

MEETING THE NEEDS  
OF THE SERVING RAF  
COMMUNITY



Royal Air Force  
Benevolent Fund



Compass Partnership



# Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund

THE HEART OF THE RAF FAMILY

## OUR VISION

No member of the RAF Family will ever face adversity alone.

## OUR VALUES

### We are:

**Beneficiary focused** – we place the people we help at the heart of all we do and are dedicated to acting in their best interests.

**Compassionate** – we show empathy, giving a helping hand to those in need and distress.

**Inclusive** – we are non-judgemental and non-discriminatory in our approach and make ourselves accessible to all who need our help.

**Responsive** – we are forward leaning and innovative, staying relevant and anticipating the changes that most affect those who need our help.

**Trustworthy** – we have integrity and are honest, challenging decisions and actions that are not consistent with our values and remaining accountable for our actions.



As the world's oldest independent air force, the Royal Air Force has long been admired for its tenacity, skill, resilience and innovation.

But the men and women who proudly serve our nation, ensuring our freedom and security and who selflessly place themselves in harm's way at a moment's notice, face unique pressures that many of us in the civilian world will simply never experience.

Looked upon by many to be the RAF's oldest friend, the RAF Benevolent Fund has stood shoulder to shoulder with its allied Service for nearly 100 years. The Fund has shown considerable judgement in commissioning this research, which provides an invaluable insight into the challenges faced by our RAF serving men and women and their families and helpfully complements related MOD and RAF research. Frequent station moves, separation from immediate family, distance from close relatives, deployment, irregular shifts and antisocial hours all add to the stresses endured by the serving community. Relationship difficulties and loneliness featured as the top issues reported by personnel and their partners.

Whilst the Ministry of Defence undoubtedly has a role in supporting some of these areas, amongst others, I am greatly heartened by the RAF Benevolent Fund's ambitious and bold response to these challenges. The extensive support that the charity currently has in place is already impressive and highly regarded by both myself and the Chief of the Air Staff. But the additional projects the Fund has committed to develop in the coming years, in direct response to this report, will make a substantive difference to RAF personnel and their families in need and distress.

As the Secretary of State for Defence and having delighted in supporting the Royal Air Force to celebrate its centenary this year, I would, on behalf of Parliament and the nation, like to extend my thanks to the RAF Benevolent Fund for all that it does to support the RAF Family. This is no mean feat, as it numbers 1.4 million or so, from veterans, to serving personnel as well as their dependants. As the charity enters its centenary year, I am excited to hear that it intends to reach out further into the veteran community to offer support to all those who face adversity alone; I am equally delighted that the Fund also wants to increase its support to the serving RAF. The work of the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund is as important and relevant today as it was in those very early days following the Great War. Long may it continue to "repay the debt we owe" to those who are serving and those who have served in the RAF.

Per Ardua Ad Astra

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', written in a cursive style.

**The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
Secretary of State for Defence



I am delighted to introduce this report which presents the findings from a very significant piece of research commissioned by the RAF Benevolent Fund into the size, profile and welfare needs of the serving RAF and their families.

The RAF Benevolent Fund is only one year younger than the Service it pledges to support and is thus the RAF's oldest friend and we work hard to live out our vision, that 'no member of the RAF Family will ever face adversity alone'. In 2017, out of a total welfare spend of £18.8M we spent £4.4M directly supporting more than 32,000 members of the serving RAF community in a variety of ways including financial and housing support (including for the wounded, injured or sick), a youth support programme, grants to meet community needs on RAF stations and relationship support.

As we approach our centenary year, the outcomes detailed in this report have highlighted clear needs and provided the RAF Benevolent Fund, a bold and ambitious charity, with opportunities to evaluate our current support and to develop new initiatives in the light of changing and emerging needs.

Working closely with the RAF, we have developed a package of practical initiatives which will make a real difference to the lives of RAF personnel and their families in the areas that have emerged from the research. Our detailed response to the findings focus on five key priority areas:

- Enhancing social engagement, increasing connectivity and reducing isolation and loneliness
- Increasing the employability and wellbeing of RAF partners
- Enhancing and strengthening family relationships
- Enhancing mental wellbeing among individuals
- Increasing awareness of the range of support that is available to the serving RAF community, ensuring more people receive support in times of need.

Our current services, together with our partnerships with other charities, already provide a wide range of support but we are determined to do even more to help the RAF Family, both veterans and those currently serving. The new initiatives identified through this research and in consultation with the RAF, indicate our commitment, as the RAF's leading welfare charity, to do just that and to continue to remain at the heart of the serving RAF community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Air Vice-Marshal David Murray CVO OBE**  
Controller, RAF Benevolent Fund



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

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- Following on from the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund's report *Meeting the Needs of the RAF Family* (2015) which provided a detailed investigation into the size, profile and welfare needs of the RAF ex-Service community, in 2017 the RAF Benevolent Fund commissioned research into the size, demographics and welfare needs of the serving RAF and to test proposals for addressing them.
- The work involved desk research (to confirm the size and profile of the serving RAF community), an online survey with a representative sample of the serving RAF community (to assess the scale of welfare needs) and qualitative interviews and focus groups (to explore the nature of people's problems and how they could be helped).

## Serving RAF community size and key demographics

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- **Size.** In April 2017 there were 37,052 RAF personnel of whom 33,261 were Regular Forces and 3,791 Reserves, including 1,251 full-time Reserves and 2,348 part-time Volunteer Reserves; there were 30,853 full-time trained personnel<sup>1</sup>. The estimated total size of the serving RAF community was between 95,000 and 105,000. This includes an estimated 31,000 adult dependants and 34,000 financially dependent children, along with the 37,052 RAF personnel.
- **Sex and age.** In the Regular Forces 86% were men and the average age was 33. Among Reserves 79% were men and the average age was 42.
- **Family life.** Around six in 10 RAF Regular personnel were married or in a civil partnership, with a further two in 10 in a long-term or stable relationship; the remaining two in 10 were single, widowed, separated or divorced. Just over half had children (on average 1.8). Among Reserves, around five in 10 were married or in a civil partnership, with a further two in 10 in a long-term or stable relationship. Around four in 10 Reservists had children (on average 1.9).
- **Housing.** 70% of RAF Regular personnel lived in Service provided accommodation, split fairly evenly between Service Family Accommodation (SFA) and Single Living Accommodation (SLA), with the remainder living in their own homes, including those privately renting.

## Welfare needs of the serving RAF community

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- The top five 'major problems' most reported by RAF personnel in the survey were, in order of prevalence:
  - Marriage or relationship difficulties (14%)
  - Partner's difficulty finding suitable work (13%)
  - Not knowing what services and benefits they were entitled to (13%)
  - Anxiety or depression (12%)
  - Partner wanting to but not being able to work (12%).
- The top five 'major problems' most reported in the survey by partners of RAF personnel were:
  - Loneliness (20%)
  - Difficulty finding a suitable job (18%)
  - Lack of money for an annual holiday (17%)
  - Anxiety or depression (16%)
  - Finding suitable childcare (16%).

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<sup>1</sup> Personnel numbers are broadly similar to 2018 figures.

- The survey also measured the extent of other specific problems, which were at lower prevalence. Various issues were reported more by partners than by RAF personnel, the most notable difference being loneliness, which was experienced at double the prevalence among partners (20%) than among RAF personnel (10%).
- RAF personnel with certain characteristics reported a higher level of problems, namely: those who were separated, divorced or widowed, but also those in the Regular rather than Reserve Forces, particularly those aged 25–44, those living in Service Family Accommodation (SFA), those with children and non-commissioned officers (especially junior non-commissioned officers (JNCOs)). Among partners of RAF personnel, the needs were greatest for those aged 18–44, living in SFA, with children and not working full time.

## Addressing the welfare needs of the serving RAF community

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- **Seeking help.** Around half of RAF personnel (43%) and of partners (50%) had sought help or support with their problems in the past few years. RAF personnel were most likely to have approached their Senior Medical Officer, followed by RAF Community Support/station welfare officers, then SSAFA<sup>2</sup>. Partners were most likely to have used the RAF HIVE Information Service, RAF Community Support/station welfare officers or SSAFA.
- **Barriers.** 20% of RAF personnel and 34% of partners said they did not know where to go for help with their problems, and three quarters of both groups said they preferred to cope or deal with their problems on their own. 39% of RAF personnel and 41% of partners were embarrassed to ask for help, and more than a third of both groups cited concerns that admitting problems might affect RAF career prospects. Follow-up interviews found that people wanted a discrete service, especially for mental health issues, and reassurances about confidentiality. We heard that some people were aware of the HIVE, padres and SSAFA but not clear about what is offered and not confident about when to approach them.
- **RAF life.** Some circumstances of RAF life were found to exacerbate problems. For example, frequent station moves, distance from parents and other close relatives, deployments, irregular shifts, anti-social hours all contributed to feelings of social isolation and difficulties with partner employment. Families with children with special needs felt the strains especially keenly. Interviewees also felt that particular attention needs to be given to the period before and after station moves. There was a view that changes in the culture of station life have increased problems of social isolation e.g. changes to catering arrangements (i.e. 'pay as you dine'), while modern digital entertainment and communications means that people spend more time at home or in their rooms.
- **Employment.** Although some of the partners interviewed had chosen not to work, it was not generally a free choice but was driven by restrictions on their lives including lack of suitable childcare or transport, reluctance of employers to take on RAF partners, and having to repeatedly switch to different career options and start again 'on the bottom rung'.
- **Meeting the needs.** Four propositions for possible new welfare support offerings to meet the needs identified were tested in focus groups. All four ideas were well received and were considered to be addressing a real need for at least some people. The proposal to develop an app was received the best, followed by workshops and seminars for partners to aid wellbeing and employability. Proposals to increase community engagement on RAF stations and to provide funding for life coaching were received positively but with more caution.



## Next Steps

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In response to these findings, the RAF Benevolent Fund is launching a new strategy, investing in five key areas within the serving RAF community:

- **Enhancing social engagement, increasing connectivity and reducing isolation and loneliness**

The RAF Benevolent Fund will pilot Station Engagement Workers, provide funding for facilities and play parks and expand its flagship Airplay youth support programme on RAF stations.

- **Increasing the employability and wellbeing of RAF partners**

The RAF Benevolent Fund will be piloting workshops and seminars for RAF partners, with follow-up one-to-one coaching.

- **Enhancing and strengthening family relationships**

The RAF Benevolent Fund will be evaluating a pilot providing respite breaks for RAF families across the UK.

- **Enhancing mental wellbeing among individuals**

The RAF Benevolent Fund will be funding access to the mindfulness app Headspace.

- **Increasing awareness of the range of support that is available to the serving RAF community, ensuring more people receive support in times of need**

The RAF Benevolent Fund will develop a digital tool which provides an easy-to-access source of information.

This is a multi-million pound response to the RAF's key needs, as highlighted by the research in this report, and is in addition to other on-going work and support already provided. Some of this will be delivered through grant funding, while other programmes will be tested via pilots first to ensure that they are effective and valued before consideration is given to rolling them out further.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background and research objectives

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In September 2015 the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund published its report *Meeting the Needs of the RAF Family* based on extensive primary and secondary research conducted by Compass Partnership among the RAF ex-Service community (RAF veterans and their dependants) and also among RAF Benevolent Fund beneficiaries. This research estimated the size of the RAF Family and then assessed the demographic profile and welfare needs of the RAF ex-Service community and the experiences of RAF Benevolent Fund beneficiaries.

Following on from this, the RAF Benevolent Fund wanted to deepen its understanding of the size of the serving RAF community (RAF personnel and their dependants) and the scope and scale of welfare needs within it. This was for the purpose of considering how the RAF Benevolent Fund could enhance its welfare provision to best meet the changing needs of the serving RAF community<sup>3</sup>.

The five specific objectives of the research were to:

- a. Confirm **size** and **demographics** of the serving RAF community
- b. Identify and explore current **welfare needs** of the serving RAF community
- c. Identify and explore **knowledge and use of existing welfare support**
- d. Identify and explore **barriers to seeking help**
- e. Identify and explore the appetite for **potential new forms of welfare support**.

## 1.2. Research approach

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The RAF Benevolent Fund commissioned Compass Partnership to carry out this research programme with the serving RAF community, taking place over a number of stages in 2017/18, with each stage addressing different research objectives.

The research was conducted with the support of RAF Community Support, and before primary research began a consultation meeting was held at RAF HQ Air Command with RAF representatives involved in delivering Community Support and also representatives from SSAFA and the RAF Families Federation.

The first stage of this research was to carry out preliminary desk research<sup>4</sup>. The aim of this stage was to confirm the size and key demographics of the serving RAF community and to identify what is known about their social welfare needs and the wellbeing of the community. This was done from existing research and identified gaps in knowledge that informed subsequent stages of work.

In late 2017 an online self-completion **survey** of the serving RAF community was undertaken. A large, representative sample of more than 2,500 RAF personnel and more than 470 partners was achieved. The survey measured the scope and scale of welfare needs within the community, and also asked about support received and potential barriers to seeking help.

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3 The term 'serving RAF community' is used throughout this report to refer to RAF personnel and their dependants.

4 Meeting the Needs of the Serving RAF Community, Stage 1: Desk Research, August 2017.

Then in spring 2018 qualitative **in-depth interviews** were conducted by telephone with 24 of the survey respondents (a mix of RAF personnel and partners), to explore in greater detail the nature of the problems they faced, the help received and wanted, and the barriers to seeking assistance. These interviews focused on three key areas of need which had been identified within the survey and where it was considered that there was potential for charitable support to be provided. The themes were: community and social isolation, mental wellbeing and partner employment.

The last stage of research in summer 2018 was six qualitative **focus groups**, convened at RAF stations. The purpose of these was to garner feedback from RAF personnel and partners on four propositions for potential new forms of welfare support which were developed by the RAF Benevolent Fund and the RAF. The concepts were tested in an early draft form, and the aim of the focus groups was to obtain reaction on perceived strengths and weaknesses, the most appropriate target audience and suggestions for enhancements.

The reader is referred to Appendix 3 for a fuller description of the research methods employed.

### 1.3. Format of this report

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Chapter Two reports on the secondary desk research to profile the size and demographics of the serving RAF community.

Chapter Three reports on the findings from the survey of RAF personnel and their partners, and intersperses insights from the subsequent in-depth interviews.

Chapter Four reports on the reaction to the four welfare support propositions tested in the focus groups.

Chapter Five draws together overall conclusions from all stages of the research programme.

Chapter Six sets out the RAF Benevolent Fund's response to the research findings.

Throughout the report, findings are illustrated with tables and charts. Sometimes the percentages cited do not sum to 100%. The reasons for this are that either:

- i. This is an artefact of reporting on weighted data, whereby 'rounding' may mean that the responses sum to either 99% or 100%.
- ii. The question was multiple choice, allowing respondents to code more than one answer category, in which case responses may sum to more than 100%.

In tables, a dash is used to signify zero and an asterisk signifies less than 0.5%.

## 2 SIZE AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SERVING RAF COMMUNITY

This chapter reports on the first stage of this research programme which was **desk research** (see Section 3.1 at Appendix 3 for more details of the research methods employed). The MOD holds records of the size and key demographics of the serving RAF community and gathers further data through regular surveys of RAF personnel. This chapter provides a summary of the latest available statistics as at September 2017 when the exploratory desk research was completed. Data is taken from the following (see references at Appendix 6):

- Population sizes are taken from the latest available at the time of conducting the research (April 2017) MOD UK Armed Forces Monthly Personnel Statistics (MOD 2017b) and MOD UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics (MOD 2017a). Figures are broadly similar to 2018 figures.
- 2017 RAF data has been provided covering length of service and personal categorisation.
- Other estimates of demographic information are taken from the latest available data from the relatively large scale random surveys of the serving population conducted by the Ministry of Defence: the UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS – MOD 2017d), and the Tri-Service Reserves Continuous Attitude Survey (RESCAS – MOD 2017c).

Given differences in timing, definitions of population and categorisations, there are sometimes slight variations between the various sources, especially in total numbers of RAF personnel. These will be pointed out in the discussion below.

### 2.1 Population estimates

An estimate of the total size of the serving RAF community was produced using total numbers of RAF personnel in April 2017 (MOD 2017b) combined with estimates of numbers of dependent adults and children based on the two main MOD surveys of RAF personnel: AFCAS (MOD 2017d) and RESCAS (MOD 2017c). These calculations are subject to an unknown margin of error, so a range of estimated size is used.

**Figure 2a** *Estimated size of serving RAF community in 2017*

	REGULAR	RESERVE	TOTAL
RAF personnel (known)	33,260	3,790	37,050
Adult dependants (estimate)	28,000	3,000	31,000
Dependent children (estimate, any age)	31,000	3,000	34,000
<b>Estimated total</b>	<b>92,000</b>	<b>10,000</b>	<b>102,000</b>

The total size of **the serving RAF community is estimated to be between 95,000 and 105,000**. Figure 2a shows how this estimate breaks down – around **37,000 RAF personnel** (33,260 Regulars and 3,790 Reserves) and **65,000 dependants** – 31,000 dependent adults and 34,000 dependent children. The dependent adults include around 21,500 spouses, 8,000 partners in committed relationships and 1,500 separated/divorced. All figures other than the numbers of RAF personnel and all totals have been rounded to the nearest 500. See Appendix 4 for more detail on how the estimates were calculated, and for caveats on the reliability of all estimates.

