

# Research into the needs of the Royal Navy Submariner community and the impact of separation on family life

Final report

Prepared for: Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust

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DECEMBER 2024

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## Contents

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<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. Research methodology</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. Key findings</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3.1 Impact of Submariner Service on families</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1.2 Mental health and emotional strain	10
3.1.3 Deployment separation	11
3.1.4 Pre-deployment stress	12
3.1.5 Life during deployment	12
3.1.6 Reuniting after deployment	13
3.1.7 Career impact	13
3.1.8. Social isolation	14
3.1.9 Impact on parents (and the wider family) of deployed Submariner	14
3.1.10 Impacts on children	15
<b>3.2 Statutory support</b>	<b>17</b>
3.2.1 Concerns with Royal Navy-affiliated services	17
3.2.2. Availability and accessibility of activities	18
3.2.3 Communication and information gaps	18
3.2.4 Inclusive community spaces	19
3.2.5 Childcare support	19
<b>3.3 The role of the not-for-profit sector in supporting families</b>	<b>21</b>
3.3.1 Accessing services and support	21
3.3.2 Challenges and gaps in support provision	23
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>26</b>

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## Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the participating family members and representatives of not-for-profit organisations for their time and valuable contributions to this study. This report would not have been possible without your commitment, trust, and openness—thank you for sharing your experiences and perspectives.

We would also like to thank Dr Nicola Lester for her valuable advice on the topic guide and her guidance on engaging with the Submariner communities.

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# Executive summary

## Background

The Royal Navy Submarine Service plays a crucial role in the UK's defence strategy, with submariners operating under challenging conditions during extended deployments. Families face unique pressures, including limited communication, frequent relocations, and emotional and logistical challenges, which strain relationships and impact children's well-being. While statutory and not-for-profit services offer some support, significant gaps remain in addressing their needs. To address these issues, the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust has commissioned an in-depth study by the National Centre for Social Research to better understand the challenges faced by Submariner families and inform future support initiatives.

## Methodology

This study explored the experiences and needs of Royal Navy Submariner families, focusing on individuals with significant emotional ties to Submariners, including spouses, partners, and dependents. Researchers conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 21 family members and 4 not-for-profit representatives to understand the emotional, social, and practical challenges they encounter during deployments, such as limited communication, family dynamics, and social isolation. The recruitment process used multi-channel outreach and a snowball sampling approach to ensure diverse participation while maintaining confidentiality. Using a trauma-informed approach, the interviews explored the support systems families rely on, gaps in current services, and opportunities for improvement. Data analysis was conducted thematically, emphasizing the diverse perspectives of participants and using verbatim quotations to illustrate key findings.

As outlined by key findings below, this report highlights the unique challenges of Submariner families and provides valuable insights to inform future support strategies tailored to their needs.

## Key findings

- **Mental health and emotional strain:** The unpredictable nature of deployments creates significant emotional strain. Families report feeling unprepared for deployments, which leads to frustration, anxiety, and mental health challenges. The separation during deployments exacerbates these issues, contributing to stress and emotional distress.
- **Deployment separation:** Separation due to deployment is a central challenge for families, with limited communication often leading to heightened anxiety. Families struggle with feelings of isolation and worry and particularly those with childcare responsibilities, often feel like single parents.
- **Pre-deployment stress:** The period leading up to deployment is marked by tension and stress. Families experience anxiety due to long working hours, limited time together, and repeated delays in departure. This period of uncertainty adds significant strain to family dynamics.
- **Coping strategies:** Families adopt various coping strategies, such as staying busy, maintaining routines, and focusing on work. These strategies help families manage the pressures of deployment but can also lead to feelings of emotional exhaustion over time.
- **Reuniting after deployment:** The return from deployment is often challenging, as families adjust to the Submariner's return. The process of reintegration can cause tension as family routines are disrupted, and relationships are tested after long absences.

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- **Career impact on spouses:** The unpredictable nature of military life poses career challenges for spouses, who often have to pause or adjust their careers due to childcare duties and frequent relocations. Spouses opt for flexible or remote work, but opportunities for career progression are limited.
  - **Social isolation:** Frequent relocations and the demands of childcare contribute to social isolation, with families finding it difficult to form lasting connections outside of the military community. This isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness and a lack of support.
  - **Impact on extended family:** Extended family members, such as parents of Submariners, often feel excluded from the support networks available to immediate family members. This lack of inclusion in support services and resources creates additional strain.
  - **Support services and accessibility:** Families report low awareness of available support services, particularly those provided by not-for-profit organizations. Families discover these services through word-of-mouth or in times of crisis, highlighting gaps in communication and outreach.
  - **Concerns with Royal Navy-affiliated services:** There is hesitancy in accessing statutory services affiliated with the Royal Navy, particularly due to concerns over confidentiality and the potential impact on the Submariner's career.
  - **Geographical barriers:** Families living in remote areas or far from military bases face additional challenges in accessing support and services, with fewer events and activities available in these locations.
  - **Mental health stigma:** A significant stigma surrounding mental health issues deters some families from seeking support, exacerbating emotional and psychological challenges.
  - **Challenges for Not-for-Profit organizations:** Not-for-profit organizations face challenges, including limited funding, a lack of tailored services for military families, and difficulties in integrating services for military families with those designed for civilians.
  - **Need for improved collaboration:** There is a strong call for greater collaboration between military and non-military organizations, as well as more inclusive integration into local communities, to ensure that Submariner families receive comprehensive and accessible support.

To address these key findings, the report offers a list of recommendations focused on mental health support, improving communication during deployments, fostering community-building initiatives, supporting post-deployment reintegration, and offering career development opportunities for spouses. Additionally, the report calls for sustainable funding and the integration of feedback mechanisms to ensure that support programs are tailored to the evolving needs of Submariner families.

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## Report structure

The report is organised into five main chapters, each addressing a key component of the research into the needs of Submariner families.

**The introduction** provides a brief background of the Royal Navy Submarine Service, outlining some of the unique challenges faced by Submariner families and introduces the study's objectives.

**Methodology** provides information on the methodological approach, including recruitment methods, participant demographics, data collection and limitations of the study.

**Key findings** are then split into three key sections.

- The first section examines how Submariner Service affects the mental health, family dynamics, social relationships, and career opportunities of Submariner family members.
- The second section provides families' experience with statutory support services, identifying strengths and gaps in service delivery.
- The third section explores the role and the contributions of not-for-profit organisations in providing mental health support, community activities, and peer networks to Submariner families.

