

# The Families in Stress (Army) Warrior Programme

## Evaluation Report

### Introduction

The Families in Stress - Army (FiS A) project was funded by the Armed Forces (AF) Covenant Fund Trust and delivered by The Warrior Programme (TWP). The project was designed to deliver rapid support to military families in stress, providing a safe and supportive environment for partners/spouses from which they could start to stabilise their situation and develop:

- the resilience and confidence to deal with personal challenges, and
- the ability to engage effectively with, and benefit from, existing welfare and other support services.

As well as spouses/partners benefitting from the programme, it was anticipated that children in these army families would also experience the positive impacts resulting from the increased resilience and stability of their parents.

The FiS A funding period ran from April 2017 to June 2019 and the Warrior programme was delivered primarily in the South/South West and Yorkshire regions. Participants engaged in an initial 3 day course and were offered a range of follow up activity including one day refresher courses and monthly phone calls to check on progress.

TWP was also successful in gaining Armed Forces Covenant Trust funding for another FiS project focusing on delivering the Warrior programme to the families of serving personnel in the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Royal Airforce, as well as LIBOR funding for delivery to serving personnel across the armed forces.

This evaluation report seeks to identify the impact, achievements and key learning points arising from delivery of the FiS A project. However, reference may be made to the FiS RN/RAF and serving personnel projects where appropriate. For clarity in this report, TWP is used to refer to the delivery organisation and the Warrior programme is used to describe the course and support delivered.

### Methodology

The methodology for the evaluation included:

- one-to-one and group discussions with Warrior programme participants, taking place between 2 and 4 months from completing the initial 3 day course;
- discussions with Warrior staff (management, regional co-ordinators, trainers and coaches);
- one-to-one discussions with staff in stakeholder organisations (Army Welfare etc. and associated charities), and
- desk review of programme monitoring data.

Discussions were guided by a set of key questions, tailored for each respondent group, to ensure consistency of approach. Direct quotes are shown in italics and speech marks but are not attributed to individuals in order to protect confidentiality. Where any names are used, permission has been given to do so. Many thanks to the programme participants interviewed who showed enormous generosity in sharing sensitive and personal stories and thoughts without which this evaluation would not be possible.

## Key findings

- The Warrior programme for Army Families in Stress (FiS A) is enabling spouses/partners to access empowering and supportive training and development that is helping them to tackle a range of personal, family and work-related challenges. The positive impact is not only being felt by those directly participating in the Warrior programme, but also by their children and wider family, including enabling serving family members to be able to focus more effectively on their jobs. The project has excelled in establishing effective referral routes to a programme that is very highly valued by serving families and army personnel, including those working in Army Welfare.
- The FiS A project has engaged 91 spouses/partners of serving army personnel to date. Whilst this is clearly a significantly lower number than planned, there are very valid reasons for this including the delay in funding approval leading to delays in being able to recruit staff and promote the programme, adding to the lead in time originally anticipated by TWP. TWP is continuing to make provision for army spouses/partners who wish to engage with the programme which will enable the organisation to work towards its original target.
- For the spouses/partners of serving army personnel accessing the programme, the causes of stress stem from a variety of experiences and traumas. These not only include those related to life as an army spouse/partner such as the separation, fear and loneliness that can result from being left during deployments, but also those that can occur in any family including alcohol abuse, domestic violence, childbirth trauma, problems with children/parenting and bereavement. The destabilising effect of the often frequent moves that result from postings, including for some the move back to the UK from army bases in Germany, is a further contributing factor.
- The Warrior programme has had marked and far reaching positive benefits for the spouses/partners of serving personnel. These include increased self-confidence, improved relationships and family life, and decreased feelings of anger, anxiety, frustration, as well as being more effective at work and pursuing work-related ambitions. Participants also report feeling *“less isolated and desperate – you realise that other people are going through the same things, that you’re not mad and that you can feel better.”* It is clear that participants’ resilience and ability to manage the stresses of service life are improved by the programme, including *“feeling like you have control over your own destiny even though you know you’ll still be following him around.”*
- An estimated 120 children have benefited from the positive changes experienced by spouses/partners participating in the Warrior programme. In addition to the beneficial effects of reduced family tensions and improved relationships, feedback indicates that the new skills and *“ways of thinking and reacting”* acquired on the programme are enabling more confident and effective parenting that is resulting in improvements in children’s attitudes and behaviour. Being able to focus on relationships of mutual respect, and appropriate boundary setting were particularly highlighted.
- Feedback indicates that the Warrior programme is helping the serving personnel of the families in stress to be more effective in their roles. The challenges and issues experienced by families in stress can have a negative effect on the serving personnel of the family. If a soldier is worried about his partner’s anxiety or the problems that his child is having at school, this may quite understandably distract him, particularly if he is deployed away from

home. Feedback indicates that the improvements experienced by those participating in Warrior *“means that he can concentrate on his job better – he’s not worrying about us and what’s happening – it’s a big relief for him and for me.”*

- The Warrior programme is helping to support the army’s ongoing commitment to improving its focus on mental health and wellbeing. It can be difficult for members of serving families to *“admit that you’re struggling – you know that it can impact on your husband and so you tend to just soldier on.”* The army’s attitude to and understanding of mental and emotional health has changed tremendously in recent years, with a clear acknowledgement of its importance and the introduction of services to support this key area of health and wellbeing. The culture change necessary to embed fully this approach in such a large and complex organisation is a work in progress. Engagement with the Warrior programme offers significant opportunities to support this challenging task.
- The significant time and resources invested by TWP in building a firm foundation on which to launch this new programme has resulted in the establishment of what are now very efficient referral routes, with better reach into families who are most in need but often less likely to seek help. This is a particular achievement given the complexity of a large and multi-faceted organisation such as the army and the challenge of establishing referral pathways through the myriad of points of contact in Army Welfare and the chain of command. It highlights TWP’s ability and commitment to developing strong and effective relationships with these essential partners to both develop and deliver impactful services.
- A key feature of the development work was to offer referral staff (military and charities) the opportunity of taking part in the programme. This has resulted in significant impacts including personal benefits for Army Welfare staff (MOD and charities); enabling these professionals to enhance their *“ability to do my job to support others, including drawing effective boundaries”*, and being in a stronger position to promote the Warrior programme and make appropriate referrals that benefit families in stress because *“I’m working from a position of knowledge having experienced the benefits myself.”* This impact not only brings benefits for the MOD in terms of staff retention and development of Army Welfare personnel but has the potential for doing the same for those serving personnel that these services support.
- Ensuring good access to the programme has also been an essential feature of developing this offer. Providing courses in the north and south of the country in locations that are near or part of garrisons and/or service welfare facilities has proved very effective. The ability of TWP to offer residential and non-residential options is very helpful, as is the support of TWP’s regional co-ordinators and army staff in helping women to find appropriate childcare solutions. That said, childcare remains a barrier for some, including those who would prefer to *“have the headspace without having to think about what will need doing at home every night.”*
- Participants and professionals (army and charities) alike were highly positive about the *“really efficient and well-run programme”* and *“warm, welcoming and really professional staff”*. For people who are under significant pressure and stress, these features combined with a clear understanding of the military and military life enabled them to feel that *“it was time really well spent and you knew that you could relax and ask people anything you needed to.”*