Figure 2b provides a visual summary of the known numbers of RAF personnel and key demographics in April 2017 (MOD 2017a, MOD 2017b). Note that the demographics for Reserves only cover those in the Volunteer Reserves.

**Figure 2b** Number of RAF personnel and key demographics (April 2017)<sup>5</sup>

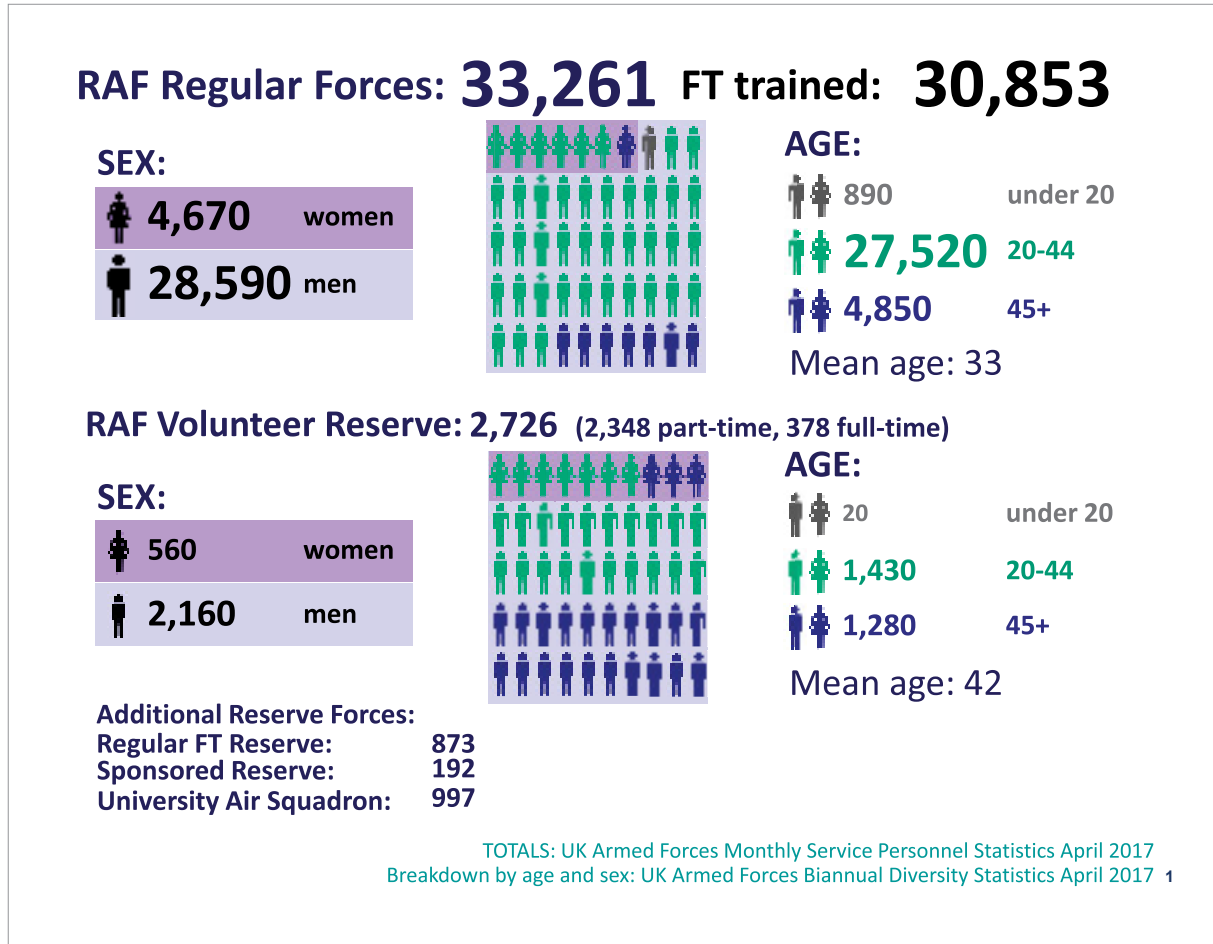
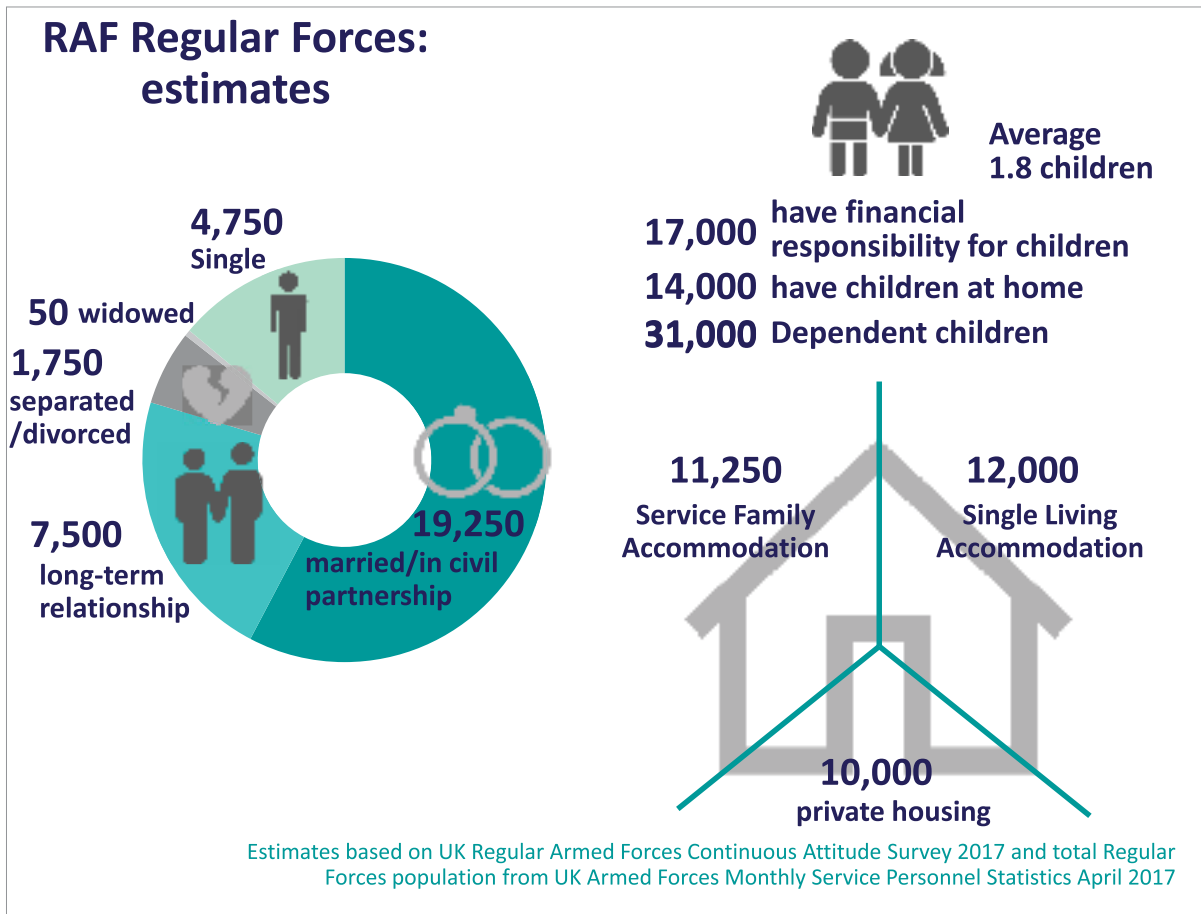


Figure 2c overleaf shows estimates of the numbers of RAF Regular personnel by relationship status, presence of children and type of housing based on AFCAS (MOD 2017d). The survey percentages have been applied to known total numbers of RAF personnel in the Regular Forces (MOD 2017b) to provide these estimates. All estimates are subject to a margin of error, and all numbers shown in the chart have been rounded. Around six in 10 RAF Regulars were married or in a civil partnership, with a further two in 10 in a long-term or stable relationship. Just over half had children (on average 1.8). Seven in 10 live in Service provided accommodation, split fairly evenly between Service Family Accommodation (SFA) and Single Living Accommodation (SLA), with the remainder living in their own homes, including those privately renting. Figure 2d shows the equivalent available data for personnel serving in the RAF Reserve Forces, using survey percentages from RESCAS (MOD 2017c) applied to known total numbers of RAF personnel in the Reserve Forces (MOD 2017b) to provide these estimates. All estimates are subject to a margin of error, thus all numbers shown in the chart have been rounded.

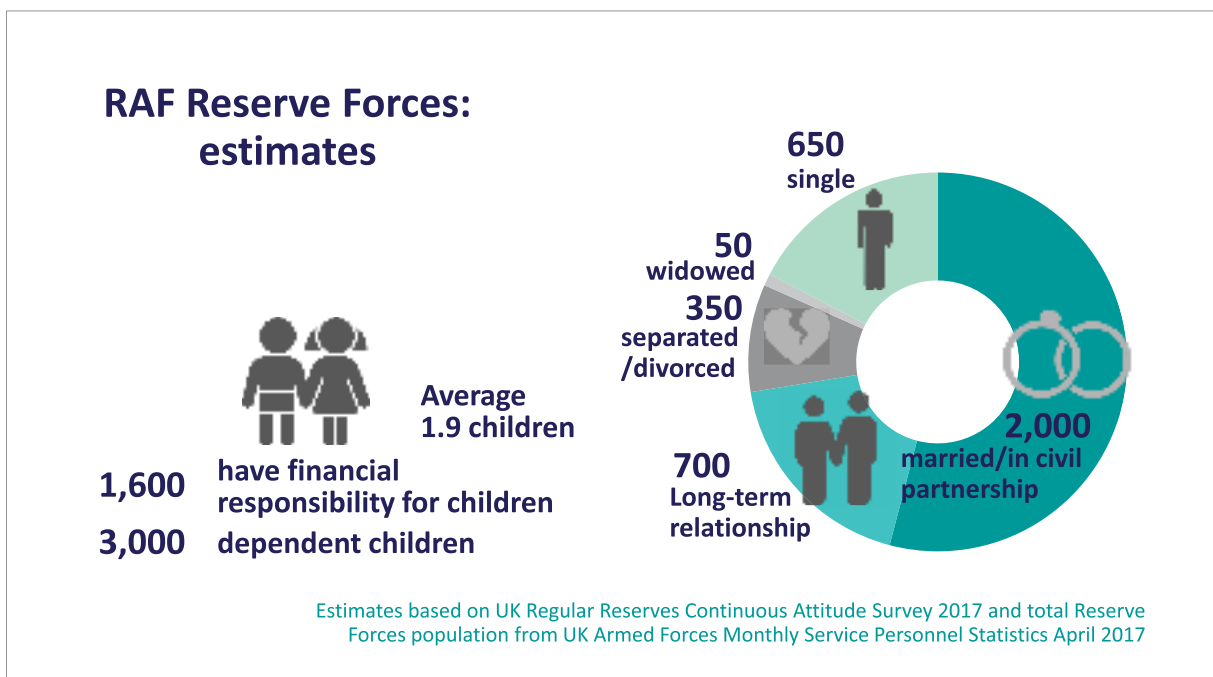
<sup>5</sup> Note: total numbers of personnel are taken from UK Armed Forces Monthly Service Personnel Statistics, and these differ slightly from the total numbers by age and sex from the UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics.



**Figure 2c** Relationship and family status, and living arrangements: estimated numbers of RAF personnel in RAF Regular Forces in 2017



**Figure 2d.** Relationship and family status, and living arrangements: estimated numbers of RAF personnel in RAF Reserve Forces in 2017



Among Reserves, just over half were married or in a civil partnership, with a further two in 10 in a long-term or stable relationship. Around four in 10 Reservists had children (on average 1.9).

Further details of the data supporting these population sizes and estimates are given in the remaining sections of this chapter.

## 2.2 Number of RAF personnel

In April 2017 the number of RAF personnel was 37,052 including 33,261 Regulars and a total of 3,791 Reserve personnel<sup>6</sup>. This figure includes 1,251 full-time Reserves and 2,348 part-time Volunteer Reserve personnel. There are also a further 997 in the University Air Squadron (MOD 2017b). The main population is broken down according to RAF service in figure 2e. Within the Regular Forces, there are 30,853 full-time trained personnel.

**Figure 2e** *RAF personnel<sup>7</sup> April 2017 (MOD 2017b)*

SERVICE	NUMBER
UK Regular Forces	33,261
...of which full time trained	30,853
UK Reserve Forces	3,791
...of which Full Time Reserves	1,244
...including from Volunteer Reserve	371
Part-time Volunteer Reserve (i.e. RAuxAF)	2,355
Sponsored Reserve <sup>8</sup>	192
<b>TOTAL Regular and Reserve, excluding UAS</b>	<b>37,052</b>
University Air Squadron (UAS)	997
<b>TOTAL including UAS</b>	<b>38,049</b>

Of the RAF Regular Forces 7,430 are officers (22%) with 25,830 in other ranks (78%) (MOD 2017a). The total serving RAF population has fallen from around 42,000 in April 2012, with more than half of this decline between 2012 and 2013 and very little change in the last two years.

It should be noted that the definition of 'Reserve Forces' varies by data source. RAF data on length of service gives a slightly higher total of Reservists (5,011) than that cited in MOD monthly personnel statistics (4,788 including the UAS – MOD 2017b), possibly because of the inclusion of personnel in training in the RAF data.

<sup>6</sup> Note that all figures in this section are taken from UK Armed Forces Monthly Service Personnel Statistics and the total number of personnel differs slightly from the figures given in the UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics, as used in Section 2.3. The total figures also differ slightly from those provided by the RAF in relation to personal status and length of service.

<sup>7</sup> Total trained and untrained strength of all Regular, full-time and Reserve, Royal Air Force Service personnel.

<sup>8</sup> The Sponsored Reserve are a civilian workforce who deliver support to UK Forces under a contract or agreement with the MOD. They deliver this support in peacetime as civilians and continue to deliver it as a member of the Reserve Forces when there is a requirement to do so during military operations.

## 2.3 Age and sex

The majority of RAF Regular Forces personnel are men; so too are those within the RAF Volunteer Reserve, although women make up a slightly larger minority of this latter group (see figure 2f).

**Figure 2f** Sex of RAF Regular Forces and Volunteer Reserves April 2017 (MOD 2017a)

	REGULAR FORCES		VOLUNTEER RESERVE	
Female	4,670	14%	560	21%
Male	28,590	86%	2,160	79%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>33,260</b>		<b>2,730</b>	

The vast majority (83%) of RAF Regular Forces personnel are aged 20–44, with an average age of 33 years, while the RAF Volunteer Reserve are slightly older on average (42) with almost half (47%) aged 45 and over (see figure 2g).

**Figure 2g** Age of RAF Regular Forces and Volunteer Reserves April 2017 (MOD 2017a)

	REGULAR FORCES		VOLUNTEER RESERVE	
Under 18	160	<0.5%	-	-
18–19	730	2%	20	1%
20–24	4,460	13%	150	6%
25–29	7,220	22%	310	11%
30–34	6,530	20%	330	12%
35–39	5,710	17%	320	12%
40–44	3,600	11%	320	12%
45–49	2,860	9%	500	18%
50–54	1,740	5%	450	17%
55–59	250	1%	260	9%
60 and over	-	-	70	3%
<b>AVERAGE AGE</b>	<b>33</b>		<b>42</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>33,260</b>		<b>2,730</b>	

Almost all RAF personnel are white UK, with 2% of Regular Forces and 4% of Volunteer Reserves identified as BAME (MOD 2017a).

## 2.4 Length of service

RAF data provides an indication of length of service (figure 2h). The majority of the RAF Regular Forces have been serving for up to 20 years, with almost half serving for under 10 years. The data for RAF Reserves suggests 66% have been serving for under five years. The time served may be overestimated for some Reservists as it may include previous time served in the Regular Forces and any gaps between Regular and Reserve service.

**Figure 2h** *Length of service of RAF Regular Forces and Reservists<sup>9</sup> (RAF internal data)*

	REGULAR FORCES		VOLUNTEER RESERVE	
<5 years	8,030	24%	3,324	66%
5–10 years	7,253	22%	526	10%
10–15 years	5,727	17%	318	6%
15–20 years	5,831	18%	231	5%
20–25 years	2,304	7%	101	2%
25–30 years	2,238	7%	205	4%
30–35 years	1,335	4%	183	4%
35+ years	317	1%	123	2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>33,035</b>		<b>5,011</b>	

## 2.5 Family status

The data in this section describing the composition of RAF households is based on survey research among a sample of RAF personnel, whereas the figures in Sections 2.2 to 2.4 provided numbers of all personnel from MOD records. Because of this, percentage figures are used for family status in this section. Estimates of numbers of personnel based on these percentages were provided in Section 2.1 (see Figures 2c and 2d).

### Relationship status

AFCAS (MOD 2017d) and RESCAS (MOD 2017c) provide estimates of relationship status for the RAF full-time trained Regular Forces and Volunteer Reservists<sup>10</sup> (see figure 2i).