The report then presents recommendations to improve support for Submariner families. Key areas include mental health, communication, community building, post-deployment reintegration, and career development for spouses. The recommendations also emphasise the importance of sustainable funding, co-production, and stronger collaboration between statutory and non-statutory sectors.

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# 1. Introduction

The Royal Navy Submarine Service plays a vital role in the UK's defence strategy as a division of the wider Royal Navy. Submariners are primarily stationed primarily at HMNB Clyde in Scotland, home to the UK's nuclear deterrent fleet, and HMNB Devonport in Plymouth, supporting conventional submarine operations.<sup>1</sup> Submarine crews undertake diverse missions including continuous at-sea deterrence, intelligence gathering, surveillance, and maritime security. Deployments often last 10-12 weeks to up to eight months under strict confidentiality.<sup>2</sup> Different classes of submarines fulfil distinct roles. Vanguard-class submarines (V-Boats) carry nuclear warheads as part of the UK's nuclear deterrence strategy, while Astute-class submarines (A-Boats) conduct global operations to protect UK interests.<sup>3</sup>

Communication between families and serving personnel is limited during deployment, with the frequency and quality of contact varying by submarine type. Submariners on A-boats can contact their families by email or phone, though this depends on the mission and location. In contrast, those on V-Boats have no direct contact with their families, apart from receiving a weekly 'familygram'—a 120-word message from a designated family member to the serving person. In addition to deployment duties, serving personnel are often required to relocate to other areas for training as part of pre-deployment preparations or skill development programs.

There is limited evidence on the experiences of Submariner families. Of that which is available, evidence suggests extended separations and frequent relocations strain family dynamics, often leaving one parent to manage household duties alone. Children may experience emotional and behavioural difficulties that impact academic performance, while spouses frequently encounter career setbacks, struggle to maintain support networks and endure social isolation.<sup>4</sup> Limited communication exacerbates these challenges, with families reporting difficulties maintaining meaningful connections, especially for children, who often feel disconnected from their deployed parent.<sup>5</sup> These pressures contribute to anxiety, stress, and a sense of loss among partners.

There is an existing network of statutory and not-for-profit services supporting Submariner families. Statutory services, often affiliated with the Royal Navy, offer programs such as financial assistance, healthcare, housing, and education to ensure stability for military families. Complementing these, not-for-profit organisations provide additional support, including peer networks and community-building activities, fostering resilience and connection. However, significant gaps remain in support provision, particularly in addressing the specific needs and circumstances submariner families can face.

To better understand and address the needs of these families, along with gaps in support provision, the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust commissioned the National Centre for Social Research to conduct an in-depth qualitative study of the Royal Navy Submariner community. The findings aim to provide detailed insights into the challenges faced by Submariner families and the support they receive.

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Navy Submarine Service: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/organisation/submarine-service>

<sup>2</sup> Harper, E. I. (2021) "Submariner's partner's accounts of deployment: a case study analysis of experience", *Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science*, 6(1), 1-40.

<sup>3</sup> Types of UK Royal Navy submarine: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-royal-navy-submarines/types-of-uk-royal-navy-submarine>.

<sup>4</sup> Gribble, R. and Fear, N.T. Living separately during the week: Influences on family functioning, health, and well-being of UK naval families. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*. Volume 8, Number 2.

<sup>5</sup> Harper, E. I. (2021). Submariner's partner's accounts of deployment: a case study analysis of experience. *Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science*, 6 (1), 1-40.

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## 2. Research methodology

This study primarily sought to engage with Submariner family members. In the context of this research, we adopted the definition of a family provided by the Trust. For the Trust, family is considered anyone who plays a significant role in a person's life. This includes but is not limited to spouses, civil partners, cohabiting partners in committed relationships, children under 18, and relatives such as parents, siblings, and grandparents who live with, are financially dependent on, or are cared for by the veteran/serving person or partner. The Trust also recognises that family can take forms based on deep-seated emotional ties outside of traditional legal and familial definitions.

Understanding the perspectives of these individuals was key to assessing the full range of experiences faced by Submariner families, from managing the stresses of deployment to navigating the challenges of frequent relocations and limited communication.

A multi-strand recruitment approach was undertaken. This included working closely with AFCFT to distribute bespoke project information materials to relevant Government departments, statutory service providers and not-for-profit organisations. NatCen also worked closely with specialist not-for-profit organisations to disseminate project information to Submariner community members via social media, mailing lists, newsletters, and blogs. Project information was also disseminated via NatCen's social media platforms, including LinkedIn, Facebook, and X.

Project information materials directed statutory service providers and not-for-profit organisations to opt in to take part by directly contacting NatCen. Submariner family members were directed to a NatCen study webpage where they were able to express interest in participating via a short online questionnaire. This questionnaire collected demographic information and additional details about their relationships with Submariner Service members. Eligible participants were then contacted with an invitation email by a member of the NatCen research team.

A snowball sampling approach was also undertaken, with participating Submariner family members invited to share project information with others who might be interested and eligible to take part in the research, including any children in their care aged 13 and over.

The findings in this report are based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 25 participants:

- 21 family members, of which 20 were spouses/partners and one was a parent of a Submariner, with a mix of experiences in terms of length of deployment, type of boats (A-Boats and V-Boats), proximity to the base.
- 4 representatives of not-for-profit organisations.

Due to the specific and small size of the research population, we did not apply any demographic sub-sampling criteria or quotas for this study. The demographic range of the achieved sample is also not reported, to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

No statutory service providers or government departments took part in this research. This study therefore primarily reflects the experiences and perspectives of family members and therefore may not fully represent the broader not-for-profit or statutory service landscape.

Interviews were carried out remotely and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

To guide the interviews and ensure consistency, a detailed topic guide was developed, outlining the key areas of focus for discussion. Created with the support of Dr Nicola Lester, the guide was reviewed and signed off by the AFCFT, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and the needs of the Submariner community. The guide was designed to allow flexibility in responses while ensuring



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that core themes were addressed across all interviews. The use of the topic guide helped to structure the conversations, while still allowing participants to share what was most important to them.