- Feedback demonstrates that the Warrior programme is clearly providing a safe and supportive environment for those participating – particularly important given the challenges faced and the need to *“go in with an open, trusting mind if you’re going to really benefit from it.”* An important factor in creating this safe environment is that the Warrior programme *“isn’t part of the military – you can go on it in confidence and that makes it a bit easier to take the step of trying to get help to tackle things.”*
- The word of mouth promotion from and visible positive change in spouses/partners who have taken part in Warrior, combined with the now well established relationships with key welfare personnel has led to significant and rising demand for the programme, evidenced by the current waiting list for places – *“there is so little available for families and the need is really there.”* TWP clearly requires urgent and significant funding to meet this need and to continue delivery of this highly valued intervention.
- Feedback indicates that there are families that could particularly benefit from the Warrior programme including *“new service families where the spouse is needing to adjust to a very different life, often with very young children”, “families living outside the wire who are particularly isolated,”* and *“families of commonwealth soldiers who have no networks in the UK and who are often very isolated.”*
- Whilst the scope of this evaluation precludes a cost benefit analysis, it is likely that there are cost savings to the military in terms of reduced need for ongoing support from army welfare and other services, as well as improved performance for those non-serving family members who work in MOD posts, and for serving personnel in those families.

## Recommendations

- ➔ Given the wide reaching positive impact that the FiS A project has been able to achieve for serving families in the army, including for children and serving personnel, further funding should be made available as a matter of urgency to ensure that the momentum is not lost, those on the waiting list can be engaged and the army as an organisation can continue to benefit from the support that the Warrior programme provides in helping to take forward its aspirations for mental health and wellbeing in the armed forces.
- ➔ The Warrior programme should continue to be free at the point of delivery to ensure that families are able to access this highly valuable intervention. Funders should also consider the importance of including in project budgets an allocation for childcare to ensure equality of opportunity for those who have no recourse to other childcare arrangements and who wish to take up a residential course.
- ➔ TWP should continue to offer residential and non-residential options for the 3 day course.
- ➔ Consideration should be given to targeting some service family groups identified in the course of the evaluation, including ‘new’ service families (particularly in the lower ranks), those ‘outside the wire’ and those of commonwealth serving personnel.

## Breaking new ground and building relationships

TWP has a longstanding track record of highly successful work with armed forces veterans and their families, enabling them to develop the self-awareness, resilience and skills to tackle often deep seated issues that have prevented them from living healthy, prosperous and positive lives. TWP's long held ambition has been to extend this unique and very valuable opportunity to serving personnel and their families – to help improve working, personal and family life when in service and, where applicable, during the process of transition out of the armed forces. The Families in Stress (FiS) projects embodied this ambition for serving families.

Through its considerable work with veterans and the discussions that took place to develop the FiS A project, TWP already had very positive relationships with the armed forces. Whilst these links formed the springboard from which to launch FiS A, it necessarily took time to cement the relationships with Army Welfare and other key personnel to provide the smooth referral routes necessary to establish the significant flow of participants that FiS A eventually achieved. This was also due in part to the time needed to advertise, recruit and induct new TWP regional co-ordinators once the AF Covenant Trust had finally confirmed the project funding. These co-ordinators became the lynchpins for promotion and engagement in Yorkshire and the South/South West.

TWP's targets were ambitious given the long lead in time required to establish such a service as the Warrior programme. The original veteran's programme had taken several years to develop the now very efficient referral routes, so it was not surprising to find a similar challenge in breaking the new ground of engaging with the families of serving personnel.

### ***Developing robust referral routes***

Part of the challenge for the Warrior programme is to find ways of promoting a course that is difficult to describe but that results in far reaching positive impacts for those who participate. In the words of one key referral partner *"It can be tricky to sell the course because describing the content doesn't help someone understand why it would be good to take part, but the key way to get the message across about its value is the examples of how it's changed people's lives for the better."*

A number of referral partners participated in the programme so that they could experience the benefits first hand. This enhanced their confidence and ability to promote the programme *"once you've been on it, you can give examples of what a difference it's made to your life, and reassure people so that they aren't so worried about doing something that is probably very much outside of their comfort zone."* Whilst staff in referral organisations can and do promote the programme and make successful referrals to it without having taken part in a course, enabling them to participate not only *"brings lots of personal benefits for me as an individual"* but also provides TWP with effective reach to serving family members who need this intervention.

Welfare personnel acknowledge the challenge of seeking help – *"The hardest part I feel for anyone seeking self-improvement is picking up the phone and making the initial call. Even as Unit Welfare Officer, I very much doubted I would make that initial call."* TWP has tackled this challenge very effectively by developing such positive relationships with army and associated charity based welfare staff who can encourage those for whom they feel Warrior would be beneficial.

As a result of the significant time and resource put into building solid foundations for the project, fewer than the planned number of serving families were engaged on the programme. In its second year of operation FiS A reached the point where word of mouth promotion from serving family

members who had participated created a “buzz in the community which meant that others were keen to come forward because they could see that if it had had such a positive effect for someone that they knew, they had confidence it could also help them.”

### **Creating effective access**

The strategy to promote and recruit participants through two TWP co-ordinators based in the north and south of the country has worked well in providing good geographical coverage. The choice of locations has also meant that TWP has been able to establish positive and significant profiles in Catterick and in Wiltshire/Hampshire based army garrisons. Just over half of participants came from the north of England, the majority from the north east. The remainder were from the south, the majority from the south central area.