**Figure 2i** *Relationship status of RAF full-time trained Regular Forces and Volunteer Reservists: AFCAS (MOD 2017b) and RESCAS (MOD 2017c)*

	REGULAR FT TRAINED FORCES	VOLUNTEER RESERVISTS
Married/in a civil partnership	58%	53%
Long-term/established relationship	22%	18%
Separated/divorced	5%	9%
Single	14%	17%
Widowed	0.1%	1%
Unknown	1%	1%

Among the trained UK Regular RAF personnel included in AFCAS 2017 (MOD 2017d) 58% reported being married or in a civil partnership, with a further 22% in a long-term or stable relationship, 14% single and 5% divorced or separated. Among the RAF Volunteer Reservists included in RESCAS (MOD 2017c), 53% reported being married or in a civil partnership, with a further 18% in a stable relationship, 17% single and 9% separated or divorced.

<sup>9</sup> Reservists include all Reserve Forces: regular, volunteer and sponsored.

<sup>10</sup> The RESCAS data does not specify whether or not this includes the 10% of the Volunteer Reserve who are part of the Full Time Reserve Service (FTRS), or if it is restricted to part-time personnel only.

## Dependent children

Among the full-time trained Regular RAF personnel included in AFCAS 2017 (MOD 2017d) just over half (51%) had children whom they support financially. The total number of children for each respondent is not provided<sup>11</sup> but from the data available Regular RAF personnel with children have an estimated average of 1.8 children. 82% of those with children said that they lived with them, which equates to 42% of all RAF Regulars. Among the RAF Volunteer Reservists taking part in RESCAS (MOD 2017c), 43% have children. Based on the numbers of children reported in the survey, Reservists with children have an estimated average of 1.9 children.

**Figure 2j** *Financially dependent children among RAF full-time trained Regular Forces and Volunteer Reservists: AFCAS (MOD 2017d) and RESCAS (MOD 2017c)*

	REGULAR FT TRAINED FORCES	VOLUNTEER RESERVISTS
Any children	51%	43%
Children aged under 5	25%	Not available
Children aged 5 to 17	30%	Not available
Children aged 18+	8%	Not available
Estimated average number of children (among those with any children)	1.8	1.9
Any children living with them	42%	Not available

<sup>11</sup> The number of children is provided within each of three age bands, but some respondents have children in more than one age band, so this data cannot be combined, and no total number of children per respondent is provided in the data.

## 2.6 Accommodation

An estimate of the accommodation occupied by RAF full-time trained Regular Forces is provided by AFCAS 2017 (figure 2k).

**Figure 2k** *Accommodation of RAF full-time trained Regular Forces: AFCAS (MOD 2017d)*

	REGULAR FT TRAINED FORCES
Service Family Accommodation (SFA)	33%
Substitute Service Family Accommodation (SSFA)	1%
Single Living Accommodation (SLA)	33%
Substitute Single Living Accommodation (SSLA)	3%
Owned home	26%
Private rented accommodation	3%
Relative's home/other	1%

Around a third (34%) of regular RAF personnel reported living in either Service Family Accommodation (SFA) or Substitute Service Family Accommodation (SSFA) with 36% in either Single Living Accommodation (SLA) or Substitute Single Living Accommodation (SSLA), and 29% living in their own home (owned or rented). In the absence of any data on housing, RAF Reservists (unless currently mobilised<sup>12</sup>) and their dependants presumably live in their own property (either owned or rented) off base.

<sup>12</sup> 16% of the Volunteer Reserve report having been mobilised from 2014 to 2017 (MOD 2017c).



## 3 SURVEY AND INTERVIEW FINDINGS

This chapter reports on the primary research collected through an **online self-completion survey** in November/December 2017 of 3,057 people in the serving RAF community: 2,579 RAF personnel and 478 partners of RAF personnel. All RAF personnel currently serving were invited to take part via email and the response rate was 7% from the total population of RAF personnel and an estimated 2% from partners. The survey measured the reported prevalence of different difficulties people faced, the help they had sought and barriers to seeking help.

Further insights come from subsequent **in-depth telephone interviews** with 24 of the survey respondents (12 RAF personnel and 12 dependant partners) conducted in March/April 2018, which explored three specific themes in greater detail: social isolation, mental wellbeing and partner employment. These three topics were selected as they affected significant numbers of people and in order to consider how more could be done to help with challenges faced in those areas. All of the interviewees had reported major problems in at least one of those three areas, and the majority had reported major problems in all three areas. As such, they do not represent a picture of life in the RAF – rather they highlight the concerns and experiences of individuals with particular needs. Insights from the in-depth interviews are interspersed throughout this chapter.

Further details of the survey and qualitative research methods and statistical reliability and limitations are given at Appendix 3.

### 3.1 Profile of research participants

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The responses to the online survey are reported separately for RAF personnel and partners.

The reader is referred to Appendix 3 for a full description of the sample profile for each sample (Section 3.2.4). The achieved survey sample was weighted to be statistically representative of the wider serving RAF community on the following demographic variables: age, gender, military rank, relationship status, presence of children and employment status. The majority of RAF personnel surveyed were male, Regulars, with average age 35 and typically married or in a committed relationship. The partners surveyed were predominantly married women with average age 39, typically working and living in Service Family Accommodation.

The 24 participants in the subsequent telephone in-depth interviews were mainly in the 25–34 age bracket. The 12 RAF personnel comprised nine men and three women; of whom seven were married, one living with their partner/in a committed relationship and four singles; and mainly from junior ranks. All 12 partners interviewed were married women. These people were selected to take part because they had all reported major problems with social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment in the survey responses; and most of them had experienced major problems under all three themes.

### 3.2 Reported difficulties

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Over a series of questions respondents to the survey were asked whether they had experienced each of 30 specific problems (under seven themes) over the past few years. They were asked to rate each one on a four-point scale, as to whether it had been a 'major problem', 'problem', 'slight problem' or they had 'never' experienced it. The proportion of RAF personnel and partners citing each issue as either a 'major problem' or a 'problem' was totalled. Then for RAF personnel this was extrapolated to estimate how many people in the total serving RAF population might have experienced each issue – this was calculated at two levels 'major problem' and 'major problem or problem'.



Approaching half (45%) of RAF personnel and four in 10 (39%) of partners reported experiencing no 'major problems' in the past few years. The remainder had experienced 'major problems' with at least some of the 30 specific issues investigated, but typically only a few of them. 55% of RAF personnel reported one or more 'major problems' over the past few years (and 84% reported one or more 'major problems' or 'problems'). 61% of partners reported one or more 'major problems' and 90% cited one or more 'major problems' or 'problems'. However, the majority of people said they had only experienced a few problems of the 30 presented in the survey.

The average (mean) number of issues experienced as 'major problems' was 2.1 among RAF personnel and 2.6 among partners, and most people had experienced none at all, or just one or two (see fig. 5.1 at Appendix 5). The average number of issues experienced as 'major problems' or 'problems' was 5.3 among RAF personnel and 6.4 among partners.

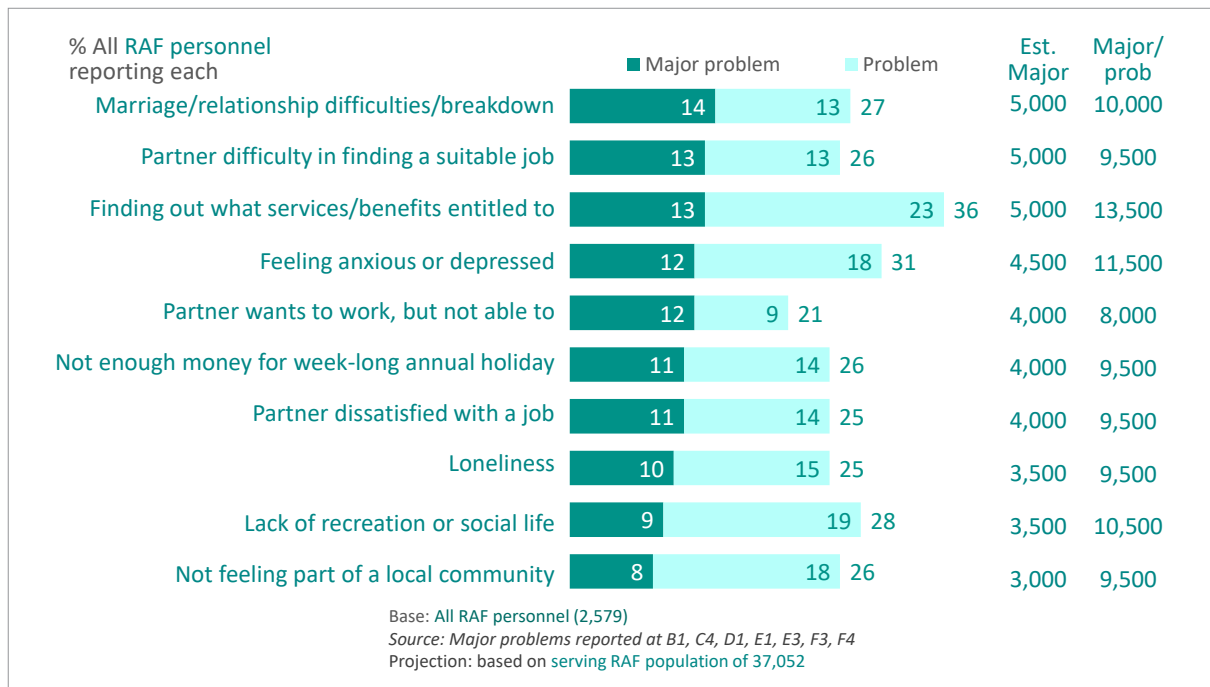
Focusing on 'major problems', the single most reported difficulty among RAF personnel was **marriage or relationship difficulties or breakdown**, reported by 14%, which could be extrapolated to around 5,000 people. The second and third ranked major problems were **their partner having difficulty finding a suitable job**, 13% and **difficulty finding out what services or benefits they were entitled to**, again affecting around 5,000 people. The other issues that featured among the top 10 major problems included anxiety/depression, partners not being able to work or being dissatisfied with their job, and lack of money for an annual holiday. Loneliness, lack of recreation or social life and not feeling part of a local community were also concerns (fig. 3a).

Adding together 'major problems' and 'problems', the single most reported difficulty among RAF personnel was **finding out what services or benefits they were entitled to**, reported by 36%, which is equivalent to 13,500 people. This was followed by **feeling anxious or depressed**, cited by 31% or around 11,500 people and **lack of recreation or social life**, cited by 28%, or around 10,500 people (fig. 3a).

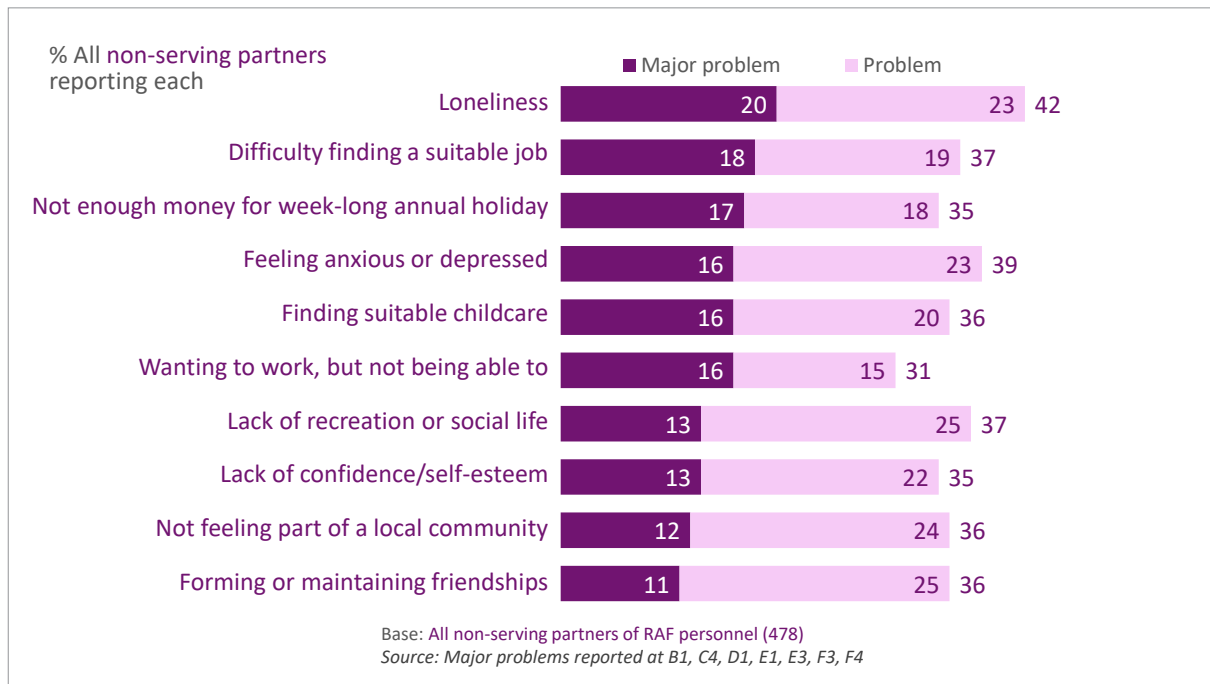
Among partners of RAF personnel, there was a slightly different rank order of concerns. Their single most reported 'major problem' was **loneliness**, reported by 20%. Their second and third ranked issues were **difficulty finding a suitable job**, cited by 18%, and **not having enough money for a week-long annual holiday**, 17%. Other issues featuring among their top concerns were anxiety or depression, finding suitable childcare, wanting to work but not being able to, and lack of confidence/self-esteem. There were also issues around social isolation – lack of recreation or social life, not feeling part of a local community and friendship difficulties (fig. 3b).

Adding together 'major problems' and 'problems', the single most reported difficulty among partners of RAF personnel was still **loneliness**, reported by 42%. This was followed by **feeling anxious or depressed**, cited by 39%, and then **difficulty finding a suitable job** and **lack of recreation or social life**, both on 37% (fig. 3b).

**Figure 3a** Top 10 ranked problems experienced by RAF personnel, over the past few years



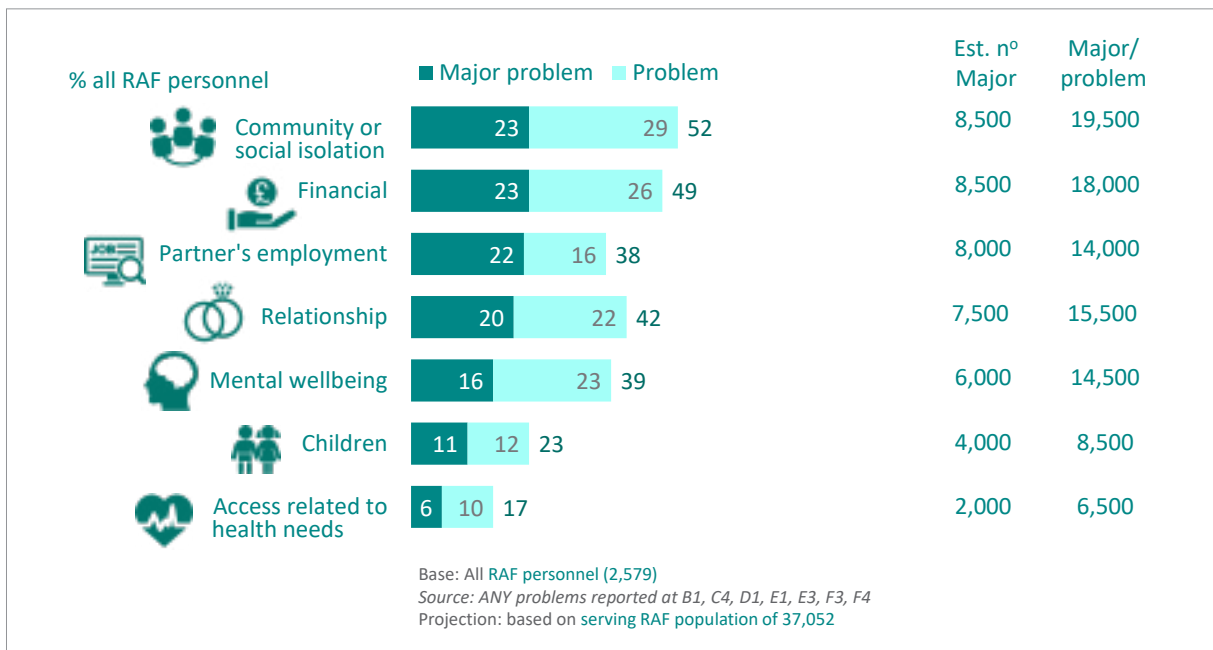
**Figure 3b** Top 10 ranked problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel, over the past few years