Interviews with Submariner families centred the experiences and perspectives of family members and were conducted in line with a trauma-informed approach to research. Data collection focused on exploring the unique challenges these families face during periods of separation, including the emotional, social, and practical impacts of deployment. This included examining the effects on family dynamics, communication, emotional well-being, career progression, and social connections. Additionally, the interviews sought to understand the types of support families rely on, their experiences with existing services, and the gaps in support that need to be addressed to better meet their needs.

Interviews with not-for-profit representatives focused on exploring the services and support they provide to Submariner families, as well as the challenges they face in delivering effective assistance. This included discussing the types of programs available, their reach and effectiveness, and the resources required to support Submariner communities. The interviews also aimed to identify any gaps in services, the role of partnerships with other organisations, and the potential for improving support tailored to the unique needs of Submariner families.

With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then analysed using thematic analysis, focusing on identifying key patterns, themes, and variations across the interviews. The analysis was conducted in alignment with the research questions, allowing us to draw together participants' experiences in relation to their specific needs and the challenges they face. Each transcript was carefully reviewed and coded to identify themes and insights. These codes were grouped into broader categories, helping to organise the data into meaningful patterns that reflected the diverse perspectives within the Submariner community. Verbatim interview quotations are used throughout this report to illustrate these themes and provide context for the findings. The final analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, challenges, and support needs of Submariner families, while also highlighting areas where service provision could be improved.

This report shows the range and diversity of views and experiences amongst those interviewed. As this is qualitative research, and a purposive and snowballing sampling approach was undertaken, the number of people who hold a particular view is not reported as it offers no indication of the extent to which these views are held in the wider population.

While the interviews explore participant experiences of identifying and accessing, this report does not name any agencies or organisations, statutory or not-for-profit, to protect participants' anonymity. This approach enables discussion of experience from both statutory and non-statutory support while safeguarding privacy.

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## 3. Key findings

### 3.1 Impact of Submariner Service on families

#### Key findings

**Mental health and emotional strain:** The unpredictable nature of deployments creates emotional strain, with families feeling unprepared, leading to frustration and mental health challenges.

**Deployment separation:** Separation due to deployment is emotionally challenging for families, given limited communication, leading to anxiety and distress.

**Pre-deployment stress:** The period leading up to deployment is stressful, with families facing tension from long working hours, limited time together, and repeated delays in departure.

**During deployment:** During deployment, those with childcare responsibilities often feel like single parents, struggling with household responsibilities and childcare.

**Coping strategies and adjustments:** Families cope by staying busy, focusing on work, and maintaining routines for themselves and their children.

**Reuniting after deployment:** The return from deployment is challenging, as families adjust to reuniting with the Submariner, often leading to tension and difficulties in resuming family routines.

**Career impact:** Spouses/partners face career challenges due to childcare responsibilities and frequent relocations. This leads them to opt for flexible or remote work to accommodate the unpredictability of military life.

**Social isolation:** Frequent relocations and childcare duties lead to social isolation, with participants unable to connect with people outside the military community.

**Impact on extended family:** Extended family members, particularly parents of Submariners, often feel isolated and excluded from support services and networks.

This section explores the unique challenges faced by Submariner families, including the effects on mental health, career prospects, social life, and family dynamics. It also examines communication difficulties, coping strategies, and the emotional toll on family members during and after deployment.

#### 3.1.2 Mental health and emotional strain

The role of Submariner Service has a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of family members, influencing their ability to manage daily life, maintain relationships, and access social support. Families often face significant changes in their living arrangements, social networks, and career opportunities due to the demands of military life. The unpredictability of deployment schedules, as well as the high level of commitment required from Submariners, leaves family members feeling as though they lack control over their own lives.

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Participants expressed feeling unprepared for the adjustments required as part of their partner's Service, which often resulted in frustration and emotional strain.

"I think not being fully prepared for it was probably the biggest mistake, not fully understanding how much of a commitment it was going to be for him, and how I was going to be dragged into it, whether I liked it or not."

[partner/spouse]

This lack of preparation and the feeling of being "dragged into" the Service life left family members feeling disconnected from their own lives, with the Royal Navy seemingly controlling their schedules despite not being directly employed by the Service.

Participants also reported feeling unprepared for naval life and the challenges it presents, which significantly negatively impacted their mental health. They disclosed that they felt unaware of the realities of being in the Submarine Service before joining, especially concerning the high commitment required from both Submariners and their families, such as tolerance of unpredictable schedules and deployments.

### 3.1.3 Deployment separation

The separation caused by deployment was reported as one of the most challenging aspects for Submariner families, with the emotional toll of separation on families, particularly spouses and children, described as significant. Partners often experience guilt and anxiety, particularly when they are left with the responsibility of raising children alone, managing the household, and adjusting to life without the Submariner's presence. The unpredictability of deployment dates and schedules adds to this stress, with families unable to plan for important events or life milestones, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and helplessness.

Limited communication significantly impacts emotional well-being. Families of Submariners on A-Boats, who can communicate through email or phone, report anxiety and distress associated with waiting for contact.

Due to the high level of secrecy required for those working on V-boat submarines, the family members of those Submariners describe experiencing prolonged periods without any direct communication, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty about the Submariner's safety and well-being. Participants described Familygram, a system in place for V-Boats which allows brief, censored messages. Families however reported this form of communication as unsatisfactory, as it only enabled one-way communication, and it is often unreliable and limited in how much information can be shared.

"[...] it's almost like that they've died, but there's obviously not that traumatic event that's happened because they haven't, obviously, but because it's just like darkness. As soon as they've gone, there's just nothing. You don't hear anything, so it's really odd. It's just like you're in a bit of a limbo for a very long time." [partner/spouse]

With limited means to connect with their deployed family members, participants were often concerned about the Submariner's safety and well-being. The lack of communication during deployments also had practical implications on participants' daily lives. They had to adjust mentally and, due to the no-contact rule, plan for various situations, such as if the car broke down or they needed to access the Submariner's bank account. The constant need to anticipate possible issues that could arise during deployment caused significant stress.

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Participants cited depression and anxiety linked to both deployment and the necessity to relocate. These challenges are compounded when families move away from their support networks, losing touch with friends and family, which heightens the sense of loneliness and isolation.