The two delivery locations in the north and south of the country has made it possible for TWP to offer residential and non-residential courses to maximise access for those who have childcare responsibilities or who would rather not travel and be away from home. For the spouses/partners of serving families with children who are not away at boarding school (either because of age or rank), arranging and in some cases, paying for suitable childcare is a challenge.

That said, a number of women commented that being away on a residential is preferable “because you can really focus on yourself, knowing that you’re not going to need to get home and cook tea and do bedtime.” One participant “had to get my mother-in-law to take a week’s unpaid leave from work” to enable her to go to the residential. It is clear that for some participants, especially those with complex issues, having financial and other support to cover childcare is important if they are to reap the full benefits of the programme.

The need for the Warrior programme and the importance of it being free at the point of delivery was stressed by participants, and a number of professionals:

*“I think it’s really good that the Warrior programme has been extended to families. There isn’t a lot out there for serving families and a lot of wives and partners are affected by the life. It’s really needed.”*

*“Serving personnel have a lot available to them, and training credits to pay for it. Wives don’t have that and it’s a big gap. They are the people behind the soldiers and it’s important that they are able to access this kind of really high quality training. Money is an issue for a lot of them, so it’s important that it’s free of charge.”*

Whilst all public sector budgets are stretched, it is clear that removing the barrier of cost, particularly for poorer families is a very important aspect of creating equality of access to this very effective programme.



## The needs of service families in stress

Army families in stress experience a range of needs and issues. Some are directly related to being a service family and others are found in family situations in service and civilian settings. All but one of the participants were female, reflecting the profile of army spouses/partners.

Some frequent themes arising from discussions with the participants include:

- **Pressure to be strong and feelings of isolation**

*"It's very difficult when you're expected to be strong, to hold things together. You can feel like you're letting the side down if you say you can't cope."*

*"I'm the continuity of the family, I hold it together. I needed to sort myself out."*

*"You end up feeling isolated because you feel that you can't talk about how you feel – that's a lonely place. And you feel isolated in your relationship because of that too."*

*"We are the people who have been keeping everything together, keeping everything going."*

*"There are a lot of outside stresses and we need to be able to deal with those. Investing in us is a really good thing because we're the ones who are expected to hold it all together, even when we might be having personal crises of our own."*

*"Before I did the course, I'd cut myself off from everything. I had made my world so small with limiting beliefs. Now that's all changed."*

- **Anxiety and the loss of identity and self-confidence**

*"There are identity problems that you can get being a military wife. You can sometimes lose your way. You end up not really knowing who you are."*

*"My husband's been in the services for 16 years. The moving all the time and all that goes with it, it had really knocked my confidence."*

*"We need to follow our men and you end up not really having a life of your own. You are at the mercy of things outside of your control."*

*"You end up in a rut because you feel hopeless, you can't see a way forward that doesn't rock the boat."*

*"I've had anxiety for about 15 years. You're anxious about everything and you just lose your confidence to do anything."*

*"Since we moved to the garrison I went into a bit of a slump. I had to give up my career as primary school teacher when I became a military wife. It's a choice but you do give up things that have been a part of your life, part of you."*

- **Inability to move forward with their own lives**

*"It's difficult to prioritise anything that can help me as a person."*

*"We're not broken, we're strong women, but we have blockages that are stopping us from moving on with our lives"*

*"We've moved constantly and my career just wasn't going how I wanted it too."*

*"You know when you marry into the military that it's going to have an effect on your life, but you don't really get it until you want to pursue a career and it's just not going to happen."*

- **Dealing with stresses and personal trauma relating to having children**

*"I had a baby who died and injuries from childbirth. I was so angry with the midwives and doctors. For the whole of the last posting I'd been depressed."*

*"I've begun to realise that I hadn't properly acknowledged the post-natal depression I had, and the effects of having a husband away."*

*"You are a lone parent and you don't realise that to begin with because you're married. But you have to deal with everything and compensate for their dad not being around."*

A number of those taking part in the programme had experienced significant issues in their relationships with their serving spouse/partner. Whilst these problems are found in the civilian population, the stresses of army life are very likely to exacerbate such relationship difficulties. These include frequent moves, separation during tours of duty, being a 'lone parent' for significant amounts of time and the impact of any trauma/issues experienced by the serving person in the course of their job. In addition, for those service families approaching transition out of the army, further pressures present themselves including the need for both the serving person and their spouse/partner to redefine their identities, find new jobs, schools and places to live.

Participants often identify one issue or challenge that prompted them to come on the programme and then discover that the initial course is helping to tackle a variety of other underlying and sometimes previously unidentified problems that have been having adverse effects on their lives.

It's important to note that many participants play a number of different roles in addition to being an army spouse/partner. These can include full or part-time work, including in a variety of MOD or service related work, being a mother and/or being a veteran. The common factor is that they are all part of a family with a serving spouse/partner.

### **Wide ranging positive impacts for spouses/partners**

Warrior participants reported a range of significant benefits from taking part in the programme. Their resilience and ability to deal with the pressures of being an army spouse/partner have improved both through the experience of taking part in the three day course and being able to use the techniques acquired in their everyday lives.

Warrior provides a safe space for army spouses/partners to acknowledge their feelings and barriers, realise *"that you're not alone – others feel the same things and haven't been able to talk about it"*, and to develop the skills and strategies to tackle the challenges that life brings – service related or not. A key strength of the project has been to reach out to army families, in partnership with army



welfare and service charity staff, to enable this access and engagement to take place. This is particularly important because *“it can be really difficult to admit there’s anything wrong because you know it can impact on your husband and you also feel like you’re letting the side down.”*

The armed forces continue to make significant progress in supporting the mental wellbeing of serving personnel and their families, and in the efforts to change cultural norms so that asking for help is seen as a strength rather than a weakness. The Warrior programme is making a contribution to this change by offering an intervention that is about *“being the best that you can be”* by tackling the issues and barriers that may be holding people back.