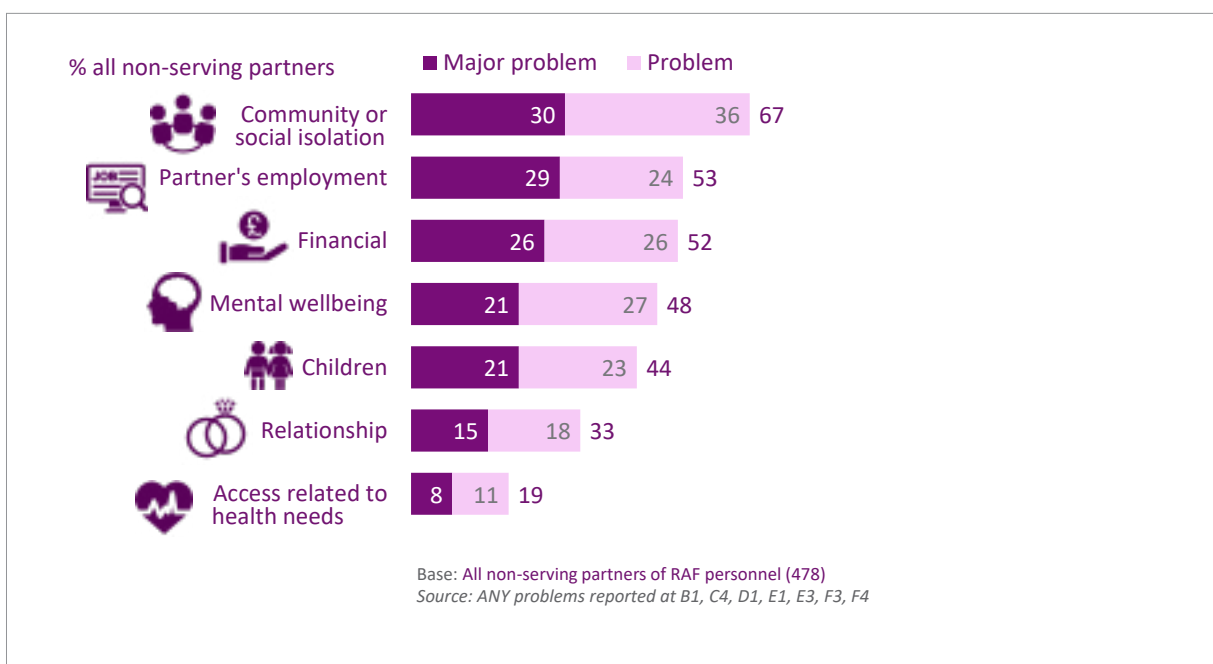
The 30 different issues were grouped under seven different themes (see Appendix 5 for full details of which specific problems were grouped under each thematic heading). Among RAF personnel, the top three themes for ‘major problems’, each experienced by more than one in five, were: community or social isolation, financial difficulties and difficulties around partner’s

employment. At the level of ‘major problem’ or ‘problem’ the top three themes, each experienced by more than four in 10, were: community and social isolation, financial difficulties and relationship difficulties. Just under four in 10 cited partner’s employment or mental wellbeing, and under a quarter mentioned children or access related to health needs (fig. 3c).

**Figure 3c** Summary of problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – grouped by theme



**Figure 3d** Summary of problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – grouped by theme



Among partners of RAF personnel, the top three themes for 'major problems', each experienced by more than a quarter, were: community or social isolation, their employment and financial difficulties. At the level of 'major problem' or 'problem' the same three themes emerged, each raised by more than half (fig. 3d).

Figures 3c and 3d highlight how more partners than RAF personnel reported problems across many themes, particularly social isolation. The exception to this pattern was relationships, which was more problematic for RAF personnel.

Under each theme, there were various specific issues that were cited at significantly higher prevalence by partners than by RAF personnel. Some of the differences could be explained by the fact that not all the RAF personnel had partners or children thereby reducing the percentage of them experiencing family-related issues (e.g. to do with partners' employment or childcare). However, there were other notable variances where partners were more likely than RAF personnel to cite a 'major problem', particularly under the social isolation theme and also a couple pertaining to finances or mental wellbeing:

- Loneliness – 20% of partners vs. 10% of RAF personnel
- Not enough money for a week-long holiday once a year – 17% vs. 11%
- Feeling anxious or depressed – 16% vs. 12%
- Lack of confidence/self-esteem – 13% vs. 9%
- Lack of recreation or social life – 13% vs. 9%
- Not feeling part of a local community – 12% vs. 8%.

There were a couple of notable 'major problems' which were cited by significantly more RAF personnel than partners, under the relationships theme:

- Marriage or relationship difficulties or breakdown – 14% of RAF personnel vs. 7% of partners<sup>13</sup>
- Difficulty forming a new relationship – 5% of RAF personnel vs. 1% of partners.

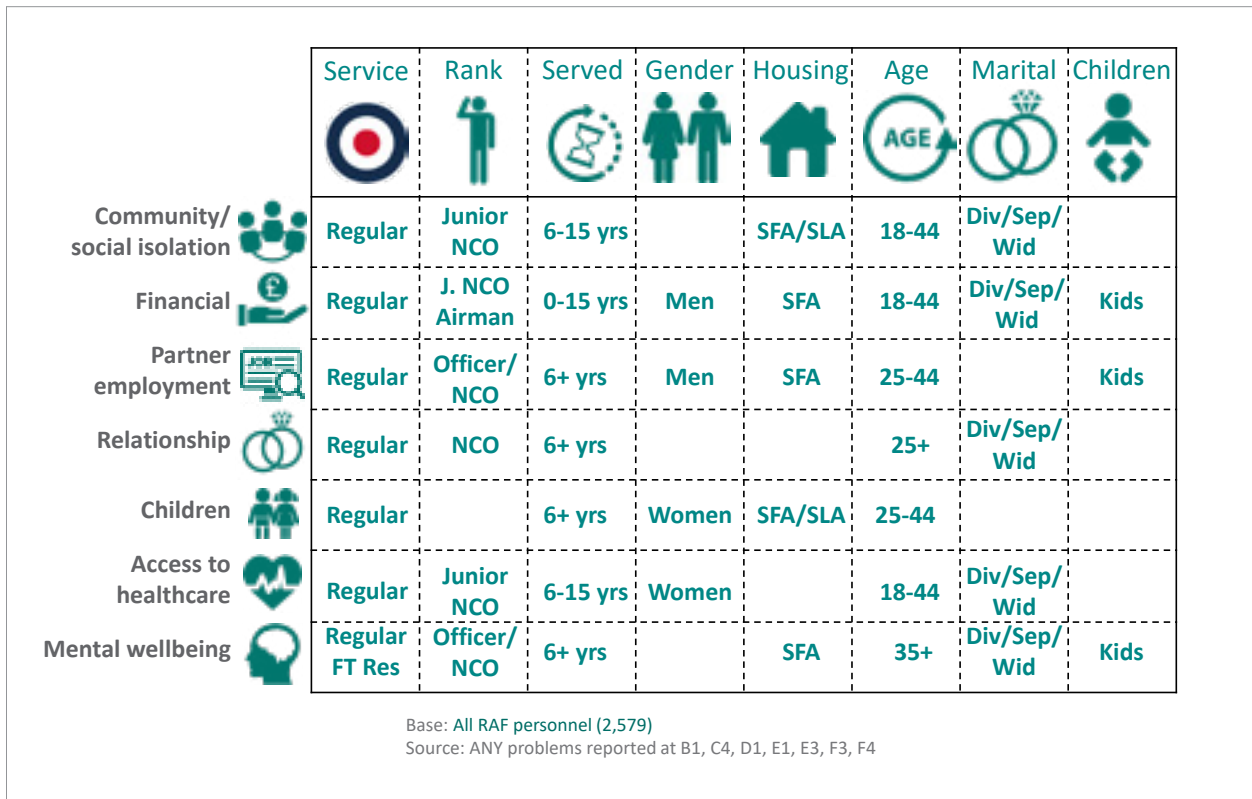
RAF personnel who cited problems under the themes of mental wellbeing, access to healthcare or children were particularly likely to also cite problems under the other themes. Partners experiencing problems with mental wellbeing or access to healthcare were especially likely to also cite problems under the other themes.

Figure 3e shows the categories of people among RAF personnel who were the most likely to cite problems under each theme. Regulars reported a higher level of problems than Reserves. Serving men reported a higher level of problems than serving women under financial difficulties and problems with their partner's employment; while serving women reported a higher level of problems than their male counterparts under the themes of mental wellbeing and children. RAF personnel with any of the following characteristics showed higher levels of problems across many themes: junior non-commissioned officers, those having served for six to 15 years, aged 25–44, with children, living in Service Family Accommodation and who were separated/divorced or widowed.

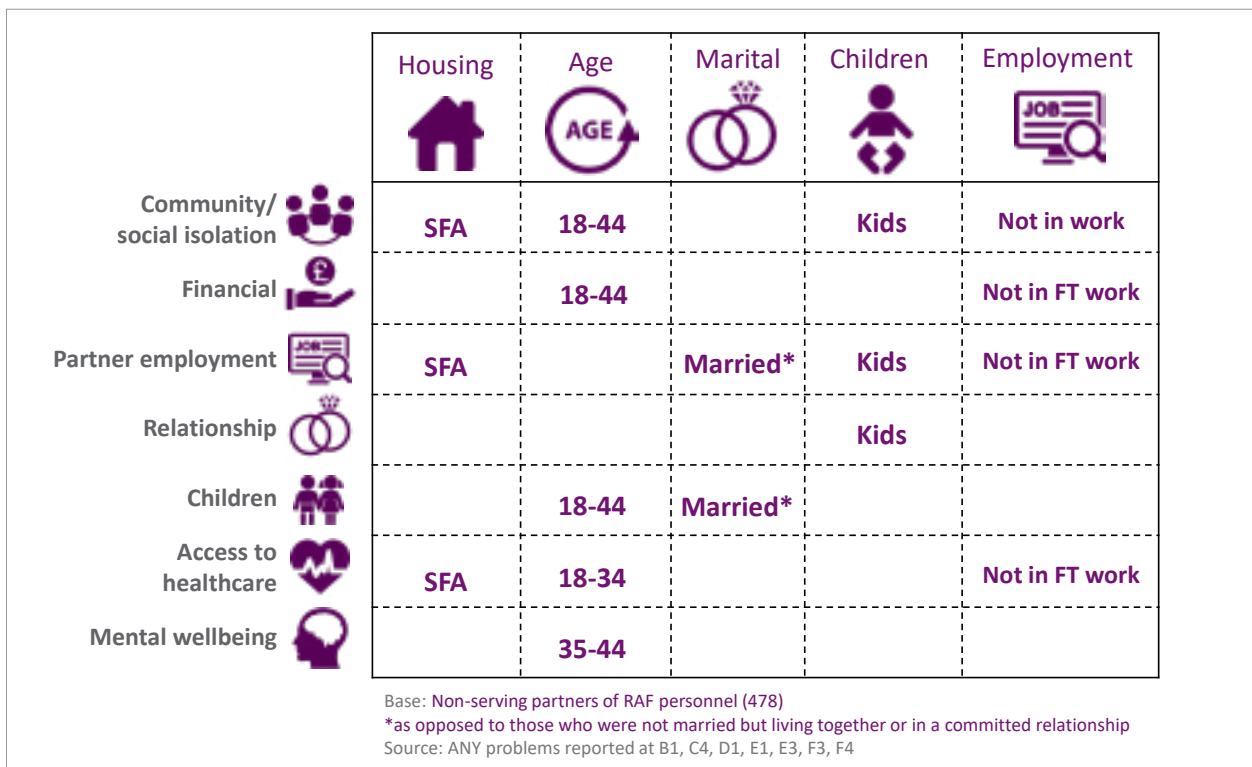
Among partners of RAF personnel, the following sub-groups showed a heightened reporting of any problems under several themes: aged 18–44, with children, not in full-time work, living in Service Family Accommodation. Those who were married, rather than in a committed relationship, reported more problems under the themes of employment and children (fig. 3f).

<sup>13</sup> This is not surprising since by definition the partners were in established relationships whereas the serving respondents included people who were single, separated and divorced too.

**Figure 3e** Sub-groups among RAF personnel who reported the highest level of problems within each theme



**Figure 3f** Sub-groups among partners of RAF personnel who reported the highest level of problems within each theme



The subsequent sections discuss in more detail specific issues falling under each thematic heading, highlighting key insights such as the percentage citing 'major problems' and the rank order of issues. Supporting evidence is provided by the accompanying charts at Appendix 5 – these show the prevalence of both 'major problems' and 'problems' to illustrate both those with the greatest needs and the wider pool who are affected but at a lower level of severity.

### 3.3 Community and social isolation

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More RAF personnel and their partners had experienced 'problems' or 'major problems' over the past few years under the theme of community and social isolation than any other theme: 23% of RAF personnel and 30% of partners cited it as a major problem. Adding together 'major problems', and 'problems', this increased to 52% of RAF personnel and 67% of partners. Figures 5.2 and 5.3 at Appendix 5 show the proportions citing each of the five specific issues under this theme as major problems or problems.

10% of RAF personnel cited a 'major problem' with **loneliness**, and this proportion doubled to 20% among partners. 'Major problems' with **lack of recreation or social life, not feeling part of a local community or difficulty forming or maintaining friendships** had been encountered by 8%–9% of RAF personnel and 11%–13% of partners. 6% of RAF personnel and 9% of partners had experienced 'major problems' with **lack of suitable transport** (their own or public transport).

The proportion of partners voicing each of these concerns was significantly higher than the proportion of RAF personnel.

Those under the age of 45 and those living in Service Family Accommodation were more likely to cite each of these problems. So too were RAF personnel who were in the Regulars rather than the Reserves, junior non-commissioned officers, and weekend commuters. Non-working partners were more likely than other partners to feel socially isolated.

Loneliness was particularly reported by RAF personnel who were separated, divorced or widowed and they also found it harder than most to form or maintain friendships. Serving women and those in dual serving households were also slightly more likely than other RAF personnel to feel lonely. Lack of transport was a particular problem for those living in Service Family Accommodation (serving or partners) and partners who were not in work.

Community and social isolation was a theme explored in more detail in the in-depth interviews. It was the perception that social isolation is experienced by people in many different circumstances within the serving RAF community: serving and non-serving, working or not, single or partnered and living on or off base. The interviewees said that the particular nature of RAF life sometimes put considerable strain on their lives – frequent moves, the remote rural location of some stations, being distanced from immediate or extended family members, deployments, irregular shifts and antisocial hours all contributed to social isolation.

Interviewees reported a loss of community feel on bases and some suggested this was linked to selling off RAF housing and contracting out on-base services – bars have shut and they didn't know their neighbours. The impact of geographical moves was regularly cited as a cause of stress, particularly by partners. Partners said that it was difficult to develop friendships at some stations e.g. due to insufficient numbers to sustain community activities, established wives' cliques, some stations having very limited community facilities and some being remote from local community facilities. Partners without children found it harder to meet people and make friends within the RAF community; so too those who were working full-time in civilian jobs off base. Partners were often living a long way from their parents and other relatives and so lacked the extended family support network for socialising, emotional support and childcare. Several of the interviewees had a child with additional educational needs and this caused heightened anxiety when moving location.

In terms of serving life, the interviewees observed that changes in catering arrangements (especially the introduction of 'pay as you dine') had had an impact on the culture making it less sociable. Some blocks had no communal area to mingle either. And the younger generations spent significant amounts of time socialising with digital technology e.g. playing computer games or using social media but this often confined them to their rooms, rather than interacting with the neighbours in the Service Family Accommodation. When RAF personnel were deployed their partners found this very tough and those with children said it can feel like becoming a 'single parent'.

*"There's no common room for people to congregate... so people tend to stay in their rooms."*

Junior officer, single man

*"You have people you work with, but they are not close friends. In my whole 20 years in the air force I have felt isolated and lonely – every day I am away, I would say my wife feels isolated and lonely... When you live on a military station every year your neighbours change... It's harder for her to make friends than it is for me."*

SNCO

*"It was difficult (for her) initially (when we arrived here)... there were no job vacancies and cabin fever sets in..."*

Airman, partner is working part time

*"You lose your confidence... Every time you move you've got to make new friends... You've got to pluck up the courage to walk into a group where you don't know anybody."*

Partner who had experienced a lot of station moves

### 3.4 Financial means

Six specific issues were included under the theme of financial means, covering lack of money, debt, and state entitlements. 23% of RAF personnel and 26% of partners cited one or more of these as a 'major problem'; when adding together 'major problems' and 'problems', this increased to 49% of RAF personnel and 52% of partners experiencing problems in this area. Figures 5.4 and 5.5 at Appendix 5 show the proportions citing each of the six issues under this theme as major problems or problems.

The most problematic issue for RAF personnel was **finding out what services or benefits they were entitled to** (13% cited this as a 'major problem'); followed by **insufficient funds for a week-long annual holiday** (11%). Among partners of RAF personnel, lack of money for a holiday was their top concern (17% citing this as a 'major problem'), followed by difficulty finding out about service or benefit entitlements (11%).

Other issues under this heading, each of which were cited as a 'major problem' by fewer than 10% were, in descending rank order: **not enough money to cover unexpected needs** (e.g. car or house repairs, or family illness), **not enough money to buy or replace items needed, not enough money for day-to-day living or to pay household bills, and late or missed payments/problems with debt**).