“It's very lonely. So, unless you know someone or unless something like that WhatsApp group that our partners and husbands made happens, or you already know about things that are on, it's just extremely lonely for single people who are left waiting on their partners coming home from deployments.” [partner/spouse]

### 3.1.4 Pre-deployment stress

Participants also described the pre-deployment period as difficult, as families navigate tension and frustration while preparing for the separation. Partners/spouses described the period running up to deployment as the most challenging, due to the partner having to work long hours preparing for deployment and having limited time to spend with their family. Short-term changes to deployment departure dates due to delays or technical difficulties meant families often had to say goodbye to their loved one's multiple times, which they described as an “emotional rollercoaster of sadness, hope and disappointment”:

“You can end up saying goodbye four/five times before they actually go, and that's very hard because, by the fifth time, you are so emotionally exhausted [...] and then they've gone, and you can't tell them that actually you really love them, because it's so difficult saying goodbye so many times. [partner/spouse]

This was described as sometimes leading to an argumentative and tense family dynamic for spouses and children hoping to spend more time together before the Submariner leaves. Having to plan for every practical eventuality, such as sorting access to bills, bank accounts or car insurance, added to this tension.

### 3.1.5 Life during deployment

During deployment partners/spouses described having to adapt to independent living without having to rely on their partner's support. Those living as a couple with no children described feeling lonely and having to manage their household on their own. Those with children described the struggles of having to juggle multiple responsibilities, which was particularly challenging for those with disabilities or those with children with SEN/ASN.

“Because I've got a child, I feel like I have to just get on with it. I'm both parents when he's not here, which puts quite a lot of stress and strain on me really.” [partner/spouse]

Participants expressed how family life frequently takes a backseat to the demands of the Royal Navy Service. They often felt the need to create a sense of normalcy for their children, providing additional reassurance by sleeping in the same room and putting away the Submariner's belongings to minimise reminders of their absence.

Participants described feeling “stagnant/stuck in time” as they struggled to plan their lives during deployment. The lack of clear return dates led to guilt about planning significant events without their partner's input and uncertainty about their attendance. This was worsened by the increasing length of

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deployments, now lasting 6-8 months instead of the previous 10-12 weeks, and the possibility of last-minute extensions. Families worried about whether their spouses/partners would be able to attend key events like weddings, birthdays, and other life events.

Families developed various coping strategies to manage the emotional and practical impacts of deployment. Some partners chose to focus on work or other activities, creating a sense of normalcy by staying busy. Others used practical measures such as apps to track the days until their deployed family member returned.

### 3.1.6 Reuniting after deployment

The return from deployment was a challenging time for families, as both the serving person and their family had to adjust to each other again. Participants shared that family routines needed to be re-established, often leading to tension. Partners and spouses also found it difficult to shift back into a shared decision-making role after months of managing everything themselves.

Participants expressed concerns about how deployment impacted their partner's behaviour, mental health, and their relationship upon return. Adjusting to new routines as a couple could be tough, with the Submariner needing time alone while the participant wanted to reconnect. Some described their partners as distant or changed when they returned, which was difficult to manage, particularly when they were eager to reconnect. Participants found it difficult that their partners could not talk about their deployment experiences due to the high level of secrecy required.

"I sort of describe it as in he goes away and there's this great big hole in our lives that's him, and then we close that hole down. Then when he comes back, that hole has to slowly open back up [...] and you need time to allow yourself to open back up to this person being back in your house." [partner/spouse]

### 3.1.7 Career impact

Spouses and partners of Submariners highlighted how their partner's profession limited their own career opportunities. This led them to opt for remote work or part-time positions due to childcare demands while their partner was deployed. Some could not pursue job opportunities because of the possibility of relocation or having to take over childcare duties, while others reduced their working hours or put their careers on hold to maintain a flexible schedule in case their partner was called away.

"Because he's deployed or I've not got him there [...] I'm the only one that's there to do it, so my job has a massive impact because it's not always at the forefront, or not the most important thing. Sometimes that's the first thing that I have to drop if something happens at home, so I think it does have an impact on your career prospects." [partner/spouse]

Participants struggled to work because they could not rely on their Submariner partners for childcare, given the unpredictability of their jobs. This often made them the primary caregivers, severely limiting their ability to pursue work or engage in self-care activities. Some felt the Royal Navy assumed partners would naturally take on these duties.

Frequent relocations disrupted careers, forcing job changes and hindering advancement. These moves also made finding new employment challenging, leading to periods of unemployment. Participants expressed a need for support to balance career opportunities.

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### 3.1.8. Social isolation

Participants described how their partner's Service significantly affected their social lives and personal relationships. These resulted in changes in their friendship groups, as childcare responsibilities or solo parenting often prevented them from attending social events or spending time with friends.

Participants found it particularly challenging to socialise with those outside the military community, as they often lacked an understanding of the emotional toll and unique challenges, such as the no-contact rule during deployments or the uncertainty surrounding deployment schedules.

"I don't think the rest of the world is equipped to understand. When you're trying to explain on the phone, 'I can't get that information'. There is nowhere I can get that from until he comes back,' and that's really difficult and it's really hard to explain to people." [partner/spouse]

This disconnect results in isolation and fatigued, as they had little time for self-care or socialising. For some, relocating frequently or living away from extended family compounded feelings of loneliness.

"It's hard for me to make plans or anything like that that doesn't involve my kids because, obviously, I've got no one that can watch them, so I don't get to socialise. I don't go out at all." [partner/spouse]

Some families, however, found new friendships and connections within military housing communities and appreciated the opportunity to bond with others who understood their unique circumstances.

Participants cited depression and anxiety linked to both deployment and the necessity to relocate. These challenges are compounded when families move away from their support networks, losing touch with friends and family, which heightens the sense of isolation.

"I'd spent the past year-and-a-half obsessing about the relationship because I was unhappy that he'd joined, [...] and frustrated with the Navy. I didn't feel like I had anyone to talk to about it. It turned almost into an OCD kind of thing [...]. So, I ended up going to see a counsellor for a few months [...], things have gotten a lot better since then." [partner/spouse]

### 3.1.9 Impact on parents (and the wider family) of deployed Submariner

Partners/spouses discussed the impacts of Submariner Service on other family members, particularly parents of the serving person. They outlined there to be little support or information for the wider family and noted that Submariners' parents were often willing to connect with others in similar situations but had trouble accessing any relevant groups or support and reported feeling "out of the loop".

Participants highlighted a lack of formal support or resources tailored to the needs of parents (and the wider family) to help them better understand Service life, learn to communicate with their child about their experiences and understand potential changes in their child's behaviour. Participants discussed notable interest coming from parents in connecting with others in similar situations and accessing more information to better understand and support their child during and after deployments.