By providing a practical, skills based offer that is outside of the forces’ services it is able to reach family members (and serving personnel) *“who may still feel uncomfortable about accessing support that’s delivered by the services – somehow it feels there’s more privacy about that – you can go away quietly and sort things out.”* It also *“hits a really important level for those who don’t want to go the doctor for help or who don’t want to speak to their own regimental team because of the stigma, but really need something to help them to tackle their problems.”*

There is a wide range of frequently reported positive changes for spouses/partners resulting from taking part in the Warrior programme including:

#### **Reducing anger, frustration, depression and anxiety**

- *“I had severe anxiety around my daughter. I don’t know why it happened, but some of it relates to my husband being away.....The course definitely helped with that. I don’t feel so anxious now.”*
- *“When I drove home after the course I thought about what had happened with my baby and just felt empty – there was no anger. I was amazed, it was so different.”*
- *“My husband has noticed a difference – he was amazed that I’d done all that on my own and that I don’t panic about things so much.”*
- *“I’ve been a lot calmer since Warrior. I’m now on the lowest doses of anti-depressant and my blood pressure has come down so that medication has been reduced as well. That’s amazing. The whole thing has been amazing.”*
- *“Before the course I was very anxious about a lot of things and I would get quite cross too. I was always thinking that other people were wrong, that it was their fault. Things are very different now. I’m much less anxious.”*
- *“I don’t do road rage or shout at the kids now. I almost lost them. Now I haven’t. My wife thinks I’m a different human being.”*

#### **Increasing self confidence and motivation, including at work**

- *“I have a horrible inner critic but what I’ve learnt makes me know that I’m capable of anything. I can challenge that critic.”*
- *“I used to put myself at the bottom of the pecking order and now I self care more. That helps to build self confidence and self esteem – my husband has really noticed that and is really pleased – a bit of me has come back!”*

- *"I feel confident that I can deal with what life throws at me. You know it's not going to be plain sailing but I've got the confidence in myself that I am capable, I can achieve things. That's a great feeling."*
- *"I'm much more confident at work and my boss has really noticed."*
- *"Warrior has really helped with the process of transition into a new career."*
- *"I'm not sure I would have coped with the job change as well as I did if I hadn't been on Warrior."*
- *"I'm more effective at work and I can manage my home/life balance much better than I did before."*
- *"The confidence I've got and having less anxiety will really help with finding a new job."*

### **Dealing positively with the challenges of being an army spouse/partner**

- *"I love where we live now but I've been feeling a bit like 'is this all there's going to be?'. So as a result of having that conversation, my husband applied for a posting and we're off overseas next year. It came out of talking about how I'm feeling and that's a really positive outcome. I'll have to give up my job, but another of my goals was to do my CV – and I've done that."*
- *"We've had to move again since the course – from one end of the country to the other. I've coped with that and I've started a new job – it's 7 years since I worked. And I've done all that on my own with my husband away. I was still anxious but I kept it in check. I wouldn't have been able to do that before. My husband has noticed a difference – he was amazed that I'd done all that on my own and that I don't panic about things so much."*
- *"On the course I couldn't look at SMART goals for more than 3 months ahead because I knew my husband was going to be posted. His posting order has come through, but the course is helping me to be more confident and positive. One goal I set was to start driving lessons because I knew I could do that anywhere and I'm definitely going to do it."*
- *"I speak to my husband much more about how I'm feeling. I don't stew on it like I used to, I just come out with it. It's difficult when things are always dependent on his job....and I needed to talk about how that made me feel.....the course gave me the courage to have a conversation about it."*
- *"From a force's wife point of view, I wish more would go on it. I see that loss of identity and putting things on hold – how I used to feel. Warrior teaches you that you don't have to be that way – that there is another way of doing things. They teach really simple but powerful techniques. If you make them into a habit you can build yourself up into the person that you want to be."*

Coming together as a group for the initial Warrior course also provides a sense of connection with a common purpose which helps reduce isolation, even though participants aren't expected to share with the group their thoughts, feelings and experiences. *"A great thing is that there is no pressure to divulge things, it's not like group therapy. You can share if you want to, but just as much or as little as you want. But you know that everyone is here for the same purpose."* The bonds that are formed

on the course can help to address isolation in the longer term. Many participants have formed Whatsapp groups to provide communities of peer support between each other.

Spouses/partners have also benefited from the follow up support provided after the initial 3 day course, including refresher days that are *“really helpful if you don’t get something the first time around”* and *“a chance to practise things a bit and reconnect with exercises that you need to use in everyday life but might have got out of the habit.”* The monthly phone ‘check ins’ to see how Warriors are progressing provide an opportunity for them to ask for any additional help that they might need and enable signposting to other services where appropriate. Feedback indicates that the range of follow up is *“good to have – you know that they care, that they don’t just forget you after the course and you can go back to them if you need to.”*

In order to provide maximum access to courses, TWP has a policy of offering places on a first come, first served basis across all their programmes. This means that groups often include participants from a range of backgrounds including the spouses/partners of serving personnel (all services) veterans/veterans’ family members and serving personnel (all services). This approach has helped to reinforce the aspects of the course that encourage participants to open up their ways of thinking and interpreting events and people - *“expanding my world”, “helping me to see other perspectives more clearly – and that helps your understanding”,* and *“ becoming more open minded.”*

### **Visible positive change**

Welfare professionals who work with/had referred serving family members to Warrior also observed significant changes from participating on the course:

*“People who’ve been on it are so positive and others in the community see that and then they’re desperate to have a go.”*

*“About four of the women I work with went on the course and they’ve all gained so much confidence from it. They’re quite amazed at what they’ve achieved. One person thought she’d never be able to get a job because of the demands of the family and she’s now in part-time work. That’s had a hugely beneficial effect for her and the rest of the family.”*

*“One person told me it had done more for them than years of counselling.”*

*“Warrior is unique because it’s for the individual. We have various services for children and the serving personnel have a lot of opportunities because of their careers, but partners are really forgotten about and this is so good because it is just for them – even though the rest of the family will benefit.”*

*“I’ve had two cases of active closure after people have been on the Warrior programme, and that’s a success. They’ve not needed to come back to me because they’ve been able to find ways of sorting out their difficulties using what they’ve learnt. It’s partly due to the post course support as well, so it’s really good that they can have that.”*

*“It does what it says it’s going to. It helps people to get back in their roles, back in their jobs and fulfilling their mission.”*

*“There is a real lack of support for them (spouses and partners) in comparison to the things that they carry around from being with a serving person. The Warrior programme supports them to be the best they can be.”*