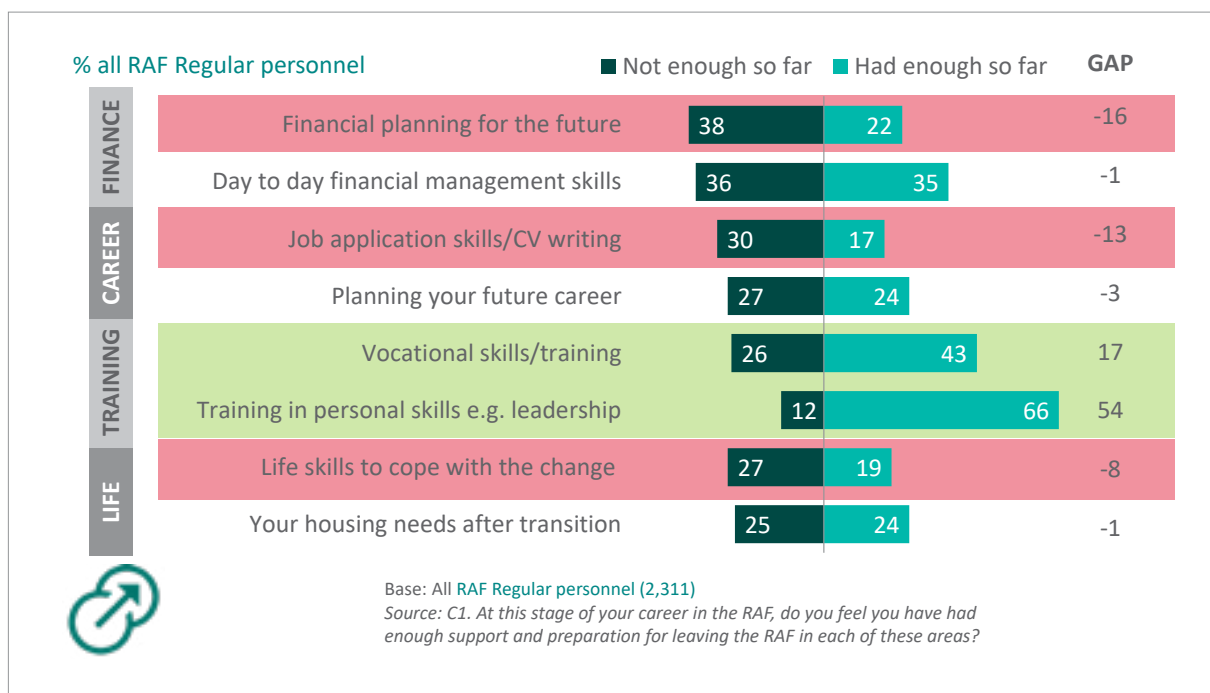
Knowing what they were entitled to was more likely to be cited as a problem by RAF personnel who were Regulars, aged under 45, men, living in Service Accommodation, and at the lower ranks of airman/women or junior non-commissioned officers. Among partners, those aged under 45 and those not in work were particularly likely to have a knowledge gap.

### 3.5 Employment

#### 3.5.1 Serving person’s preparedness for transition

The survey asked RAF personnel whether they felt they had had sufficient support and preparation for leaving the RAF, given the stage of their RAF career. Among RAF Regulars as a whole, taking account of the current stage in their career, the two areas where they felt least prepared for leaving the RAF were financial planning for the future (38% saying they had not had enough preparation so far) and day-to-day financial management skills (36%). The two areas where they thought they were best prepared were vocational skills/training and training in personal skills e.g. leadership, team working (fig. 3g).

**Figure 3g.** RAF personnel’s perceived preparedness for transition



Focusing in on RAF personnel who were already in the transition phase (two years prior to discharge), those who were planning to leave in the next 12 months felt much better prepared than those who were planning to leave in the next two years (see fig. 5.6 at Appendix 5). This is presumably because as their discharge date draws closer, they had undergone more transition planning and courses and so felt more ready. Among those who were planning to leave within the next 12 months, the two areas where they felt least well prepared were life skills to cope with the change to civilian life and financial planning for the future.

#### 3.5.2. Non-serving partner’s employment

Turning to partners of RAF personnel, 29% of them cited one or more ‘major problems’ under the theme of their employment. Adding together ‘major problems’ and ‘problems’, this increased to 53%. Figure 5.8 at Appendix 5 shows the proportion of partners citing each of the four specific issues under this theme as ‘major problems’ or ‘problems’. Figure 5.7 shows the equivalent results reported by RAF personnel who had a partner, but as this is secondhand opinion (and broadly reflected views of partners themselves), only the results from partners are discussed here.



18% of partners had experienced a 'major problem' over the past few years with **difficulty finding a suitable job** and 16% with **wanting to work but not being able to**. 8% had experienced a 'major problem' with **job dissatisfaction** and 6% with **lack of training, qualifications or skills to find work**.

Difficulty finding a job or wanting to work but not being able to were more likely to be cited by partners who were not in work, who lived in Service Family Accommodation (SFA) or who had children. Non-working partners and those living in SFA were also more likely than others to cite a lack of suitable training, qualifications or skills.

The theme of partners' employment was explored in more detail in the telephone 'in-depth' interviews<sup>14</sup>. The general feeling among interviewees was that the RAF lifestyle imposes limitations on partner employment and necessitates pragmatism when seeking job opportunities. It was often not easy to pursue their chosen career and they needed to be flexible to vacancies on offer in the locality. Some partners had experienced difficulty finding their preferred work locally – so they had to take what was available, which might be a different line of work (starting 'on the bottom rung'), take variable or less challenging roles, or accept that they weren't able to build a career (limited opportunities for progression or having to move sideways out of their preferred specialism). Some partners felt that they had 'patchy' CVs with gaps and short or disjointed appointments.

*"She wanted to be a Teaching Assistant, but with lack of work continuity it's very hard... She hasn't had the opportunity to cement her profession, due to the fact we've been moved regularly."*

SNCO, partner works part time

*"The nomadic lifestyle is stressful... I became conflicted... between what I want for my own career and identity, and the sacrifices I have to make, versus keeping my family together."*

Partner, working full time in a professional healthcare role

Partners often felt they were unattractive to employers as the RAF lifestyle was seen as inflexible, yet much of the work available was in sectors requiring a degree of flexibility (e.g. hospitality, retail). Practically, they needed wrap-around childcare due to the antisocial hours and/or deployments of their serving partner; however the high costs of this additional childcare they felt often made the reduced income from working not worth it, so influencing the decision to stay at home and look after the family. Partners also always had to cover childcare in case of illness or emergency as RAF personnel could rarely do so; this was not always tolerated by all employers (and if their child had special needs and it was happening regularly this exacerbated their work absences). Not living close to their own parents meant that they could not turn to them to help with regular or emergency childcare.

*"I'm in a really high tempo deployment job... Employers know that during times when I'm deployed she won't be able to commit to what they are looking for."*

Airman, large station, partner is working part time

<sup>14</sup> The interviewees included a total sample of 20 partners on which to base the analysis (12 partners and eight RAF personnel with partners). Of these 20 people, eight partners were working full time, four were working part time, one was an unemployed job seeker and seven were not working looking after the family.

*"It was disappointing because that company is part of the Armed Forces Covenant, but they didn't seem to understand that military families don't necessarily live near a support network."*

Female, commissioned officer, husband is looking after the family and did not get a job he applied for due to lack of flexibility.

There was felt to be a significant impact from RAF postings to new stations. Some stations were in locations where the job market is weak, and remote locations can make having a car a necessity and may rule out jobs with long commutes. Upon postings it could take some time after arriving in a new location to secure work (and if it was a short posting, employers were less interested in hiring). The lack of notice over forthcoming postings was an irritation – two to three months was not enough time for partners to react and seek a transfer or apply for and secure a new job to start as soon as they arrive. Inevitably this led to a loss of household income. Anecdotally, they also felt that it was harder to get jobs on base these days, due to the contracting out of on base services.

*"When we moved up here she really struggled to find a full-time job, because of the length of time I was going to be posted here – maybe only 14 months."*

Airman, partner is working full-time

*"To be honest, I'm at my wit's end with it (the lack of notice about next posting). I'm at breaking point with it. There's no consistency...and no communication. It's tipping me over the edge."*

Partner, working full time; child with special needs

*"I don't know how I'll find work if we move, so I'd have to look for more general 'admin' roles... What they don't factor in is that if I have to leave my job we lose £21K income and his promotion isn't going to make up that gap."*

Partner, working full time in a transport planning role

*"The lucky ones get a job with the Civil Service and on camp but it's so hard now. There's really nothing on camp available. And if jobs do come up they are so oversubscribed."*

Partner, working part time

Because of all of these factors, some partners had chosen or resigned themselves to putting their own career 'on hold' and stay at home to look after the family.

### 3.6 Relationships and family life

RAF personnel were more likely to cite 'major problems' with relationships (20%) than with children (11%); and vice versa for partners, (who by definition were in an established relationship) and so were more likely to cite 'major problems' with children (21%) than with relationships (15%).

Among RAF personnel, 14% had experienced 'major problems' over the past few years to do with **marriage/relationship breakdown or difficulties**, 6% with **bereavement** and 5% with **forming a new relationship**. Among partners, 8% had experienced 'major problems' over the past few years associated with **bereavement**, 7% with **marriage/relationship breakdown or difficulties** and 1% with forming a new relationship (see figures 5.9 and 5.10 at Appendix 5).

Adding in those who cited relationship 'problems' to those experiencing 'major problems', 27% of RAF personnel said they had experienced marriage or relationship difficulties in recent years (figure 5.9 in Appendix 5).

Among RAF personnel, 25–44 year olds and non-commissioned officers were more likely than average to have experienced problems of marriage/relationship breakdown; while under 45s and singles were more likely than others to mention problems forming a new relationship. Unsurprisingly those who were currently separated or divorced were much more likely to mention both these challenges.

### 3.6.1 Children

It was reported earlier that 11% of all RAF personnel and 21% of all partners cited one or more 'major problems' with their children (figs 3c and 3d). However, re-percentageing these results on just the subset of parents who had children aged under 18, then 22% of RAF personnel with children and 28% of partners with children had experienced one or more 'major problems' with their children. The rest of the results in this section are based just on this subset of parents.

Among RAF personnel who were parents, 15% had experienced 'major problems' over the past few years with **finding suitable childcare**, 9% with their **children's education** (e.g. changing school, getting appropriate support) and 5% in **relationships with their children**. Partners of RAF personnel who were parents felt these issues more keenly: 21% had experienced 'major problems' over the past few years with **finding suitable childcare**, 12% with their **children's education** and 3% in **relationships with their children** (see figures 5.11 and 5.12 at Appendix 5).

Adding together 'major problems' and 'problems', partners were significantly more likely to cite difficulties with their children (57%) than RAF personnel were (46%), perhaps because they shoulder more of the responsibility here (see figures 5.11 and 5.12 at Appendix 5).

Among serving RAF parents, women were slightly more likely to report problems with childcare; so too those living in Service Family Accommodation. RAF parents who were separated, divorced or widowed were more likely than others to have experienced problems relating to their children. Turning to partners, those in work were more likely than those who were not working to report problems with their children's education; while the under 45s reported more problems than over 45s with childcare (probably reflecting their children's ages).

## 3.7 Health

The survey did not explore health needs of RAF personnel but did record health needs of their family members. Among those RAF personnel who had a partner, 15% said their partner had a health-related difficulty (equivalent to around 4,000 people), including:

- 8% with a long-term mental wellbeing condition
- 9% with a long-term physical health problem or disability
- 2% with difficulties getting around inside or outside of the home
- 1% with difficulty with self-care (e.g. washing, dressing, toileting, preparing meals).

Among those RAF personnel who had dependent children (of any age), 13% said one or more of their children had a health-related difficulty (equivalent to around 2,500 personnel affected), including:

- 5% with a long-term mental wellbeing condition
- 8% with a long-term physical health problem or disability
- 2% with difficulties getting around inside or outside of the home
- 3% with difficulty with self-care (e.g. washing, dressing, toileting, preparing meals).

### 3.7.1 Mental wellbeing

16% of RAF personnel and 21% of partners reported that they had experienced one or more 'major problems' with mental wellbeing over the past few years. Adding together 'major problems' and 'problems', this increased to 39% of RAF personnel and 48% of partners.

Figures 5.13 and 5.14 at Appendix 5 show the proportions citing each of the six specific issues under this theme as 'major problems' or 'problems'.

12% of RAF personnel reported major problems with feeling **anxious or depressed**, 9% a **lack of confidence/self-esteem** and 7% a **lack of purpose or hope for the future**. The equivalent proportions among partners were 16%, 13% and 5% respectively. The proportion of partners who had experienced anxiety or depression, or lack of confidence/self-esteem was significantly higher than the proportion reported by RAF personnel.

2% of RAF personnel and partners said they had experienced major problems with **PTSD or combat stress** and 1% with **heavy drinking or taking drugs**.

Among RAF personnel there were certain subgroups who were more likely to report challenges with mental wellbeing. Regulars, those aged under 45 and junior non-commissioned officers, were all more likely than average to report anxiety/depression, low self-esteem and/or a lack of purpose. Those who were separated, divorced or widowed had heightened levels of anxiety/depression and heavy drinking or drug use. Serving women were more likely than their male counterparts to report anxiety/depression and low self-esteem, but not a lack of purpose.

Among partners of RAF personnel those aged 18–34 and those not in work were particularly likely to report anxiety/depression or low confidence/self-esteem, and also more likely than average to feel a lack of purpose. Each of these problems was also slightly higher than average for those living in Service Accommodation. Partners in part-time work, rather than full-time, were slightly more likely than average to feel anxious/depressed or low self-esteem.

Mental wellbeing was explored in more detail in the telephone in-depth interviews. The participants had experienced various issues – feeling under a lot of stress, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and PTSD. It was not possible to assess all the causes but they did articulate some of the reasons they personally had identified. Station moves were clearly a factor and created anxiety in the lead-up to the next move and also sometimes took their friends away from them. On arrival in a new location it could sometimes be hard to establish life – some interviewees admitted they had withdrawn from engaging with others initially and some even for months, or years. Another trigger for anxiety was deployments and some said they struggled to cope during these times, when they had to take on additional household responsibilities on top of worrying about their loved one on deployment.

RAF working life created stresses for RAF personnel – the factors commonly mentioned by the interviewees included: irregular shifts, antisocial hours, high tempo teams and difficult workplace relationships; a few mentioned mundane job roles or the challenge of coping with an ongoing illness or health condition. RAF antisocial or variable working hours placed a strain on families, and these were exacerbated if the RAF was involved in military conflict, extended deployments or when they had a child with special needs.

*"We get very stressed with each other, we have no time for 'us'... our three-year-old doesn't burn off enough energy. I'm exhausted, and I've got no one to help me."*

Partner, five years as a military wife, suffering with anxiety, depression and lack of confidence

*"Isolation – that's the biggest thing I've had to deal with... The loneliness, the depression, you lose your confidence... You are isolated... I was drinking a lot."*

Partner, child with special needs, talking about time spent on a satellite base

*“My GP told me that stability is the one thing that would help me... but that’s the one thing I can’t have!”*

Partner experiencing employment restrictions, social isolation and mental wellbeing issues

### 3.7.2 Access to healthcare

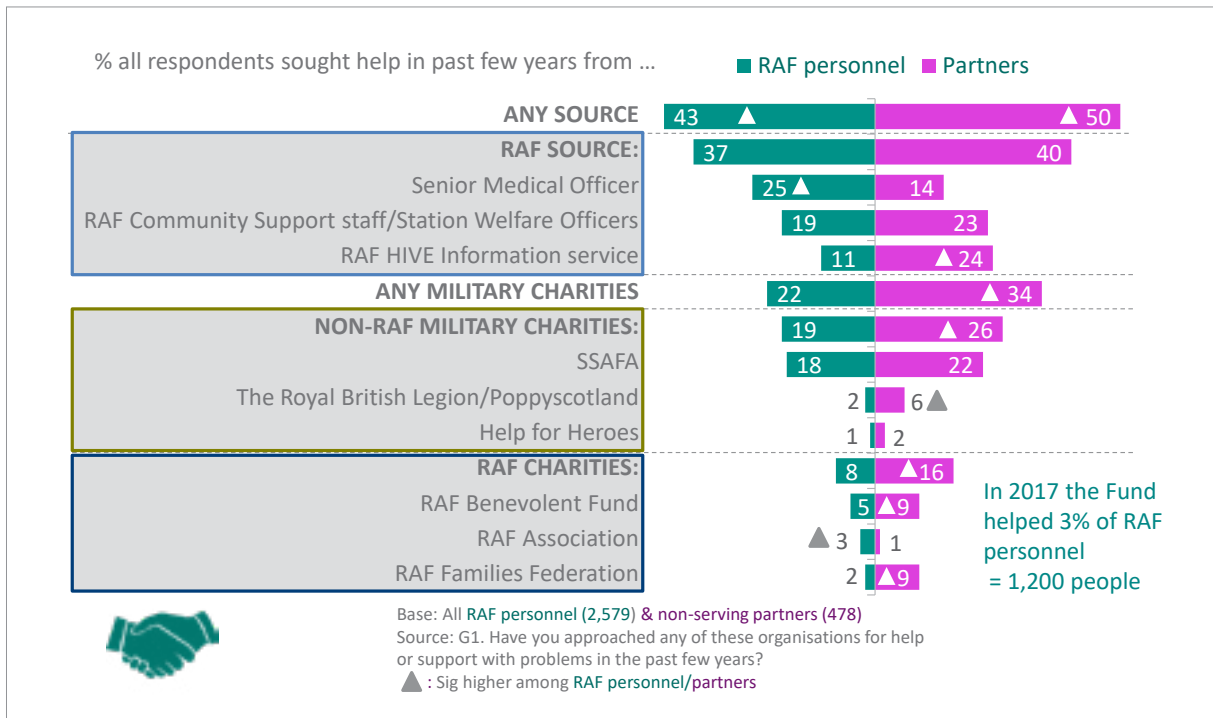
6% of all RAF personnel and 8% of all partners cited one or more ‘major problems’ with access to healthcare related to their family’s health needs – either for themselves or their partner or children. Adding together ‘major problems’ and ‘problems’, this increased to 17% of RAF personnel and 19% of partners.