In general, participants felt existing support services focused primarily on spouses and children, leaving parents and extended family members "out of the loop." Submariners' parents admitted they were often unprepared for the demands of Service life and had to learn as they went.

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However, they recognised the more profound impacts on spouses, partners, and children, who endured most of the Submariner's absence and the challenges of military life.

"We do miss him, but that's what he has chosen to do in life. We're not dependent on him for money or reading a story for his kids to go to bed or being the social life of a girlfriend or a boyfriend. We haven't got those issues, whereas I think those people have, and I think it's a very, very different thing, and much, much harder for them than us." [Submariner parent]

### 3.1.10 Impacts on children

Parents expressed concerns about how deployment affects their children. This included children's fear of separation, uncertainty surrounding deployment schedules, and the strain of prolonged absences.

"I think it has much more of an impact on the kids than it does on me [...] they just think that Daddy's gone and they don't know when he's coming back, and then when he is home, they're constantly asking me, 'Oh, how many nights is Daddy home for?' or, 'When is Daddy going back to work?' They're constantly forward thinking." [partner/spouse]

Pre-deployment, participants described children becoming overly attached to the departing parent or showing signs of anxiety, tantrums, or withdrawal. Families often need to prepare their children mentally months in advance for the separation.

Preparations for deployment, including longer working hours, disrupt family routines and reduce the time available for family interaction. Children were also described as sometimes feeling rejected due to the parent's limited availability. In the case of repeated deployment delays, this can create additional emotional strain, with families often having to say goodbye multiple times, causing distress for children.

During deployment, children were described as facing significant emotional challenges, particularly due to the lack of contact with their deployed parent. Participants reported children often expressed missing their parent and showed signs of sadness, anxiety, anger, or withdrawal. Some behavioural issues discussed include bedwetting, nail-biting, and tantrums. Some children also worry about their parent's safety.

"He's got a lot of anxiety about the submarine sinking, or he said to me the other day, he just keeps having visions of someone hijacking the submarine and they go on there with guns and stuff. Or even the submarine bumping into a big whale or a shark, he's worried about, so yes, he's got a lot of anxiety about it." [partner/spouse]

Participants described how younger children tended to adapt more easily due to having less awareness of parental separation and the length of time they had been separated.

As children got older, however, parents observed their children becoming increasingly aware and expressing their emotions.

"The children are at an age (13) where they have more awareness compared to when they were younger. They are conscious of things that happen and have opinions and emotions about him going on deployment. They have more attitude around things and are angrier about everything." [partner/spouse]

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Parents of children with SEN/ASN, such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), described how a lack of clear, reliable information regarding their parent's deployment and return can be particularly distressing for those who rely on structured routines; disrupting their sense of stability and can heighten anxiety. Parents reported that managing this uncertainty, while trying to maintain some semblance of routine, was one of the most difficult aspects of deployment.

Parents often used creative methods to explain deployment to their children. For example, one parent shared how their young child wrote letters to imaginary characters, asking them to deliver messages to the deployed parent, while another child hesitated to write out of fear that the parent's location might be discovered. Families also developed routines to help children cope, such as counting down the weeks of school or using a "deployment calendar" to track the days until the parent returns.

Some families chose not to discuss the absent parent, packing away their belongings or avoiding mentioning them to minimise emotional distress.

"[...] I tend not to try and bring my husband up too much because it can trigger them quite badly, and the only thing that can make them feel better is seeing and speaking to him, which just isn't possible." [partner/spouse]

Despite the strain, families also reported that they attempt to maintain stability and reassurance for their children, often creating routines that minimise the impact of the Submariner's absence.

"The easiest period of time is when they are gone because it's very black and white. You can't talk to them, and you have to get on with things. But this is very emotionally challenging as you are juggling everything yourself."  
[partner/spouse]

Participants shared that returning home is often a joyous occasion, with children excited to reunite with their deployed parent through shared activities. However, delays in the parent's return could lead to disappointment, especially when it interferes with important holidays or milestones like birthdays or Christmas.

While families successfully rebuilt routines post-deployment, others faced challenges as they reintegrated the parent into daily life. The deployed parent might need time to decompress, which could conflict with the family's eagerness to reconnect. This adjustment period could lead to tension as families adapted to the presence of a parent who had been absent for an extended time.



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## 3.2 Statutory support

### Summary of key findings

**Availability and accessibility of activities:** Families appreciated the activities offered, such as virtual tours and trips, but found them inconsistent and sometimes inaccessible due to scheduling, location, or transport constraints.

**Inclusive community spaces:** There was a strong need for accessible and inclusive community spaces, especially for families to connect in a relaxed, informal setting.

**Concerns with Royal Navy-affiliated services:** Families were hesitant to access statutory services, particularly those affiliated with the Royal Navy, due to concerns over confidentiality and the impact on their partner's career.

**Support gaps for certain families:** Families without children, and those with children who have special educational needs or additional support needs, reported feeling overlooked.

**Communication and information gaps:** Families felt unprepared for deployments due to poor communication and inconsistent information, both in terms of what to expect and the available support services.

**Reliance on informal networks:** Due to the gaps in formal support, families leaned heavily on informal networks—particularly for childcare and emotional support.

This chapter summarises Submariner families' experiences with statutory support, highlighting both positive aspects and areas for improvement. Statutory support for military families is primarily funded by the central government and includes services such as financial assistance, housing support, healthcare, and access to education. These services are often provided through a combination of Ministry of Defence (MOD) programs and other public sector agencies such as the NHS.

### 3.2.1 Concerns with Royal Navy-affiliated services

Participants expressed discomfort with accessing statutory support services affiliated with the Royal Navy due to concerns about confidentiality and the potential impact on their partner's employment. Families were hesitant to seek help, fearing that discussing their challenges might not be anonymous and could negatively affect their partner's career or lead to stigmatisation. This perception created a barrier to seeking assistance, as some felt uncomfortable attending support events where they worried conversations wouldn't remain confidential.

Families highlighted the need for services that prioritise confidentiality and provide a safe space for open dialogue without fear of repercussions. Additionally, families preferred to seek support from organisations independent of their partner's work. They expressed a desire to maintain their own identity and avoid being stereotyped as "military" or "Submariner wives," emphasising the importance of support that acknowledges their individuality while addressing their unique challenges.