## Helping children in serving families

There is evidence that the anticipated positive impacts for the children of Warrior participants have been realised, for example:

- a very young child who had already been excluded from primary school and was at risk of a further period of exclusion has now improved his behaviour and is progressing at school – *“He’s not perfect by any means, but it’s a lot better than it was. I react differently and that really helps.”*
- a mother who had been struggling with her relationship with her son - *“since the course I’ve been a lot more relaxed with my autistic son and I don’t take things personally so much which takes some of the tension out of the relationship.”*

A number of parents who took part in Warrior have begun to apply what they learnt on the course to how they are parenting. It is not uncommon for spouses/partners to ‘overcompensate’ for the stresses and disruptions of army life such as moving house/schools and a father being away from home for extended periods. This can result in the parent child relationship becoming unbalanced and negative. The techniques taught on the Warrior programme are enabling parents to *“apply key things such as mutual respect and boundaries, and that’s really helping to improve behaviour and relationships”*, as observed by a key army welfare professional.

For those parents who have simply found the stresses of *“operating like a single parent would be for a lot of the time”*, the Warrior programme is helping them to *“deal with things so much more calmly which has a good effect on the children too.”* Even though women (and men) marrying into the services are aware of aspects of the life they are joining, *“the realities can really come as a shock to the system.”* A number of contributors to the evaluation felt that it would be really helpful to be able to *“engage new service families early on to prevent the problems from building up.”* In addition, a further particularly vulnerable group are *“the families of commonwealth soldiers who have no support networks, no family in this country – it’s a very lonely place for many and they could really do with this programme.”*

Some spouses/partners are experiencing particularly difficult relationship issues and breakdowns that have a significant impact on children. In these instances, the Warrior participant’s ability to deal with the conflicts and stresses that often result from these situations can be very helpful to children – *“My daughter has noticed a difference in me. Even though things are still very difficult I think it means she worries about me less than she did and I’m really glad about that.”*

The self awareness and tools to manage emotions and move forward in life that people develop through the Warrior programme can sometimes lead them to make a decision to separate from their partner/spouse. These choices are always entirely made by the individual and it would seem that the learning they take from the Warrior programme can help them to manage these very difficult situations in a more positive way than might otherwise be the case.

## Enhancing the effectiveness of serving personnel

The primary focus for the FiS A project was the spouses/partners of serving army personnel. However, it is clear that the benefits have extended to many of their serving spouses/partners. This is not an entirely unexpected positive impact, however, it is important to note in highlighting the value of the programme in supporting enhanced performance in the army. In the words of an army

welfare staff member - *“Warrior is a really good offer and a really good tool to have. Not many partners will open up about problems and a lot of soldiers won’t go to Army Welfare. My job is to make sure that soldiers are effective by finding out what the problem is when they’re not. But if the problem is with the family, I can’t tell them what to do. But now I can signpost them to Warrior and I think that it could help a lot of people and where the problem is with the partner, it’s likely to help the soldier too.”*

The observations of welfare personnel detailed earlier highlight the positive change that they see in spouses/partners and the words of one echo many in saying that, *“there is a visible increase in positive attitude amongst them (Warrior participants). It certainly makes a difference and that’s so important because it transfers to home life, including the children and the serving person.”*

This positive impact on serving personnel is confirmed by the Warrior participants, many of whom report improvements in the relationship with their serving spouses/partners and how this *“makes you feel like more of a team, that you’re dealing with challenges together rather than being at odds with each other and not really communicating.”* A further example illustrates how a reduction in the long standing anxiety experienced by a spouse may have a positive effect on reducing the anxiety felt by the serving person – *“Last year my husband was sent home with anxiety and I’ve suffered with it for years. I was sceptical about going on the course, but then I really enjoyed it and got a lot out of it. I notice changes in the way that I think about things and what I’m willing to tackle, and I think that will help both of us.”*

TWP is currently delivering a programme specifically for serving personnel which is already demonstrating significant benefits for this group. It will be very interesting to see if there is a similar wider benefit for spouses/partners and children of those who have families.

## **A highly positive partnership with the army**

The project represents a very effective partnership where serving families and the army as a whole benefit from the joint working that has been developed:

*“I have really good rapport with the people who run Warrior. We can talk through prospective referrals and jointly decide the best timing and approach to take to help people engage and get the most out of the programme. We (army welfare) can build them up so that they are able to cope with the residential and make the best use of it.”*

*“The strength of Warrior is that it can work alongside the services. That means that it can provide that help to tackle problems that partners don’t want to talk about, because it’s not part of the services but understands people who are and their issues.”*

The FiS A project has not only enabled military personnel to carry out their roles more effectively because their spouses/partners have developed resilience and stability, but it has also helped those in army welfare roles to increase their effectiveness.

*“Before, I would let work overrule me. Now I practise what I preach. I manage myself better by doing the exercises every week so that I can manage my emotions. It’s really important so that I*

*can do my job to the best of my ability. I use the emotional intelligence I learnt on the programme.”*

*“Just recently both my parents fell seriously ill. Previously it would have been very difficult to cope and I probably would have needed time off work. But because of what I’ve learnt on the course, I was able to cope with what happened and that meant I continue to support the 20 service users who I’m responsible for.”*

*“Since returning from the programme, my goal setting is working much better. It has made me more driven as an individual, more positive as I reflect, I can deal with negative emotions much easier now that I have been provided with the tools to do so. I am sure that there are many others like me who now feel so fortunate to have been on Warrior. In my opinion, Warrior is a programme that delivers much more than anyone could expect. I cannot recommend the programme highly enough to others.”*

Participants and professionals alike stressed the quality and efficiency of the programme – a key requirement for people who lead busy and complex lives. TWP staff were praised for their *“warmth, understanding and professionalism right the way through the process from initial contact, on the course and afterwards – they can’t do enough for you.”* In addition, *“the fact that they really get life in the services is really important – you don’t have to explain things, they know what you’re talking about”*, provides a further essential feature of the success of the programme. Feedback also highlighted the very effective and personable trainers and coaches, *“The trainer was fantastic – such a calming nature and she presented the course so well. And the coaches were so flexible and helpful.”*

## **Moving forward**

The Warrior programme has clearly made a significant and positive difference to the lives of the spouses/partners of army serving personnel, as well as the children and serving personnel of these families. The feedback of participants and professionals highlights the important and unique offer that TWP provides to families that are experiencing stress and challenges, and the marked changes that are resulting from their engagement with the programme. The availability of this free at the point of delivery, non-MOD programme has filled a critical gap in support for serving families.