4% of RAF personnel reported ‘major problems’ with **getting access to medical treatment/support for physical health problems**, 4% with **getting access to medical treatment/support for mental health conditions**, and 1% in **housing without appropriate adaptations for long-term health conditions or disability**. The equivalent proportions among partners were 5%, 5% and 2% respectively (see figures 5.15 and 5.16 at Appendix 5).

## 3.8 Support wanted

Survey respondents were asked whether they had sought help for any of the problems they had experienced in the past few years. Over four in 10 RAF personnel had sought help, rising significantly to half of partners. More had sought help directly from the RAF than from charities; although the differential was less marked for partners than for RAF personnel, as might be expected (fig. 3h).

**Figure 3h** Organisations approached for help or support with problems in the past few years



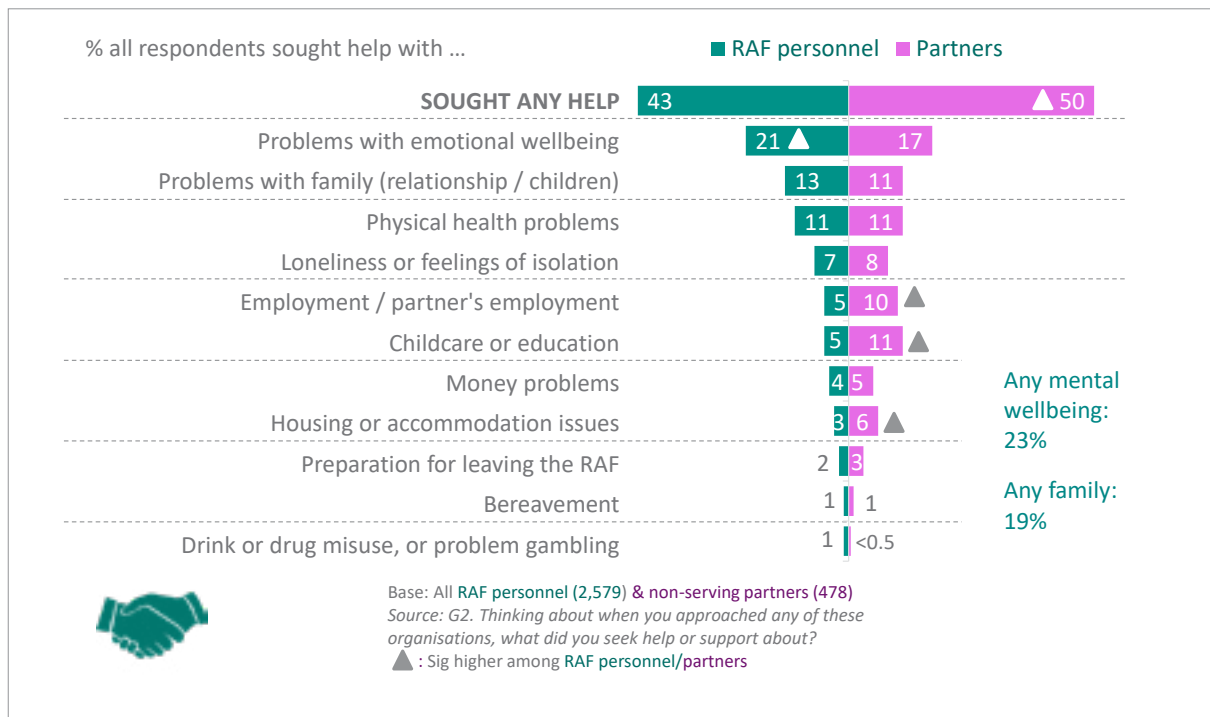
37% of RAF personnel had sought help from one or more RAF source and 22% from military charities. Among partners, 40% had sought help from one or more RAF source and 34% from military charities. RAF personnel were more likely to approach their Senior Medical Officer (25%) ahead of RAF Community Support staff or station welfare officers (19%), or the HIVE (11%); this pattern was reversed for partners.

SSAFA was the military charity people were most likely to approach, often the SSAFA social workers, who are under contract from the RAF. 5% of RAF personnel and 9% of partners said they had approached the RAF Benevolent Fund in the past few years. These results are credible since in 2017 the Fund directly helped 3% of the serving population (1,200 people).

Those sub-groups who were particularly likely to have sought support (fig. 5.17 at Appendix 5) reflected those types of people who were also most likely to have experienced problems (figs. 3e and 3f). Among RAF personnel these included Regulars rather than Reserves, non-commissioned officers, those with more than six years' service, those living in SFA, aged over 25, with children, or divorced/separated/widowed. Among partners this included: those aged under 45, those with children or those not in work.

Those who had sought help from any organisation were asked what they had sought help about. Mental wellbeing and family issues dominated. Among RAF personnel the top three reasons were problems with emotional wellbeing (e.g. anxiety, depression), problems with family (e.g. relationship with partner or children), or physical health problems. The pattern was similar for partners, although they were significantly more likely than RAF personnel to ask for help about childcare, employment or housing matters (fig. 3i).

**Figure 3i.** Topics approached organisations for help or support about



The awareness and use of support for social isolation, mental wellbeing and partner employment was explored further in the qualitative in-depth interviews and the rest of this section discusses the emerging themes.

The interviewees had a degree of confusion about what help was available to alleviate **social isolation**, to whom and under what criteria. There was patchy knowledge of SSAFA, the HIVE, station Facebook pages, padres and the Department of Community Mental Health (DCMH) as possible sources of help. It was noticed that there was a variation in support and activities available at different stations, in terms of amount, type and the way they were marketed. The RAF Benevolent Fund was rarely cited as a possible helper – for example, one had looked into welfare respite breaks but taken no action. Other external sources of help that were cited included: wives' Facebook pages as a popular and useful source of information for what's happening in the RAF community, volunteering as a way of meeting new people, and the Samaritans when feeling in desperate need.

*“(The help available) isn't very well advertised, so people don't realise it is there... Even if they do know it's there they don't think about using it.”*

SAC, single man, living in an SLA block

Those interviewees who had experienced **mental wellbeing** difficulties were asked about awareness and use of support for these. Talking Therapy, CBT and TRIM had been accessed by interviewees. DCMH was generally considered to be a very good service, less overstretched than NHS services, although not always available to families. There were some reports suggesting it was difficult to get referred, or perceived as such. The GP or Medical Centre on camp was usually positively perceived, apart from when it was not available to the families of RAF personnel. There was widespread awareness of SSAFA social workers and personal support workers and the station padres. There were some mentions of HIVE Information Officers. There were mixed experiences in terms of support from their line manager.

Non-military sources of help for mental wellbeing came through a variety of channels: organisations such as Family Action, Home Start and the Samaritans, neighbours, friends made through civilian employment, or through volunteering and friends from the RAF now living elsewhere. Get-togethers arranged for partners while their serving partner was deployed were welcomed. Some had previous negative experiences of asking for help and this discouraged future help seeking, while others thought it was getting easier nowadays to talk openly about mental wellbeing.

*“Initially it wasn't really accepted that I was ill so it was really hard... I didn't have a supportive chain of command... They just thought I wasn't very good at my job... I didn't want to give (them) ammunition, because I still want a career in the military.”*

Commissioned officer with ongoing long-term condition

*“People are a lot more open about it now. There's a lot of people on camp you can talk to about it (if you have a problem).”*

SAC, living in Single Living Accommodation

*“The SSAFA lady who was on station was brilliant and she would signpost you to people who could help you.”*

Partner, diagnosed with depression and postnatal anxiety

Turning to **partner employment**, the most common stance among interviewees was that they had not sought support for this, or they thought there was nothing available specifically for RAF partners. There was some patchy awareness and use of support through the station HIVE or Learning Centre; these included advice sessions or courses (e.g. CV writing, job skills, careers advice, guidance on choosing moveable jobs). A few partners cited charitable assistance: one had used a Forces Employment charity (possibly RFEA) to help gain an admin job at an Army Reserve Centre, another had received financial assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund for childcare while studying or to cover emergencies, and a couple had attended a job fair or course on self-employment organised by SSAFA.

However, partners were mainly relying on their own initiative. They used Facebook for mutual support, advice on school/nursery places, and job skills; these include formal station and informal military 'WAGs' Facebook pages, as well as more specialist Facebook groups e.g. 'Recruit for Spouses' or 'Great Military Wives Job Hunt'. They used generic online job vacancy websites to search for vacancies when arriving in new areas, and remarked that Job Centres were generally unhelpful. Some had been proactive and taken courses while not working, via distance learning or part-time at college. A few said they had been fortunate in securing work on stations – sometimes this was through personal contacts, but there were few such vacancies (and fewer than in the past). A couple of partners cited that local employers (e.g. in Lincolnshire where there is a high density of RAF families) were supportive to the issues military families face and were open to recruiting and/or understanding when staff needed to take time off at short notice due to their partner's RAF operational commitments, in order to cover family emergencies or during deployments. More often though people thought that employers were unsympathetic.

*"The HIVE was my security... It's nice to know you've got people you can chat to, and the SSAFA lady is there... the padre... youth leader... and our community person... a cafe as well."*

Partner, working full time

*"They put me on a course... to help with job skills. But they suggested job roles which assumed a lower level of capability or education, which was very patronising."*

Partner, graduate, not working

*"Recruit for Spouses was set up by some military wives, and provides advice on writing CVs and so on, and it's really helpful, but obviously can't say much about job opportunities in particular locations... It's fantastic for CV help but it needs better publicity."*

Partner, working full time

### 3.9 Barriers to seeking support

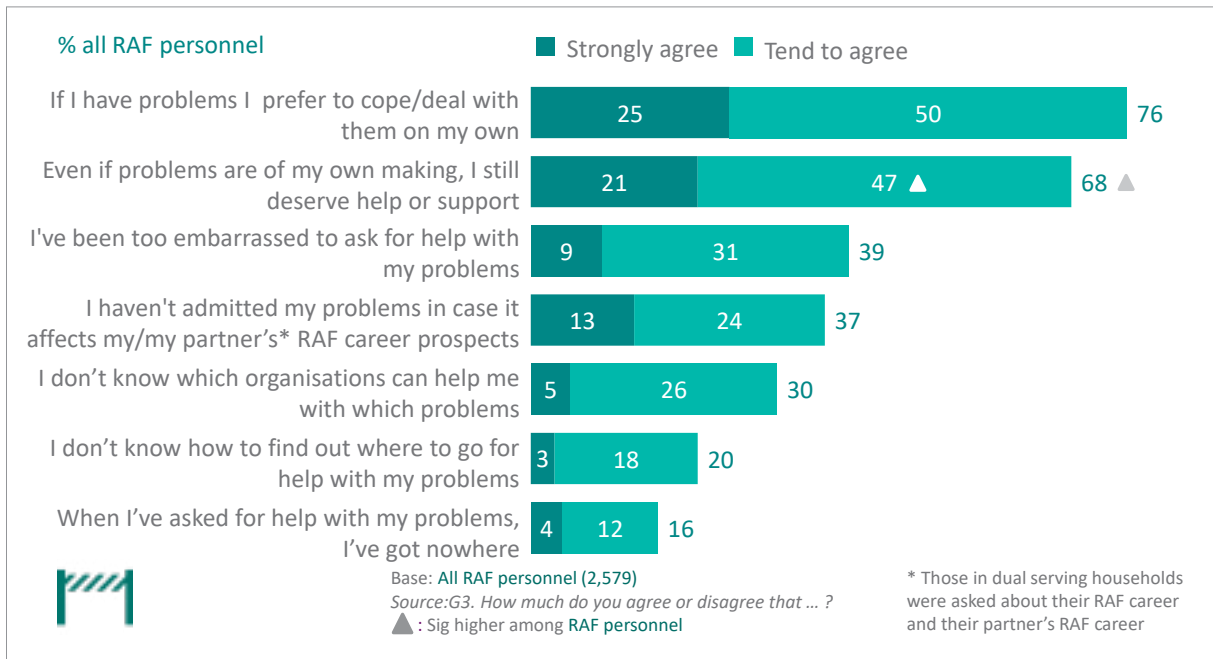
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Survey respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about barriers to seeking welfare assistance. Figures 3j and 3k show the % agreeing with each statement for RAF personnel and partners. Among both RAF personnel and partners, belief in a need to cope alone and be self-sufficient was the greatest barrier to seeking help (expressed by over three quarters); embarrassment and fear of negative impact on RAF career prospects also played a role (for more than a third). Nevertheless, over two thirds of RAF personnel and six in 10 partners believed they still deserved support even if the problems were of their own making.

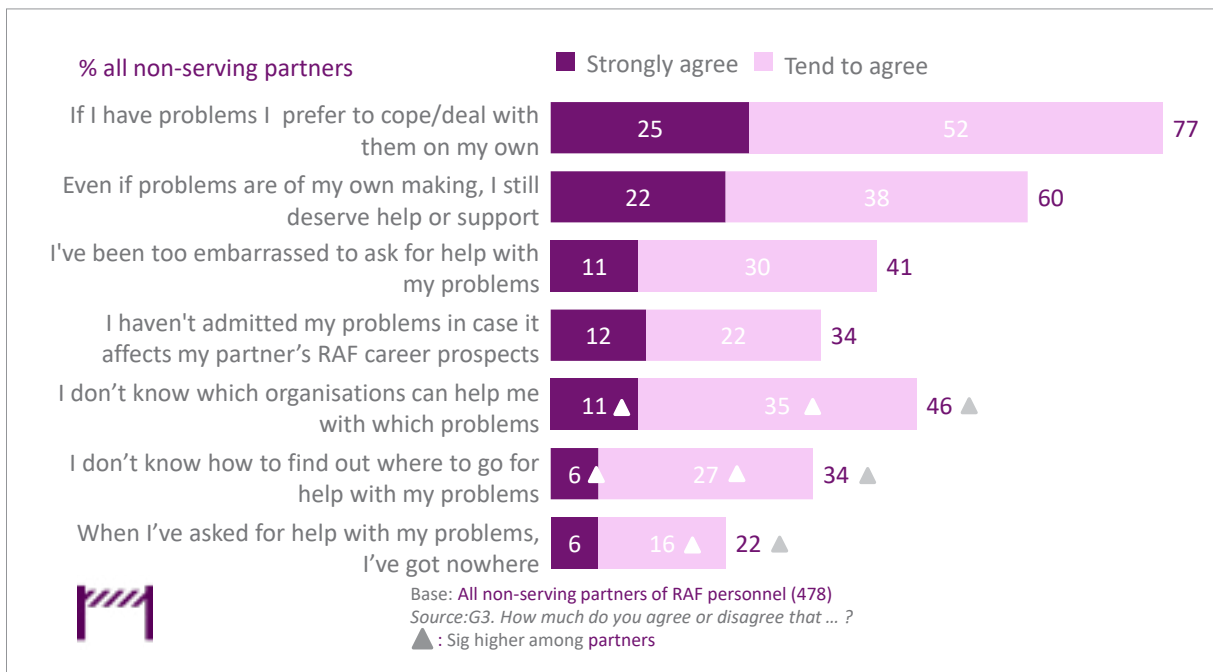
Lack of knowledge of which organisations to ask (46%), or where to go for help (34%), were significantly greater barriers for partners, than for RAF personnel (30% and 20% respectively). Partners were also significantly more likely to cite poor experience in the past, with 20% saying when they had asked for help in the past they got nowhere.



**Figure 3j.** Proportion of RAF personnel agreeing with attitude statements about seeking support



**Figure 3k.** Proportion of partners of RAF personnel agreeing with attitude statements about seeking support



There was less belief that they deserved help and a greater knowledge gap (not knowing where or how to ask for help) among the following types of RAF personnel: Regulars, under 10 years' service, under 35-year-olds, without children, lower ranks (airmen/airwomen or junior non-commissioned officers), part-time Reservists. For partners, there was a greater knowledge gap for under 35-year-olds, those without children, those living in Service Family Accommodation and those not working.

RAF personnel who were more likely than others to say they had got nowhere when asking for help included: under 45-year-olds, non-commissioned officers, and those in the Regulars or part-time Reserves.

