, such as switching to digital delivery methods which is explored in detail in the main report.

Figure 7



Survey respondents were invited to write a brief summary of how the pandemic affected their participation in the project.

Most of the responses were concerned with adapting to digital delivery methods, and there was a mixture of positive and negative experiences highlighted by the respondents. For some respondents, digital delivery methods were a positive element of how they participated in the project, with some respondents stating that they would not have been able to attend the project otherwise, for various reasons including geographical access and caring responsibilities. In addition to this, the availability of the projects digitally also helped some of the respondents experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

Running the course online meant I could finally access it. Family commitments and husband routinely being away due to his military commitments prevented me going when it was in person.

Survey respondent

I would not have been able to take part in this project without it being available on Zoom.

Survey respondent

I think the organisers have done a commendable job in adapting the format of the programme for remote delivery online (Zoom). The convenience of having resources readily accessible on the website (video recorded sessions, further reading, audio content) is immensely helpful I believe this format would be beneficial for many participants in future.

Survey respondent

Positive because it was delivered on Zoom. If it had been in person, I may have struggled to attend.

Survey respondent

If it wasn't for the pandemic then the Warrior Programme would have continued to do face-to-face courses which I doubt I would have attended. With the course being on Zoom it has enabled me to do the course whilst managing home schooling, settling into a new area due to posting and a deployment. Even though I've not met anyone face-to-face I really do feel I get the support needed.

Survey respondent

As we haven't been able to meet in person, all of our groups, which are vital for me, have stopped. Aggie Weston's have again been amazing putting on Zoom art classes, messy church and book clubs. They really have increased community spirit and allowed us to still meet when others just closed their doors.

Survey respondent

Much more active on Zoom. Allowing me to keep in touch with my community and friends via Aggie Weston's Coffee Zooms during a very stressful and lonely time.

Survey respondent

I like direct contact with people and have missed this. However, at least the video calls have been a stopgap and better than nothing. I have actually met people across the UK that I would not necessarily have met. So, you could say my friendship circle has widened.

Survey respondent

Offering virtual contact has meant that I have been able to participate more frequently... [physical] attendance can mean that travel and time to attend means I can't make it.

Survey respondent

I struggle to get to services as I have young children, being able to access the service via Zoom has allowed me to help myself.

Survey respondent

I have participated in more sessions online as I often can't make it into the hub due to my caring role.

Survey respondent

However, other respondents claimed that digital delivery methods were a negative way in which the pandemic had affected their participation in the projects. Some respondents highlighted that they did not want to access services via the internet or that they were not able to due to disability. One respondent noted the importance of digital poverty when considering digital service delivery which may mean that some Armed Forces families do not have any internet access at all. Further research into digital poverty in Armed Forces families may be of benefit to future services and projects.

All communication has been via Zoom so [it] makes it harder to have interactive activities

Survey respondent

Personally, I do not like using Zoom, I feel uncomfortable with it, I miss face-to-face meetings, just the mixing with others outside your own environment.

Survey respondent

I struggle with Zoom meetings.

Survey respondent

I have no voice so I couldn't do Zoom; [it] had to be face-to-face.

Survey respondent

I do not want to do online groups; I am looking forward to going back to our groups face-to-face.

Survey respondent

[I am] not able to access online support and I don't want to go online.

Survey respondent

I don't like computers so just chatting over the phone had to do.

Survey respondent

It's just not the same doing a course via video call, you can't interact in the same way. The trainer was amazing and kept it fun but I miss having the chat with others when on coffee breaks.

Survey respondent

Overall, the mixture of responses to the delivery of the projects via digital services again suggests that future projects would benefit from using a hybrid model, in which they could deliver services both face-to-face and via digital delivery methods.

CASE STUDY

Military Wives Choirs: Empowering Women Through Music

The Military Wives Choirs is a diverse, international, tri-service community, creating life-changing and impactful experiences for nearly 2000 women in 72 choirs in British military bases across the UK and overseas. We increase wellbeing and improve mental and physical health, developing confidence and skills, offering uplifting experiences, and providing inclusive, open and supportive choirs, meaning members can instantly find friendship, familiarity and community alongside women who understand. We also provide opportunities for members to feel empowered through accessing training and development opportunities.

Military life across the services has its challenges. Some families move yearly to a new posting, while for others deployment means long periods of separation. This can leave women feeling isolated, particularly when loved ones are away for long periods of time, as has been the case during the pandemic. Our choirs have been a lifeline, supporting each other through the toughest of times. For example, during the pandemic, a choir member donated their daughter's old iPad to another choir member so she could access their virtual choir sessions and be part of the choir again. Another choir member said of their experience in the choir: 'As a mother of three, with my husband away during lockdown, singing and socialising with my choir has been essential to my health, physically and mentally. Having contact and support from the choir, whilst through virtual means mostly, has brightened some dark times. I bring this home to my family, my joy for singing and the house feels lifted.'

Our project, Empowering Women Through Music, has enabled us to continue to offer our choirs these life-changing opportunities to sing together, as well as providing our members with a comprehensive programme of support and development, for example media training for committee members, who use this newly-found knowledge and confidence to locally promote their choir and choir activities.

Since the start of the pandemic the choirs have quickly adjusted to the restrictions. Virtual music-making, performances, support and training have ensured we could continue with our mission, of supporting our members through singing. This has become even more essential during the pandemic, where social isolation has affected the wellbeing of so many of our choir members. Now more than ever our network is needed, providing a lifeline and making an impact, building a sense of community and improving individuals' mental wellbeing. Over the last 16 months we have not lost a single choir in our network, illustrating both the power of our network and their ability to successfully combat the very real threats of loneliness and social isolation our members face.

One Choir Lead shared with us the positive and wide-reaching impacts choir has had for her.

"All of these roles have taught me skills I now plan to take into the workplace and have left no gaps on my CV while I have been a stay-at-home mum...I have learnt skills such as team working, time keeping, how to use Office 365, improved my written English, learnt how to minute meetings, gained management skills, developed interpersonal skills and become a welfare point in my choir. I have had to manage budgets, liaise with clients, organise

meetings, promoted the choir, learnt how to admin groups on social media, create events/polls...All of these experiences have now meant I am applying for a dream job I would have NEVER considered even looking at, never mind applying!"

Family Life and the Armed Forces Community Evaluation: Beneficiary Survey Update

This report from the Directory of Social Change serves as an update to *Family Life and the Armed Forces Community Evaluation* by providing an analysis of a survey of the beneficiaries of projects under the Removing Barriers to Family Life funding programme by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

This report looks at the perceptions of the support offered by the projects and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of the beneficiaries accessing the projects.

This is a valuable resource for charities, government and policymakers to explore and understand how the projects funded by the Trust support Armed Forces Families.