The programme is also enabling army and service charities’ welfare staff to deliver their roles more effectively and to make appropriate referrals to Warrior that are highly beneficial for families.

TWP, army and associated service charities’ staff have established excellent relationships of mutual understanding and respect, helping to take forward the service’s mission to continue to develop its response to ensuring the mental and emotional wellbeing of its personnel and their families.

The clearly identified benefits of Warrior and the waiting list of serving families now wishing to take advantage of this programme, combined with the likely cost savings to the army in terms of improved effectiveness and reduction in family crises, indicates that it is a programme that should be seriously considered for further funding, and as a matter of urgency to avoid the loss of momentum and the skilled and dedicated staff working to deliver it.



## Case study examples

The following examples provide more detailed illustrations of the range of issues facing the families of serving army personnel and how the Warrior programme is helping them to tackle these challenges. Where participants also work in army welfare roles, this is indicated.

All names have been changed to protect confidentiality, with the exception of the Warrior co-ordinators (Zoe and Beccy).

### Joanne – wife of serving army personnel

*I was having a difficult time. My son (aged 5) has been having problems at school – he'd been temporarily excluded before and then was taken back and was on the verge of being excluded again. I was struggling with my job too – having real issues. All in all I was in a bad place. Once you have kids, your priorities change and partners don't like it. My husband was needing to come out of work to go and deal with my son at school. He'd never dealt with it before and it affected him more than it did me and he didn't deal with it well.*

*I was open to anything that might help at that point. I didn't know what to expect but I needed to do something. I'm the continuity of the family, I hold it together. I needed to sort myself out.*

*Warrior has definitely helped me. It's helped me to clear my head and see things differently. I got a new job offered, due to start the same time as the Warrior course. I managed to put back my start date so I could go on the course. I'm so glad I did – I'm not sure I would have coped with the job change as well as I did if I hadn't been on Warrior.*

*My coping mechanisms are so much better because of the course. Before, I would fly off the handle. It doesn't mean you don't get down times, but you can deal with them so much better. I deal with my husband differently now as well - It felt a bit uncomfortable ignoring what he was saying to me, but it meant that I didn't rise to it and it didn't end up in a huge barney. That's a massive turnaround and it's better for everyone in the family. My husband has noticed the difference – he found it odd when I didn't rise to the argument. He gets a bit funny about it – he worries about what I've told people, but the way I react now prevents the blow ups.*

*I've been a lot calmer since Warrior. I'm now on the lowest dose of anti-depressant and my blood pressure has come down so that medication has been reduced as well. That's amazing. The whole thing has been amazing. My new job is going really well and I'm appreciated there. I leave any stress at work and I don't bring it away with me. I have changed how I react to things and I realise that I don't have to take things on, I can let them go. It's a great feeling. In the last couple of months I've only had two days when I've felt at rock bottom. Before it was every other day. And now I have ways of dealing with it when it happens.*

*My new job means that my husband has to take more of the share of school pick ups, but now that I've done the Warrior we talk about any issues to do with my son and we sort it out. He's doing much better at school now – it's not all solved but it's moving in the right direction.*

*Next year my husband is likely to be away and I think that what I've done on Warrior will really help in dealing with all the changes and the stresses that will happen with that. I really want to get to a refresher. I met a great group of girls and we support each other on a Whatsapp group which is great. I'd recommend Warrior to anyone.*

### **Kimberley – wife of serving army personnel and working in army welfare**

*I heard about the Warrior programme in the office – I’m a youth and community worker for army welfare. I thought it was just for families of serving personnel, not for army wives that also work in the military. Then I got quite unwell and I thought I’d look into it, so I asked the Warrior co-ordinator who works out of our office.*

*I had my little boy 5 years ago and I’ve begun to realise that I hadn’t properly acknowledged the post-natal depression I had, and the effects of having a husband away and the identity problems that you can get being a military wife. I was signed off work with stress and exhaustion. I went back after a few months but was signed off again and diagnosed with anxiety disorder.*

*I was really unwell. I accessed counselling and I went on the Warrior programme. I didn’t have any expectations but as soon as I started the course, I loved the mindset. The approaches to goal setting and how the other techniques worked. I’d never done timeline therapy or visualisation – they were totally new and really helpful. It all really supported the things I was doing around mindfulness too.*

*It’s made a big difference to my life. I used to have a thing about emotional eating and dieting. Now, I no longer diet and I work on how I feel, not how I look. I’ve started counsellor training and that will qualify me to practise. I’m more effective at work and I can manage my home/life balance much better than I did before. It’s improved my relationships and family life. I used to put myself at the bottom of the pecking order and now I self care more – I do pilates, cooking, writing. That helps to build self confidence and self esteem – my husband has really noticed that and is really pleased – a bit of me has come back! Before I did the course, I’d cut myself off from everything. I had made my world so small with limiting beliefs. Now that’s all changed.*

*It’s having a lasting benefit for me. Before, I would get myself caught up in a cycle and I couldn’t find my way out. Now, I’m able to recognise the triggers and I can reset my mind rather than letting things get on top of me. It’s made me realise that I’m capable of so much more. I have a horrible inner critic but what I’ve learnt makes me know that I’m capable of anything. I can challenge that critic.*

*It’s great to get the monthly follow up calls. It reminds me to look at my book and check my goals. I’m hoping to get to a refresher course soon. I wish the course had lasted longer – it was so good.*

*From a force’s wife point of view, I wish more would go on it. I see that loss of identity and putting things on hold – how I used to feel. Warrior teaches you that you don’t have to be that way – that there is another way of doing things. They teach really simple but powerful techniques. If you make them into a habit you can build yourself up into the person that you want to be.*

*A big barrier for women is childcare. If childcare could be provided then it would really help. It would be great if more foreign and commonwealth families who have no support networks here could go on the programme. Bringing more diversity to the programme would also be great.*

### **Selina – wife of serving army personnel and working in a non services role**

*I saw Warrior on the Facebook group and contacted Zoe about it. I think it’s really good. I surprised myself on it and afterwards. I felt like I was stuck in a rut with my job and I needed some confidence so that I could do something about it.*