In the telephone interviews, RAF personnel were slow to open up about their problems or admit that they were struggling and mentioned the prevalent 'man up' attitude in the military. The interviews explored the barriers to seeking help for challenges around social isolation, mental wellbeing and partner employment.

### 3.9.1 Community and social isolation

Interviewees cited a range of hurdles to overcome before seeking help to **alleviate community and social isolation**. Both RAF personnel and their partners expressed worries about the impact on the RAF career and working relationships; concerns included being seen as somebody who is weak or doesn't cope well, personal problems becoming the subject of workplace banter, and worries about jeopardising career prospects (next deployment, posting, promotion or being medically downgraded). Associated feelings were embarrassment, a belief that they should be self-sufficient enough to resolve their own problems, lack of confidence in talking about problems and for some a sense of fatalism that 'this is how life is'.

*"If you told anyone at work, the Warrant Officer might keep it quiet (but with) other people word would soon get out... gossip, or someone would turn it into a bit of banter, a bit of a laugh."*

SAC, living in married quarters

Interviewees had a superficial knowledge that there is a range of support available but they were unsure if they would qualify for help, how to access it and whether it is okay to ask; and partners even more so than RAF personnel. Disappointment with how previous requests for help had been handled made some people disinclined to ask again.

Some partners expressed a frustration that they were keen to plan in advance of postings to new areas, to find out about the new community and to get established in work and get children into new schools and nurseries as soon as possible but they encountered administrative blocks. This included insufficient notice of the move date, which impacted their own employment, and state agencies not being able to help until more detail was known about the move date (e.g. in regard to school places, additional assistance for children with special needs).

### 3.9.2 Mental wellbeing

The barriers to seeking help were very similar for **mental wellbeing** as for social isolation. In addition to all the same key barriers described above, there were a few additional barriers, namely: not realising the way they were feeling was 'not the norm' and so not coming forward for help, worries at junior rank level about having to ask permission to get time off to go to appointments, and for working partners help being offered by military sources at impractical times (i.e. during daytime working hours).

*"It got a little bit out of hand. I just thought that was how everyone feels. But it's not."*

Partner, now diagnosed with depression

*"In the Forces there's an attitude of saying 'can't let it affect me... got to get on with it.'"*

Commissioned officer, 16 years in RAF

*"I do worry about the repercussions. Does it go to my line manager? I'm at a position in my career when I am close to promotion, and we've got a move coming up that we wanted, and I don't want to jeopardise things."*

SAC, experiencing loneliness, depression, anxiety

### 3.9.3 Partner employment

Turning to the issue of **partner employment**, the lack of awareness of any help actually being available to partners to assist them into work was a key barrier: the most common response from interviewees was not knowing where to turn or who could help. Some expressed a feeling that no one could really help them. There were also associated worries around feeling that they should be responsible for sorting out their own difficulties, embarrassment to admit they were struggling, and even concerns about a negative impact on the serving person's career if they sought help. Other issues mentioned by a few partners included: lacking confidence to talk about employment problems, concern about confidentiality or lack of trust (as they hear gossip about those who have approached Station Welfare) and crucially, low self-esteem or inertia meaning they were reluctant to address the problem.

*"A lot of women I meet, we don't have an awful lot of confidence. After many, many years it wears you down... suffer in silence."*

Partner, working full time

*"Family balance is seen as detrimental to the career because in the military we are almost 24/7, 365 days of the year... To say 'I can't do something because my wife or husband needs to work' – the senior response would be – 'that's not our problem' so the military person won't want to impact their career, which might then cause the spouse to not feel confident enough to get a job."*

Female, commissioned officer. Husband is not working looking after the children

## 3.10 Ideas to improve support

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In the survey respondents were invited to make suggestions, in their own words, as to what could be done differently to offer better help and support to RAF personnel and their families – half (52%) of RAF personnel and over six in 10 (63%) of partners made suggestions.

13% of RAF personnel and 27% of partners made suggestions about the mode or format in which help could be provided. The top answer here was to provide support groups, engagement activities or groups, raised by 19% of partners and 6% of RAF personnel; the ideas were diverse and included coffee mornings, evening socials for partners off camp, family social events, integration with local community activities and gatherings for single RAF personnel. Handfuls of people (1–2%) mentioned other modes of providing support such as workshops/roadshows, enhanced welcome packs when newly posted, agencies visiting camp to raise awareness, and also making visits to vulnerable families.

26% of RAF personnel and 39% of partners called for better support on specific topics. Again the comments were wide ranging but among both RAF personnel and partners the top requests for better support were with family/childcare (raised by 11% of RAF personnel and 20% of partners); followed by housing (6% of RAF personnel and 9% of partners). The other themes raised are shown in fig 5.18 at Appendix 5. The calls around family and childcare included better support for couples who are not married, for families of deployed personnel, weekend parents, families of full-time Reservists and childcare for mothers whose husbands are deployed so they can continue working.

The telephone in-depth interviews afforded opportunity to ask people in more detail about potential new forms of assistance that might help them, in relation to social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment.

### 3.10.1 Community and social isolation

Under the theme of **community and social isolation** a variety of different suggestions were made to improve the support to the serving RAF community:

- More coherent publicity for the support that is already available – interviewees wanted to know what is available and for whom. Information is provided when joining the RAF or when arriving at a new station but not always noticeable thereafter. Some said there is a lot of information and so you ‘can’t see the wood for the trees’. Social media was becoming more important in station life and has the potential to be utilised further.
- Support for those who fall between the cracks of support services – these could include a variety of people, such as: those who live a long way from the station, couples who do not have children, families where the serving person makes frequent trips away but each is too short to get official family deployment support, the LGBT community.
- Improved community events and facilities at stations where they are currently poor – needs will vary on a station by station basis but suggestions included: team building and sports events; Friday family ‘happy hour’/get together; day trips out for families; themed social evenings for working partners; a stronger SSAFA presence; more proactive community officers. Interviewees felt it was important to: allow time for community events to build up awareness and clientele (rather than cancelling future events if first one organised has low turnout), provide transport for those who don’t have access to a car, nurture a culture in which attendance at community events is encouraged and expected, and people know they are wanted.
- Better support for people preparing for moves to new stations, especially for families with children with additional needs (e.g. in identifying appropriate housing, schools/nurseries, education support services).
- Make information and support available through different channels. Online information was thought to be good for initial enquiries, especially for those who were shy or had low self-esteem e.g. what social events/activities are happening, what support is available and am I eligible? Some partners loved the unofficial wives Facebook pages but others questioned their validity and would welcome more official information, both online and in person. For those feeling isolated or lonely, face-to-face support was thought to be important, even though telephone might appear more convenient.

### 3.10.2 Mental wellbeing

Under the theme of **mental wellbeing** there were calls for improved publicity of the support available to encourage take-up and to provide access to family members too. The mental health support needed to be discrete, responsive and accessible through a variety of channels:

- Better publicity of the support that already exists – specific suggestions included: greater clarity on who the support services are for and what kind of issues they can assist with; make people feel welcome in coming forward with their worries e.g. someone visiting to tell them about community events and support services; publicise mental wellbeing success stories of those who have sought help and got their life back on track.
- Reassure on confidentiality and provide a discrete service – ideally the support services for mental wellbeing should not be in a building or location where people entering are immediately identifiable as having mental wellbeing issues. Assurance should be given that seeking help will not result in a note on their military service record.
- Responsiveness to their initial enquiry – at initial contact people can be nervous and wonder if they are asking a stupid question of the wrong person. If the approach is online or by phone

then assurances should be given that a specific person will call them back within a specific timeframe, and enquiries followed up accordingly. It was also commented that sufferers with mental health problems can be at their lowest outside of office hours e.g. in the middle of the night.

- Make the DCMH and Station Medical Centre available to family members, not just RAF personnel (in a few instances the GP surgery was available to the family and this was welcomed).
- Again, make the support available through different modes. Online information is best for early tentative enquiries but ultimately people thought face-to-face support would be most productive in addressing their problems and someone at the end of the phone to be able to ask about this.

### 3.10.3 Partner employment

Under the theme of **partner employment** there were calls for more tailored support for RAF partners, through a variety of channels and from the RAF, employers and the Armed Forces Covenant:

- The practical support that partners would value included: help with CVs, job skills, careers advice, coping with stress and financial management; boosting self-confidence; vocational and 'back to work' courses, ideally with childcare provided; careers advice about jobs that are mobile (at graduate level as well as non-graduates).
- Providing support through a variety of modes: advisers at the HIVE, Learning Centre on station, or mobile teams who cover a few stations in a locality on different days; learning courses or days held face-to-face (which also would boost morale and be away from distractions of children); online websites or apps to search and learn – perhaps a portal or enhanced station Facebook pages, as well as more informal Facebook support groups; access into employment support services initially by email or phone rather than face-to-face (to preserve anonymity and seem less daunting).
- There was a request for more help with childcare, (perhaps through charitable agencies), to facilitate partners' working e.g. regular childcare provision or to cover emergencies.
- There was a feeling that the RAF should do more to help partners, rather than them having to rely on generic civilian resources. Specific suggestions for RAF actions included: publicise the HIVE services available to partners and the station Facebook pages better; give more advance notice of forthcoming postings (two to three months is not enough); cultivate more sympathetic attitudes towards family circumstances; shake off outdated attitudes that assume the partner is not working or that their career is 'second fiddle'.
- Collaborate with local employers to encourage them to hire RAF partners. It would also be good if there were more employment opportunities for partners on bases – contracting out station services had meant that fewer jobs of this type were available and some thought partners should get priority for these, over other civilians.
- More proactive support through the Armed Forces Covenant around postings to new stations. e.g. help to secure work in new locality, to gain school/nursery places prior to arrival, and to address the issue of non-entitlement to Job Seekers' Allowance because partners have supposedly left their job voluntarily.



## 4 TESTING NEW IDEAS

The last stage of the RAF Benevolent Fund research programme was to gain feedback on four potential new welfare support offerings:

- Provision of RAF Benevolent Fund Community Engagement Workers on RAF stations
- Provision of a welfare app
- Provision of workshops and seminars for partners of RAF personnel
- Provision of life coaching.

The reader is referred to figures 3.8, 3.9, 3.10 and 3.11 at Appendix 3, which give the full proposition descriptions, as shown to the research participants.

The purpose of the research was to test the appetite for each proposition in its draft form, eliciting opinion on strengths and weaknesses, whether there was a real perceived need for it, likely take-up, and suitability of the Fund providing or funding these.

The research was conducted through **six qualitative focus groups** – four with RAF personnel and two with partners. These were held at three different RAF stations: RAF Odiham, RAF Brize Norton and RAF Marham. A total of 57 participants took part (38 RAF personnel and 19 partners), all of whom had previously completed the online survey, and the majority (44) of whom had experienced major problems with at least one of: social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment. (See Section 3.4 at Appendix 3 for further details of the research methods employed).

The sections which follow discuss each proposition in turn, reporting the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each concept and any important considerations when implementing, or suggestions for how to enhance the ideas.

### 4.1 RAF Benevolent Fund Community Engagement Workers on stations

**Overview:** The Community Engagement Workers (CEWs) proposition was developed in response to the needs evidenced in the online survey around social isolation, with the aim of raising awareness and promoting community engagement on RAF stations and in communities, helping to reduce social isolation both among RAF personnel and their partners. The workers would work alongside the Community Support team and perform various roles, including: highlighting what's on locally, accompanying people to activities on their first visit, developing a buddy system for clubs to welcome new members, and encouraging individuals to engage in activities (the full description is in fig 3.8 at Appendix 3).

**Strengths and opportunities:** Initial reactions to the idea of RAF Benevolent Fund CEWs were largely positive. They were viewed as a catalyst who could make connections between people. The main potential beneficiaries were thought to be partners, people who were new on camp, singles, shy or anxious people, and those with no children. Participants thought that the CEWs could help to fill the social void created by a variety of factors such as 'pay as you dine' catering, singles staying in their rooms occupying themselves with digital entertainment (social media, gaming) and less comprehensive welcome resources upon arrival at a new station. The CEWs would take a while to embed in communities but some said it would be important for it to become 'the norm' to interact with the CEW, and the worker would need to establish connections with new people early in order to be most effective at preventing social isolation.

*“It probably does take someone to hold your hand the first time, especially when people are new... with anxiety or something like that... I think that would help a lot of people.”*

RAF personnel

**Weaknesses and challenges:** There were several different concerns voiced about the idea of CEWs. There was a risk that it would be seen as ‘forced fun’, which is off-putting. There was also some cynicism as to whether there were sufficient activities and facilities on stations for the CEW to make the introduction. It was seen as less relevant for RAF personnel than for partners (since the former often made friends through work and the latter were often at home alone). Shy or anxious people were thought to have the most to benefit from the CEWs but there was concern as to whether they would actually engage with the worker. Differences in military rank and cliques within partner groups may present barriers to joining in too. There was also thought to be potential overlap with the RAF Mentors system (though this is work-focused), SSAFA social workers (although there was potential misunderstanding of the social work service), and HIVE/Community Support (which was felt to be already adequately performing the CEW type function on certain stations, notwithstanding the findings from the online survey which still highlighted social isolation as an issue).

*“No one likes forced fun but I think it would make them feel more included.”*

RAF personnel

*“Those likely to struggle are the people who are reluctant to try new things, they are also the ones who are likely to dodge any voluntary welcome.”*

RAF personnel

## 4.2 The welfare app

**Overview:** The welfare app would be an easy to access source of welfare information for the RAF Family, so that people have a single point of information at their fingertips. Ultimately the aim of the app would be to direct people to sources of help and thereby remove the barrier of not knowing where to turn to alleviate their problems. The app would potentially provide information about welfare, support, benefits and entitlements, across a range of themes (e.g. housing, health, childcare, education, resettlement) and signpost to different welfare providers (the full description is in fig 3.9 at Appendix 3).

**Strengths and opportunities:** Initial reactions to the idea of the welfare app were very enthusiastic. People liked the idea of all the information in one place, and it being accessible 24/7 because currently it was not easy to know where to look for information or advice. People liked the idea of quick access to information ‘with just three clicks’ as one put it. The potential audience for this app was felt to be everyone in the RAF Family, although they did highlight a few groups who would particularly benefit: new joiners and movers, RAF line managers (to advise their staff), those wanting employment advice, those resettling, veterans living far from stations, partners with anxiety, partners whose serving partner was away/deployed, partners working full time off camp.

*“It’s always there (24/7), so if you need to find something at the weekend, or in the middle of the night, or out of working hours, it’s available. It’s a great idea. I want it now!”*

RAF personnel



*“At the moment line managers must either go to Google or you ring WPMS and say ‘How do I help this individual?’ If the app is there you can go straight to it... It would be brilliant.”*

RAF personnel, with line management responsibilities

**Weaknesses and challenges:** There were some perceived weaknesses of the concept. The main one was that it might duplicate information already available from the RAF/MOD, Community Support, Carillion Amey, the RAF Benevolent Fund and other charities’ own websites. A few mentioned the possibility of information overload, with work encroaching into personal time, especially if the app was sending the user regular notifications. Others queried whether it might take up lots of data on their smartphone, which would be disadvantageous to use. The app would need to signpost to other sources rather than replicating detailed information. It was suggested that the app would mainly help people who are already well equipped to find out information on the internet, and do little for those who struggle with technology. Some remarked that it also might actually dissuade shy people from seeking help face-to-face, and so reinforce their tendency towards social isolation.

*“There is a community support website that has all this information... If somebody wants to collate the information that’s good, but it shouldn’t be the charity.”*

RAF personnel

*“It does have the potential to make people even more isolated because they can just press a button to find out (rather than talking to someone).”*

Partner

### 4.3 Workshops and seminars for partners

**Overview:** Unlike the other three propositions, this concept was geared particularly for partners of RAF personnel. The RAF personnel were asked to comment second-hand on whether they thought their partners would be interested and benefit. The aim would be to provide workshops and seminars to help partners gain skills and information on a range of subjects (employment, relationships, life skills, emotional resilience etc.) in order to aid station moves and help to increase household income, reduce loneliness and enhance mental wellbeing. The events would be held at venues and times accessible to partners, with appropriate childcare and other support in place to maximise attendance (see fig 3.10 at Appendix 3 for the full description).

**Strengths and opportunities:** There was a lot of enthusiasm for this idea, especially for younger people. The range of topics was thought to be very good. People liked the idea of combining learning and socialising. Provision of childcare would be much appreciated by parents, and the ‘other support’ to encourage attendance was assumed to mean transport to help get people living further afield to the venue, particularly non-drivers and those whose partners needed to take the car to get to work. Partners were generally considered to have been neglected in terms of support, and so providing these opportunities tailored to them, was welcomed. It was observed that helping partners to enhance their quality of life in this way, helps marriages and relationships and ultimately helps the RAF.

*“I think it’s a fantastic idea! There’s so much focus on the serving person. Not enough is done for the partners.”*

RAF personnel

*"I don't meet people (on camp) so from a mental wellbeing point of view... something you could learn to do would be superb."*

Partner, working full time off camp

**Weaknesses and challenges:** There were relatively few concerns raised about the workshops concept. There was a risk that perhaps certain types of people might miss out, but there were ways to overcome this: shy/anxious people and those living a long distance from their partner's station (overcome through providing the material presented face-to-face via podcasts and webinars, to access remotely); non-drivers living off camp (provision of transport would be important); full-time workers (sessions would need to be held at varied times of the day and week including some evening and/or weekend slots).