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### 3.2.2. Availability and accessibility of activities

Participants appreciated the offer of family activities and trips organised by the Royal Navy, such as virtual submarine tours and visits to zoos and science centres, viewing them as valuable opportunities to connect with other families. However, families also noted that these opportunities were often inconsistent and, in some instances, difficult to access due to factors like location or transport needs.

A key concern was the scheduling of events. In some cases, events were cancelled to prioritise other needs, such as homecoming events. Additionally, scheduling often conflicted with family work obligations, and event dates and times were typically decided without consulting families, leading to low participation rates. Families expressed a need for more consistent, flexible planning that takes their availability into account.

Some participants also opted not to use statutory services because the activities offered did not align with their life circumstances or interests, for example, the support being targeted at families with children or designed without consulting families.

Families of Submariners on A-boats reported feeling more neglected support-wise compared to families of Submariners on other boat types. They highlighted fewer opportunities for communication during deployments and a lack of organised homecoming events.

“A-boats are totally ignored. There is nothing, literally nothing, as far as I'm concerned. There were maybe one or two things that were organised, but generally, the A-boat goes off and you are ignored. You're not even formally told when they're coming back. On two or three occasions when our A-boat has come back, one or two times, I was the only person down the Spit\* waving them in.”

In addition, a few participants mentioned attempting to access statutory support but found themselves ineligible, for example, because of their postcode being too far.

### 3.2.3 Communication and information gaps

Communication was a major concern for families, with participants expressing that they treated Royal Navy-services as their main source of information on deployment and felt unprepared for deployments due to a lack of clear and accurate information about what to expect. This was a common sentiment, particularly among families new to the Service.

Participants also felt that the advice and information provided by Naval services—whether through online forums, emails, telephone calls, conference calls, or in-person meetings—often seemed too disconnected from the Submariner community to effectively address the types of support families needed before, during, and after deployment.

Participants also felt that the information received was not sufficient and did not adequately or consistently direct them to the appropriate services or towards tailored support specific to their needs, such as support based on the type of submarine their family member was assigned to.

Participants also reported receiving inconsistent and insufficient information about deployment expectations, available support, and practical matters like relocation details (e.g., local doctors and schools). They also highlighted those other duties, such as weekend training or preparation for deployments, which impact family life, often went unacknowledged. Additionally, there was a lack of information regarding the reintegration process after deployment and its effects on families.

Key updates, such as homecoming dates, were typically shared through Microsoft Teams calls or in-

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person sessions, but these were infrequent, poorly timed, and often last-minute. Spouses also frequently remained unaware of statutory support options until well into the deployment, as they had to rely on their Service member to relay this information instead of receiving it directly. As a result, families sought information through unofficial channels, like online forums, WhatsApp groups, or community connections.

### 3.2.4 Inclusive community spaces

A recurring theme among families was the lack of accessible and inclusive community spaces. Participants voiced a desire for regular, welcoming spaces where they could meet others who understood their unique situation and challenges.

Families discussed the local community centres as an example of a potentially valuable resource that felt underutilised in some local communities. This lack of inclusive, consistently available community hubs contributed to feelings of social isolation, as families expressed a strong desire for a welcoming space where they could connect with others in similar situations:

"If you're feeling lonely and isolated, it would help so much to have somewhere to go and meet other families going through the same thing. Even just to sit, have a cup of tea, or be around others who understand."

Families emphasised the importance of having spaces that foster connection and informal support. They expressed a need for a sense of belonging and an environment where they could gather without the pressure of formal events or the fear of judgment.

### 3.2.5 Childcare support

A significant concern for families was the lack of adequate childcare, particularly during emergencies or for those with children with SEND/ASN needs. This shortage placed considerable pressure on families, especially those with limited access to local or informal support networks. The closure of a statutory nursery further exacerbated difficulties, particularly in accessing essential services like afterschool programs, breakfast clubs, and wrap-around care—especially for families living outside of Helensburgh. Additionally, the absence of childcare options hindered parents' ability to attend support events.

A key issue raised by families without children was feeling overlooked by support services, which were often geared toward families with young children. For example, Royal Navy personnel with children were sometimes prioritised for time off during holidays like Christmas, further disadvantaging families without children and contributing to feelings of exclusion and isolation.

Families with children who have special educational needs [SEN] or additional support needs [ASN], faced additional challenges, especially when relocating between regions with different educational systems. Families moving from England to Scotland, for instance, struggled to navigate the variations in SEN/ASN support services, which created added stress and uncertainty.

Due to challenges in accessing formal support services, family members often relied heavily on informal networks, particularly for childcare arrangements. They frequently turned to neighbours, friends, and family for assistance. Participants joined group chats or Facebook pages specific to the submarines their partners served on, fostering a sense of community and shared experience. This connection allowed families to form friendships with others facing similar challenges, creating a supportive environment.

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Participants indicated that while they would turn to statutory services in emergencies or for information during deployments, they preferred informal support systems, or they reached out directly to the support crew to communicate with Submariner personnel.

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## 3.3 The role of not-for profit sector in supporting families

### Key findings

**Limited awareness and access:** Submariner families reported low awareness and access to not-for-profit-support services, often discovering them through word of mouth or only in times of crisis.

**Geographical barriers:** Families living in remote locations or living further away from the military base faced additional challenges, with few events and limited support available in their areas.

**Mental health stigma:** The stigma surrounding mental health issues deterred some families from seeking support, further exacerbating their challenges.

**Challenges for not-for-profit organisations:** Not-for-profits also faced several challenges, including limited funding, lack of specialised support tailored to military families, and difficulties integrating military family services with those intended for civilians.

**Need for improved collaboration:** There was a strong call for better collaboration between the military and non-military not-for-profit organisations, alongside improved communication and more inclusive integration into local communities to support Submariner families effectively.

This chapter explores the challenges faced by Submariner families in accessing not-for-profit support services and highlights the difficulties these organisations encounter in providing assistance. Not-for-profits play a key role in complementing statutory support by offering services such as mental health programs, peer support networks, financial advice, and community activities tailored to the unique needs of military families.

### 3.3.1 Accessing services and support

#### Awareness and accessibility of support

Submariner families reported limited awareness of the support available from the not-for-profit sector. While some recalled receiving information about not-for-profit support from the during calls organised by the Royal Navy for family members to update them about deployment progress, the way this information was presented made it difficult for families to engage with it effectively.