*I didn’t feel that I had issues like some of the others on the course. I’ve had experiences in my life but I didn’t feel that they had affected me. But then when we did the timeline and we had to go back in*

*time about something that we felt bad about, like something we needed to apologise for, I realised that there was something and it helped me to come to terms with what had happened. I really surprised myself.*

*It has had a good effect on me. I speak to my husband much more about how I'm feeling. I don't stew on it like I used to, I just come out with it. It's difficult when things are always dependent on his job – it's a difficult expectation to follow him, and I needed to talk about how that made me feel. What happened on the course gave me the courage to have a conversation about it. When I was younger I always travelled, I loved going on holiday on my own. I love where we live now but I've been feeling a bit like 'is this all there's going to be?'. So as a result of having that conversation, my husband applied for a posting and we're off overseas next year. It came out of talking about how I'm feeling and that's a really positive outcome.*

*I'll have to give up my job, but another of my goals was to do my CV – and I've done that. And I have a goal around getting fitter, and I'm talking to you whilst I'm doing my walking!*

*For me, it's the little changes that I didn't realise that have made a difference. Some of the positive changes happening in my life are definitely down to doing the course. If there's something in your life that you want to feel better about, you should go on this course. Just take it on face value and do it!*

#### **Hannah – wife of serving army personnel and working in a non services role**

*A friend of mine had done it (Warrior) and said it was really good. My husband is in the military and I've just given up a 20 year career. We've moved constantly and my career just wasn't going how I wanted it too. I'd put it off and put it off and I was a bit cross too about changes in management at work. There have been lots of changes and I was feeling a bit lost. I went on the course hoping to get something for stress management. I tend to cling onto things and I wanted to find a way of seeing what I could do about that.*

*It was really interesting and good. It's made me a lot more positive, more relaxed about things and not dwelling on things so much. My oldest son is on the autistic spectrum and so that can be quite challenging. Since the course I've been a lot more relaxed with him and I don't take things personally so much which takes some of the tension out of the relationship.*

*With the new career, I'd started a degree in English when I gave up work, with the plan to do proof reading and copywriting. I also started helping out at my son's school and that's gone so well that they've offered me a job – so I start on Monday as a support worker. Warrior has really helped with the process of transition into a new career.*

*I've recommended Warrior to my friends – I think everyone can get something out of it. It was a really positive and interesting experience and I learnt a lot. If you've got children, it's a great mini-break too, and that's important. It gives you a bit of space for yourself that you don't get otherwise. I'd like to get to a refresher but I had childcare issues with the first one and the next one coincides with me starting my new job.*

*I saw it on Facebook and I think social media is the way to go. We live outside the wire so people like me are even less likely to come across it. I think it would be good to promote it around wellness and wellbeing – it really can help with that and lots of people are interested in that.*

## **Lois – wife of serving army personnel, and not in paid work on starting the programme**

*I saw a post on Facebook about the Warrior programme and there were certain words that I thought 'that just sounds like me' – like being overwhelmed by thoughts and emotions that control you and wanting to do better at work, and develop resilience.*

*My husband's been in the services for 16 years. The moving all the time and all that goes with it, it had really knocked my confidence. You don't realise it until you step back. You have to just get on with things and you think it doesn't affect you, and then years down the line you realise what an effect it has. I had also had a really difficult time. I had a baby who died and injuries from childbirth. I was so angry with the midwives and doctors. For the whole of the last posting I'd been depressed. Home was a safe place and I just kept myself focused on that. I can see that now, but I didn't at the time. I had counselling but it didn't really help.*

*I really wanted to go on the course but it was difficult because my husband was away and I needed someone to look after my daughter and I'd be quite a long way from home. In the end, my mother-in-law took a week's unpaid leave so that I could go.*

*It was a really good course. It was well organised and I liked that it was so punctual. It was good but really packed. At the end of each day I was quite frazzled. It was really helpful that it was residential. If I'd have gone home I would have been swamped by bedtime and I needed that time to think about what I'd done in the day and write a list of the things I wanted to ask about the next day. It gave me some space.*

*I found the idea of the unconscious and conscious mind really helpful and then when I was doing one of the exercises I got quite upset and a lady took me aside and I talked to her about my baby. It was all really powerful. When I drove home after the course I thought about what had happened with my baby and just felt empty – there was no anger. I was amazed, it was so different. I emailed them (Warrior) to tell them and they wrote me a really nice email back.*

*Before the course I was very anxious about a lot of things and I would get quite cross too. I was always thinking that other people were wrong, that it was their fault. Things are very different now. I'm much less anxious. We've had to move again since the course – from one end of the country to the other. I've coped with that and I've started a new job – it's 7 years since I worked. And I've done all that on my own with my husband away. I was still anxious but I kept it in check. I wouldn't have been able to do that before. My husband has noticed a difference – he was amazed that I'd done all that on my own and that I don't panic about things so much. And I just don't feel angry at the hospital anymore which is really huge.*

*I found the timeline quite difficult. I find letting go quite hard. I'm about to go to a refresher and it would be great to have the chance to try that again. There's still a lot that I need to work on but I'm so much better than before. I use the ha breathing – it's really helpful if you're feeling anxious. I want to set some better goals too – I ran out of time on the course so mine weren't that good.*

*I think it's really good that the Warrior programme has been extended to families. There isn't a lot out there for serving families and a lot of wives and partners are affected by the life. It's really needed.*

### **Barbara – wife of serving army personnel and working in a service related role**

*I've had anxiety for about 15 years and it's just stopped me from doing a lot of things. My husband also suffers with it and was sent home from tour last year because of it. I was sceptical about going on the programme at first – I couldn't really see what it could do to help. But then you get there and realise that everyone is there for the same reasons, but different somehow too – everyone is struggling with something and it'll be to do with their particular circumstances, but we all had problems dealing with some things and being able to move forward.*

*I really enjoyed being on the course and I got a lot out of it. It was really well organised and even though some things are difficult to get, there's help. The difference I've noticed is in the small things, but things that mean a lot. I made a decision to go on a park run and then it got cancelled at the last minute. I still went and did the 5K – I wouldn't have done that before. I had to go to the dentist for a check up and he said I needed a small filling that he could do right then. Before, my anxiety wouldn't have let me do that, but I got it done there and then. They are small things but they build your confidence when you've been anxious about everything for so long.*