Others were unaware of what support options existed altogether.

“Things aren't advertised. You're not told about anything really. You're just kind of left to it, and if you need the support, you've got to ask for it. There is a list of charities and support services on the back of the booklet that you get given at the beginning of patrol, but unless you know what you're looking for, you don't use it.” [partner/spouse]

Most of those aware of not-for-profit support learned about it through word of mouth, social media, or referrals from statutory organisations. Some only discovered support during a crisis or after their issues had already been resolved.

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Families who lived further away from the military bases were less aware of the support available to them and felt they had fewer opportunities to network or attend events, which were often concentrated near naval bases. These families were also less likely to attend in-person events given the time and effort required to travel to these events for those with already busy schedules.

“It does feel like you miss out a bit on some of the events and some of the family days out that they do because you're not up there. So, I think, yes, if they had more resources in different areas, that'd be better. I know that'd be hard but, yes.” [partner/spouse]

Participants who engaged with not-for-profit organisations noted that while several charities existed, their programs were often unclear or not relevant, leaving families uncertain about the available support. Staying informed about services was also a challenge, as participants had to sift through multiple social media pages and sources, making it difficult to stay updated on available activities and programs.

### **Willingness to seek support from not-for-profit organisations**

Participants reported varying levels of willingness to seek support from the not-profit sector. While some actively pursued assistance from charities, others were less inclined to do so. Participants believed it was the Royal Navy's responsibility to provide support to families and did not look for help elsewhere. Additionally, some preferred to handle issues independently or with the help of family and friends.

A significant concern among participants was the stigma associated with seeking support from charities, particularly regarding mental health support. This perceived stigma often deterred individuals from reaching out for help, reinforcing a sense of isolation.

“I think it takes a lot for a family to reach out and say, 'I need help,' to one of these charities, and a lot of people struggle in silence and just get on with it, because they feel like, oh, well, I don't want to bother anyone, or it's not that bad. Whereas I think if they actively checked in on people, people would actually get more support and the help that they needed.” [partner/spouse]

### **Experience with not-for-profit services**

Participants reported mixed experiences with not-for-profit support programs, with satisfaction varying depending on the organisation and available activities. A key issue identified was the lack of feedback loops and limited understanding of the unique needs of Submariner families. This resulted in some programmes and events being poorly aligned with their needs, leading to low attendance and frustration among both participants and organisers. The closure of some services post-pandemic further reduced the availability of support options.

Some participants shared positive experiences with not-for-profit services. Families appreciated activities, community meetups, and adult-only coffee sessions, where they could connect with others who understood the unique pressures of deployment. These events were valued as supportive, judgment-free spaces where spouses and partners could relax and build meaningful social connections.

“The people there would know something was wrong if I wasn't in touch or didn't attend. Just knowing that someone is thinking of you makes a difference.” [partner/spouse]

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Some not-for-profit services were also described as offering personalised, one-on-one support through assigned staff members who provided regular check-ins, emotional assistance, and practical help with daily needs such as transportation, housing, and childcare.

“They asked what suited us, like help with breakfast or getting the kids to school. One of the team would visit weekly just to talk and keep me company, because the only people I’d see all day were my children.”  
[partner/spouse]

Additionally, some participants found online support provided by both military and non-military organisations particularly helpful for navigating the emotional stages of deployment. The anonymous environment allowed individuals to share their feelings openly, process emotions, and connect with others who had similar experiences.

“It was so helpful to know others had gone through it and come out on the other side. It gave me hope when I was struggling.” [partner/spouse]

### **Barriers to engagement**

Participants observed that organised events, meetings, and away days tended to focus on parents with toddlers and small children, limiting engagement options for those with older children or no children. They emphasised the need for inclusive spaces where both parents and non-parents could connect and share their experiences with other adults. Additionally, there was a strong need for adult-only spaces to provide non-parents with a comfortable environment and offer parents a chance to step away from parenting duties.

Families living farther from military bases felt that most support resources were concentrated near these hubs, leaving them with fewer accessible options. Distance also raised concerns around eligibility for certain services, particularly mental health support, which was harder to access for those not in certain postcodes.

Even though some participants were aware of not-for-profit providers working with naval or Submariner families, they were unclear on what were the services that they provide and how they differed from each other. In some cases, this also acted as a barrier in accessing support.

“I think there are already loads of military charities out there. I think it can get quite confusing for me [...] That almost prevents people from wanting to go to it.” [partner/spouse]

“I haven’t accessed any information or support at all. I wouldn’t know where to go for a start, or who to ask.” [partner/spouse]

## **3.3.2 Challenges and gaps in support provision**

### **Resourcing**

Limited financial resources and staffing were key challenges restricting what not-for-profit organisations could offer to Submariner families. Charities supporting military families were established in England and had smaller teams in Scotland, sometimes relying on just one staff member for support.

Those working in the not-for-profit sector raised concerns about the sustainability of support due to the short duration of funding. Projects often received only temporary financial backing, which hindered

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their ability to fully integrate into the local community and achieve desired outcomes. This lack of stability made it difficult for organisations to provide consistent and effective services to families in need.

“I think the common challenge is about long-term funding and every other organisation in the sector that I speak to have the same issue [...] You know, three-year multi-year funding is great, but actually five-year funding is a lot more sustainable to be able to put in place projects that we can effectively embed.” [not-for-profit sector]

Some participants mentioned that non-military charities, which could apply for grants to support military families, faced challenges with the funding requirements. These charities often serve the wider community, and they find it difficult to budget in a way that ensures military families get the support they need. They must also show how their services directly help military families, which makes the process of applying for grants and meeting reporting requirements more challenging.

As a result, charities struggle to provide the level of support needed, particularly in areas where military families are dispersed or underserved.

### **Mental health support**

Access to mental health support is a critical gap in the current provision for Submariner families. Not-for-profit organisations have noted limited availability of one-on-one support, leaving families without essential support to manage their emotions during deployments. On the other hand, families expressed a need for guidance on how to navigate their feelings and support their children through the challenges of separation.