*The techniques are really helping me to control my anxiety. The breathing exercise really helps me to calm down. My insomnia has improved and I'm more confident at work. My boss has noticed that and commented on it, and even my boss's boss has noticed because they've given me a new project and that wouldn't have happened before.*

*On the course I couldn't look at SMART goals for more than 3 months ahead because I knew my husband was going to be posted. His posting order has come through, but the course is helping me to be more confident and positive. One goal I set was to start driving lessons because I knew I could do that anywhere and I'm definitely going to do it. The confidence I've got and having less anxiety will really help with finding a new job.*

*I really enjoyed meeting other people on the course and it's given me a good support network. We've set up a Whatsapp group and that's great to keep in touch with them. I'd really like to get to a refresher course if I can.*

### **Carlie – partner of serving army personnel and working in army welfare**

*I heard about Warrior when I went to an Army Welfare Service presentation. There isn't much that's focused on families so it sounded interesting.*

*The trainer was brilliant, she was really good at battling all the challenges back. One lady in the group really needed to be convinced that it was worth doing and the trainer always had an answer in a really calm way. She reassured everyone and explained that there was a lot of science behind it. The whole principle of the programme is good – to try and make your life better, fix things that might not work as well as they should.*

*Most of the people on the course had a lot more underlying issues than me. I don't think I've really experienced anything really difficult but I still got something out of it. I could see that others got a lot more because they had much more to deal with. There was one soldier's wife who I could see was very empowered by the experience and another who I know is really vulnerable – it had a really good impact for her.*

*The whole experience has enabled me to identify people who would really benefit. Vulnerable adults who are suffering with anxiety and depression, and those with a history of trauma and sexual abuse.*



*Warrior is a really good offer and a really good tool to have. Not many partners will open up about problems and a lot of soldiers won't go to Army Welfare. My job is to make sure that soldiers are effective by finding out what the problem is when they're not. But if the problem is with the family, I can't tell them what to do. But now I can signpost them to Warrior and I think that it could help a lot of people and where the problem is with the partner, it could help the soldier too.*

*The strength of Warrior is that it can work alongside the services. That means that it can provide that help to tackle problems that partners don't want to talk about, because it's not part of the services but understands people who are and their issues. The fact that no-one is going to ask you to bear your soul at the Warrior course is really important – because that's exactly what most partners (of serving personnel) don't want to do. You're being encouraged to look into where your problems are coming from, but not made to talk about it.*

*The follow up is very good. The monthly phone calls are not intrusive and are rather a nice thing. Some people need to know that there's somebody in the background in case they need help.*

### **Katherine – wife of serving army personnel**

*It was a last minute decision to go on the course. Someone I knew had spoken to Zoe and it was pure coincidence that she told me about it. I'm into that kind of thing – improving your wellbeing. I was feeling anxious. I liked the idea of getting some tools to help with my anxiety, and it did prove useful.*

*The lead coach was really good and wasn't condescending. It was particularly good to do the work on values – what's really important in life. I'd had a rough time in my work environment and I had to leave my job because it was too stressful. When I arrived at the course I was having a pretty rough time. I had severe anxiety around my daughter. I don't know why it happened, but some of it relates to my husband being away. When he comes back he takes her to her activities and things, and I get worried. I know that I don't need to, but because I'm not there, I think something's going to happen.*

*The course definitely helped with that. I don't feel so anxious now. I do other things with a therapist as well, and between all that, it's getting better. I feel that the course helped me to become more understanding and open minded.*

*All the staff were really good. Having people outside the room that could help if you needed it was great. You can tell that everyone is really concerned about your welfare. I'd like to go on a refresher course because I think there are still things in the background that I'd like to sort out.*

*I would recommend the course to anyone. It encourages you to treat others differently, more positively. All the military should go on it. I've been deployed myself and been at home when my husband is deployed. There's a lot of pressure on dependents and if everyone went on it, the serving personnel would understand that too. My husband wouldn't volunteer to go on it, but it should be part of the training when they come back from a tour – it would make a huge difference.*

### **Dennis – Unit Welfare Office, army**

*I got involved because I wanted to make a difference in my role as a Unit Welfare Officer and selfishly, for me. I wanted to have a toolkit to be able to work better.*

*I joined the army at 16 and was on my first op at 18. I did tours all over – the Gulf, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan - I lost 8 soldiers there, 6 in one day. I still have that date tattooed on my arm. All that stuff has an impact on you, it builds. In 2013, I went to be a commissioned officer*



*and I had a breakdown, and another one in 2015. I went to a mental health practitioner, but I ended up getting re-traumatised through treatment. I was running at 9,000 rpm. I lost my focus, drive and sense of humour.*

*Warrior has allowed me to really understand myself as a human being. It's cleared the fog. The experience on the course was completely unexpected. It's reset my mind back to 20 plus years ago when I was happier. Me and my wife were never happier than when I was a Lance Corporal and life seemed simpler. Now we're back there. The course has taken out almost all of the stress. I used to go to a very dark place. Now it's filled with chinks of light. It's life changing. The thing is that you don't have to say anything about what's happened to you if you don't want to. It's so powerful. I found myself crying. The limiting decision that I realised was colouring everything was that I thought I had a dirty soul, that I wasn't good enough. It went back to when I was 3 and I had an eye patch for my eyesight. The impact of that was that I've been utterly paranoid about what people thought of me, without realising it really.*

*Now I no longer have to feel that way. I had a lightbulb moment, like someone had whipped the collar off me. I don't do road rage or shout at the kids now. I almost lost them. Now I haven't. My wife thinks I'm a different human being. I went home on day one full of it, running around like a spaniel. We had crossed wires and almost cross words – you have to remember that your family aren't having the same experience and changes.*

*I want to go to the refresher courses and I'll take time off work to do that because it's important. All the staff are fabulous and Zoe and Becca are a winning team, absolutely right for the job and you warm to them straight away.*

*Offering the course to serving personnel is so important. If I can help one young man or woman to go on Warrior and it shapes one young life, then I've succeeded in what I want to do. We do a lot of equipment care (EC) in the army. Warrior is EC for blokes – that's what I call it! We need to train and equip mentally as well as physically. Why wouldn't you invest in yourself? Especially when other people and the service takes so much from you. The recruits that are coming through the army now are less resilient than previous generations – they need it more.*