“Because of the age my son is at, I'm not a hundred per cent sure how he is going to react to this, so that could mean his behaviour could change. It would be quite good to have somebody that would maybe be able to speak to or give advice about how to go about helping your child.”  
[partner/spouse]

Participants emphasised the need for better mental health support for Service members returning from deployment, highlighting that families often feel unprepared to assist them. They suggested that the Royal Navy and naval charities should take a more proactive role in checking in with Submariner families through calls, emails, or surveys to gauge their well-being. Establishing a dedicated point of contact for families would help mitigate barriers to seeking support, such as stigma and lack of awareness about available resources.

### **Childcare and activities for [older] children**

Childcare is another critical gap in support for Submariner families, as highlighted by both families and not-for-profit organisations. Key issues include the availability of childminders, nursery places, and wraparound care. Families relocating from England to Scotland face additional challenges due to differing childcare provisions between the two countries. The lack of adequate childcare creates a substantial burden on partners/spouses, impacting career opportunities, social lives, and mental health, which may ultimately affect the retention of serving personnel.

“Some of the challenges I have to say would be around childcare and the impact of the childcare challenge has... We are seeing the direct impact on retention in the Service but also employment opportunities and families choosing to sort of leave the area and move back to nearer to family support areas.” [partner/spouse]



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## **Community integration for relocated families**

For families who relocated to live near military bases, there was a tension between the need for support to help them integrate into the local community and the desire for tailored assistance from those who understand their specific circumstances. While not-for-profit representatives acknowledged that support provided by military charities can be effective, some expressed a view that the best way to combat family isolation is to foster connections between these families and the local community, rather than organising separate activities and support services.

Participants emphasised the importance of creating inclusive environments where both military families and residents can interact and share experiences. They believed that integrating families into community events would not only help reduce feelings of isolation but also enhance their overall experience during deployments. This approach could lead to a more supportive network, benefiting both military families and the broader community.

"There's an element of if it's constantly about supporting that group as that group and slightly othering them from the rest of the community, I think that's an issue, particularly when some of those families are coming up here for quite a long time." [not-for-profit sector]

## **Greater collaboration within the not-for-profit sector and other [non-military] agencies and organisation**

Greater collaboration within the not-for-profit sector was seen as vital to ensure effective information sharing between partners and to prevent duplication of efforts. This need for collaboration was particularly crucial given the small size of the sector in Scotland. Participants emphasised that by working together, organisations could better address the unique challenges faced by Submariner families, create a more cohesive support network and keep track of the services and programmes offered and effectively direct families to the appropriate resources.

Participants noted that improved communication, and shared resources would enhance the overall effectiveness of services offered, allowing charities to pool their strengths and provide more comprehensive support.

This collaborative approach could lead to more tailored programs that truly meet the needs of families, reducing feelings of isolation and fostering a stronger sense of community among Submariner families.

"I would say the third sector all coming together plays a massive part in support. There could be more working together [...] making sure that nothing is getting duplicated because duplication doesn't really benefit the families." [not-for-profit sector]

There was a suggestion for greater collaboration between military third-sector organisations and other local community support groups. Participants noted that improving signposting to available resources between military organisations, and third-sector charities, could enhance access to support for families.

"I think there is a real gap in support for families, the wider community support for families [...] there's no joined-up working, I think, between military statutory services, military third-sector organisations, and the rest of the community or sector." [not-for-profit sector]

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## Recommendations

This section outlines recommendations designed to guide the development of the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT) grant programme and improve support for Submariner families. These recommendations draw directly from participant suggestions shared during interviews, reflecting their lived experiences and insights. Additionally, they incorporate a synthesis of the needs and support gaps identified throughout the research process, ensuring a comprehensive and informed approach.

The recommendations are organised to provide a holistic framework for supporting Submariner families, focusing on key areas such as mental health, communication, career development, community building, and post-deployment reintegration. We also include guidance on the design of the AFCFT grant programme to ensure that funded initiatives address both the immediate and evolving challenges faced by these families.

Lastly, we offer additional considerations for broader support services, extending beyond those provided by AFCFT, to foster resilience and enhance the overall wellbeing of Submariner families.

### Mental health support

- Fund and support tailored mental health programs that specifically address the unique challenges faced by Submariner families. These programs can include online counselling, peer support programs, stress management workshops, child therapy, and digital resources. Support programs should be designed to cater to the diverse needs of family members, ensuring accessibility for all, including parents, spouses, and those without children.

### Improve communication and resources during deployment

- Fund initiatives focused on updating existing resources and guides for Submariner families, ensuring they have up-to-date, practical advice for managing deployment challenges. This may include supporting the development of an online directory or hub that provides easy access to relevant information and services, as well as the setup and development of virtual support groups or forums where families can share advice and offer emotional and practical support to one another.

### Foster community building initiatives

- Fund and encourage development of bespoke, local support initiatives that reduce social isolation for Submariner families. These initiatives should offer a range of online and in-person activities, accessible at different stages of deployment and should aim to meet diverse family needs. The focus should be on fostering community connections, encouraging peer support, and providing opportunities for networking.

### Post-deployment support

- Fund (re)integration programs that assist families in adjusting post-deployment. These programs should focus on emotional support, relationship rebuilding, and managing the complexities of re-entry after extended absences.

### Career development for spouses

- Provide funding for initiatives that enhance career development for spouses of Submariners, such as access to training programs, job opportunities, and remote work options. These initiatives should enable spouses to build transferable skills and offer flexibility to meet the demands of military family life.

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## **Design of the grant programme**

### Sustainable funding

- Ensure that the grant programme provides sustainable funding options to support long-term initiatives, allowing not-for-profit organisations to plan and implement effective services that provide lasting impact for Submariner families.

### Feedback loops and co-production

- Integrate feedback mechanisms into the grant programme so families can share their experiences, provide input, and suggest improvements to existing support services.
- Actively involve Submariner families in the design and delivery of the project/s to ensure the programmes and service offer aligns with their needs and priorities.

## **Additional findings and considerations for support services**

### **Collaborate with statutory services**

- Work alongside government agencies to ensure that Submariner families have access to broader social services and mental health resources.
- Advocate for tailored support and services that recognise the unique needs of Submariner families, ensuring they receive appropriate support from statutory services.

### **Commission research**

- Commission further research to continuously assess the evolving needs of Submariner families, ensuring that support programs remain relevant and effective.

### **Increase awareness / education**

- Commission training for not-for-profit organisations to enhance their capacity to deliver tailored support to Submariner families. This training should cover specific needs related to deployment, reintegration, and long-term family wellbeing, empowering service providers to offer targeted assistance.