The need for workshops and seminars was thought to be real but there was a concern whether people would actually make the effort to attend, and especially for more sensitive subjects like 'emotional resilience', which might potentially have a stigma of admitting not coping attached to it. Naming and presentation would need to be thought through carefully and it would need to be made clear that participants could sit and listen without being expected to open up about their life in front of the room.

*"I think there's partners who suffer with anxiety and mental issues, I know my wife does, and it's convincing them to come out. If they haven't got support a lot will struggle to attend."*

RAF personnel

*"You've got to be careful about how you sell it... (people will think) life skills, I don't need that – when actually they do."*

RAF personnel

Good publicity was thought to be key to this idea and the Fund should not rely on RAF personnel to communicate the news about these sessions to their partners; the message needs to be extended to partners through other ways. Some remarked how the RAF Benevolent Fund Community Engagement Worker concept could link in with this concept, with the workers able to promote the workshops and seminars to partners with whom they came into contact, who they thought would particularly benefit.

## 4.4 Life coaching

**Overview:** The last idea was to provide life coaching for members of the serving RAF community, enabling individuals to identify personal and professional goals, and achieve lasting change. This could include excelling in their career, exploring their potential and achieving ambitions, as well as being happy and fulfilled outside of work. Life coaching would initially be targeted at RAF personnel transitioning to life outside of the RAF, as well as partners, to develop resilience and problem solving skills to cope with the challenges they face with issues such as employability, housing, family life and social networks (see fig 3.11 at Appendix 3 for the full description).

**Strengths and opportunities:** The initial reactions from some were very positive, although it was thought that the term 'counselling' should also be added as this would resonate better with some people, and there were lots of mental health issues in the serving RAF community to be addressed. In the focus groups we heard that the terms 'counselling' and 'life coaching' had distinct appeal to different people; some people were put off by one but not the other. Younger people were seen as the main beneficiaries. RAF personnel wanted the remit extended beyond those preparing for transition (in their last two years' service) to throughout their RAF career, with planning for life, not just resettlement into civilian life – a wider remit would potentially help

retention, they remarked, too. And some wanted eligibility widened to other family members too such as older teenage children, parents of RAF personnel or siblings (e.g. on emotional resilience to cope with anxieties during serving person's deployment).

*"I love this idea. I would be doing it and advocating for it."*

Partner

*"The biggest impact will be on the younger people... I probably could have been in a better situation... Coaching could have pushed me the right way... For younger people (it) could be really beneficial."*

RAF personnel in mid career

**Weaknesses and challenges:** A key concern about this concept was duplication of existing provision. For RAF personnel, it was felt that there could be duplication of coaching received from line managers, workplace mentoring and resettlement specialists (though there was disagreement among participants on the degree of overlap, due in part to the feeling that the RAF resettlement package varied in quality depending on where you were based). For partners it was felt it might be replicating support available through padres, SSAFA etc. This seemed to indicate confusion over the concept of life coaching which differs from informal coaching/ mentoring, with some people unsure as to what the coaching actually entailed. Additionally, some people wondered whether it was appropriate distribution of RAF Benevolent Fund funds as it could involve allocating a significant amount of resource intensively on a small number of recipients. In the detailed description shown to participants the serving person and partner offerings were quite different but the debate sometimes became blurred between these offerings, particularly because serving people wanted more than the resettlement offer. The resettlement focus for RAF personnel also raised uncertainties about whether this was an appropriate issue for the RAF Benevolent Fund to invest in because it should be adequately covered by the military.

*"If it's mirroring that existing RAF resettlement package then it's not an idea I would support."*

RAF personnel

*"I think it's too focused (because) it would cost a fortune and only a small number would benefit."*

Partner

The participants reflected that there were people in certain specific circumstances who could benefit greatly from life coaching. In particular they identified those with unplanned resettlement e.g. due to discharge through ill health or injury, those returning to work after maternity leave or lengthy sickness absence, partners whose relationship with the serving person has broken down (they currently seem overlooked in terms of support and can lose housing at short notice etc.). To reduce the possible stigma the coaching could be marketed as enabling self-help. The RAF personnel who wanted the wider coaching remit (i.e. available earlier in their career, and more than resettlement support) suggested the following ideas: publicise the coaching at training days; use RAF personnel as Ambassadors to promote it; tell RAF personnel about the coaching offer at intervals and career landmarks.

Several participants saw the connections between this niche support and the other three propositions. The Community Engagement Worker could identify people who would benefit from life coaching, the app could be used to publicise it; the workshops and seminars could act as a gateway/referral path into life coaching.

## 4.5 Comparative evaluations

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Overall the **Community Engagement Workers** were seen to be meeting a real need, particularly in relation to partners, and partners themselves rated the idea highly. There was some scepticism about likely take-up/engagement, although less so among partners than among RAF personnel. Reasons for this scepticism were various, including: some people will just not engage and there is not much that can be done about that reluctance; it's less relevant for RAF personnel who make friends in the workplace; a feeling that it was the responsibility of the RAF (not the Fund) to welcome and integrate Service personnel; difficulty in seeing how this idea would work for those who did not live on camp. There were mixed views on whether this would be a justifiable investment for the RAF Benevolent Fund – partners were generally positive but RAF personnel were more cautious, for the reasons mentioned above.

Four out of the six focus groups scored the **welfare app** very highly in terms of meeting a real need, likely take-up and appropriateness for Fund investment. Opinions were more mixed in the other two focus groups, largely because of duplication with existing information sources, a feeling that the RAF/MOD should pay for this, not the Fund, or a concern that it would use up a lot of data on their mobile phone.

The four focus groups of RAF personnel felt strongly that the **workshops and seminars for partners** was addressing a real need (for their partners). In the two partner focus groups opinion was more divided – some were very enthusiastic but others were more sceptical. The main concern however, was whether take-up would be good. Some suggested that those who would benefit most (e.g. isolated or anxious people) would be least likely to take it up; and this concern was particularly expressed by the partners' focus groups. Most thought that this was a good initiative for the Fund to invest in – again partners were a little more divided than RAF personnel; and a minority believed that this should be provided by the RAF/MOD.

Opinion was more polarised on the **life coaching** proposition than for the other propositions; and divisions of opinion were apparent among both RAF personnel and partners. To some extent this was because the serving person offer differed from the partner offer, so it was more difficult to pin down the key issues. On the dimension of perceived relevance (whether the idea met a real need) three groups were positive, two were negative and one was in-between. In terms of likely take-up opinion was more sceptical than on other propositions – this is perhaps to be expected because this service is arguably more niche than the others. Opinion was also divided on whether this was an appropriate service for the Fund to invest in; the belief that the RAF was responsible for resettlement coloured the judgement of some RAF personnel.

The marketing and positioning of the propositions needs careful thought. From the focus groups we learned that people would need to feel that being approached by the Community Engagement Worker was 'the norm', i.e. they had not been specially targeted. Workshops for partners needs to consider the potential stigma related to certain titles such as 'life skills'. Life coaching and counselling both have positive and negative associations for different people.

Research participants saw the potential for integration of the four different proposals to enhance the RAF Benevolent Fund's impact with the serving RAF community. The initiatives that have wider reach and appeal (the app and the CEWs) could be useful to publicise, identify target beneficiaries and generate referrals into the more niche offerings (workshops for partners and life coaching). The reader is referred to fig 5.19 at Appendix 5 for a schematic representation of how this might work.



## 5 CONCLUSIONS

**This chapter sets out an overview and some overall conclusions from all four stages of the research.**

- 1** Over five in 10 (55%) RAF personnel and six in 10 (61%) partners reported experiencing one or more 'major problems' within the past few years; conversely, 45% of RAF personnel and 39% of partners reported experiencing no 'major problems'. Those who have experienced 'major problems' typically only cite one or two. Overall, partners of RAF personnel reported different welfare problems and a greater prevalence of 'major problems' than did RAF personnel (however since the total population of partners is smaller, the absolute numbers of people in need of help are likely to be similar for both groups).
- 2** The 'major problems' most reported by RAF personnel are around: difficulties with relationships, their partner's inability to work, not knowing what services and benefits they are entitled to, mental wellbeing, social isolation and lack of money for a holiday; (with each of the 'top 10' specific issues being cited by between 8% to 14% of RAF personnel).
- 3** The 'major problems' most reported by partners of RAF personnel encompass: social isolation, inability to work, lack of money for a holiday, finding childcare and mental wellbeing; (with each of the top 10 issues cited by between 11% to 20% of partners).
- 4** Groups among RAF personnel that appear to most need support are those who are separated, divorced or widowed, but also those in the Regular rather than Reserve Forces, particularly those aged 25–44, those living in Service Family Accommodation (SFA), those with children and non-commissioned officers (especially junior non-commissioned officers). Among partners of RAF personnel, the needs are greatest for those aged under 45, living in SFA, with children and not in full-time work.
- 5** For those who do have problems, many were reported to be connected to the unusual nature of life in the RAF (regular moves to new stations, remote locations, operational requirements and deployments). The problems are reported to be particularly acute immediately before and after station moves.
- 6** Help is mostly sought from the RAF or from SSAFA. The RAF Benevolent Fund is often the 'silent funder' and there is a degree of uncertainty about its roles in helping the serving RAF community.
- 7** A fifth of RAF personnel and a third of partners say they don't know how to find out where to go for help with their problems. Those with problems told us that they are not confident about when they should seek support or whether they are eligible for assistance. The knowledge barrier is greater among partners than among RAF personnel, and also higher for young people.

- 8** Even when they do know, there is an embedded culture of preferring to try to cope alone and this particular barrier may explain the lower use of support by younger and male RAF personnel. The stigma and embarrassment of admitting that they are not coping themselves are significant barriers to seeking help (particularly for non-commissioned officers, serving women, those who are divorced or separated and non-working partners).
- 9** Any new welfare support offerings will require substantial investment in integrated communications using multiple channels – a combination of face-to-face, digital and traditional promotion to maximise the number of touchpoints for conveying the message to the target audience. Assurances around confidentiality and that careers will not be affected will be important.
- 10** We found that propositions which were tested for addressing the needs would directly address some of the greatest needs identified in our research – a welfare app could help with knowing where to go for help, Community Engagement Workers could help with loneliness and increasing mental wellbeing, and workshops and seminars could enhance wellbeing and employability among partners. Life coaching was received more cautiously than the other three, but is more of a niche service for people with a particular mind-set, for whom it would be beneficial.
- 11** There are other ways of providing support (suggested in the focus groups) including enhanced support for RAF personnel and partners when arriving at new stations to embed into the new locality, and helping with partner employment, which deserve further exploration.
- 12** Further work is needed to define the propositions in more detail, to define objectives, scope, content, delivery mechanisms, target audience, promotion methods, performance measures, costs and timescales. A key challenge will be to overcome the culture of non-engagement with help offered (e.g. due to a desire to cope alone so as not to appear weak, or because they are shy or anxious) and address non-attitudinal barriers (e.g. childcare, transport and living a long way from the station).
- 13** Some of the propositions could work well in combination. So there is an argument for the RAF Benevolent Fund pursuing all or several of the ideas, if funds allow. The app could be used to promote the other offerings to a wide audience while the Community Engagement Workers could help to identify individuals who could most benefit from the workshops and seminars or life coaching.
- 14** It is recommended that consideration is given to piloting one or more of the propositions on one or more RAF stations to discover what works best and apply those learnings if and when rolling out the initiatives more widely.
- 15** It will take time and effort to make cultural shifts within the serving RAF community to reduce the barriers to help seeking behaviour. Any new forms of support which are implemented may therefore take considerable time to develop, communicate, establish and overcome the barriers to seeking support highlighted in this report.





## 6 NEXT STEPS

As the RAF's oldest friend, the RAF Benevolent Fund has been supporting the RAF Family for almost 100 years, providing a range of initiatives and services to meet a variety of needs, with the main staple being the provision of financial support. This research has been helpful in identifying the biggest areas of need currently experienced among RAF personnel and their families, and it is clear that the needs of today's RAF personnel and their families are changing. While instances of financial hardship are still evident, the key areas of need identified in the research relate to relationships and loneliness, employment among partners and mental wellbeing. This provides an opportunity to enhance the range of support available to RAF personnel and their families, through investing in new initiatives and services which specifically address the biggest areas of need identified and are of greatest relevance to today's serving RAF community.

In response to the identified need, the RAF Benevolent Fund is launching a new strategy to achieve its aim of enhancing the morale and wellbeing of the serving RAF community, drawing on the findings from this research and working closely with the RAF. In addition to the range of initiatives and services already available (a full list of support to the serving RAF community is at Appendix 7), the RAF Benevolent Fund is investing in five key areas in response to these findings.

### **a) Enhancing social engagement, increasing connectivity and reducing isolation and loneliness**

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Community and social isolation emerged as the most common issue experienced among RAF personnel and their partners. Working together with the RAF, the RAF Benevolent Fund is investing in the following initiatives to reduce isolation and loneliness experienced among RAF personnel and their families:

- Piloting Station Engagement Workers on a number of RAF stations, with the aim of promoting community engagement and inclusion, ultimately increasing social engagement within the serving RAF community. This is a completely new initiative for both the RAF Benevolent Fund and the RAF, and the intention is to test the concept initially through a small pilot, with a view to determining the merits in rolling this out more widely.
- Funding to provide and enhance facilities on RAF stations to enable social activities, engagement and cohesion to take place, as well as to provide additional and refurbished play parks and play areas on RAF stations to enable the children of RAF personnel to interact socially and to enhance family relationships.
- Expanding the RAF Benevolent Fund's flagship Airplay programme, increasing the provision of youth support on RAF stations, increasing engagement among children and young people.

### **b) Increasing the employability and wellbeing of RAF partners**

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Employment among partners was the second most frequently reported problem within this research; the effects of which were felt by both RAF personnel and their partners. In response to this issue, the RAF Benevolent Fund is going to:

- Pilot workshops and seminars for RAF partners, covering a range of topics, aimed at increasing employability and overall wellbeing, with follow-up coaching available on a one-to-one basis. This is with a view to considering a wider roll-out.

### **c) Enhancing and strengthening family relationships**

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Marriage or relationship difficulties was the biggest specific problem reported by RAF personnel, and both personnel and partners reported struggling to afford an annual holiday. In addition to already funding a national relationship support service, the RAF Benevolent Fund has committed to:

- Completing and evaluating a pilot for respite breaks for RAF families across the UK, ultimately helping to enhance and strengthen family relationships, with a view to considering a wider roll-out.

### **d) Enhancing mental wellbeing among individuals**

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Feeling anxious or depressed was reported by around one third of both RAF personnel and their partners. Given that having good mental health and wellbeing contributes so significantly to one's quality of life and, of course, to operational efficiency, the RAF Benevolent Fund is committed to investing further in this area. In addition to the range of initiatives outlined above which promote mental wellbeing, and the RAF Benevolent Fund's Listening and Counselling Service, the RAF Benevolent Fund is investing in the following initiative:

- Funding access to the mindfulness app Headspace across the RAF, providing a practical tool for encouraging and enhancing good mental wellbeing.

### **e) Increasing awareness of the range of support that is available to the serving RAF community, ensuring more people receive support in times of need**

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The research found that the top barriers to seeking support included not knowing where to go for help, feeling embarrassed over asking for help, preferring to cope on their own and being worried that admitting to problems might affect RAF career prospects. The RAF Benevolent Fund is keen to ensure more people receive support when they need it, while also being mindful of the barriers to achieving this. In response, the RAF Benevolent Fund is investing in the following:

- Developing a digital tool which provides an easy-to-access source of information, empowering people to find solutions to their own problems while avoiding the need to ask for help straight away. This will support both the RAF and the wider veteran community.

The bold and imaginative strategy detailed above represents a very significant multi-million pound response to this research, taking the key findings and developing practical responses to help meet the needs identified, having worked in conjunction with the RAF. This response is in addition to other on-going work and support already provided, including an open grants programme to help meet priority requests for welfare and community support on RAF stations. To ensure that every penny raised is spent carefully and effectively, with good outcomes, many of the activities will be piloted initially before committing to further investment, with the effectiveness of those interventions thoroughly tested and lessons learned. In all this, the RAF Benevolent Fund's ultimate aim within the serving RAF community is to enhance morale and wellbeing, and its range of initiatives and services will continually evolve and adapt to best achieve that aim.

## APPENDIX 1: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Compass Partnership's thanks go to a large number of people who have contributed to the success of this project.

In particular we would like to acknowledge the considerable assistance we were given by RAF Community Support, Station Commanders who emailed our questionnaire and reminders and who hosted focus groups, and all those within the RAF/MOD who responded to many enquiries for information during the desk research.

At the RAF Benevolent Fund we are very grateful for support and encouragement throughout from:

Paul Hughesdon	Director Welfare and Policy
Alison Wyman	Head of Strategy and Programmes
Damian Pinel	Welfare Research Project Manager

Alison Wyman was instrumental in supplying the data sources to generate the statistics for Chapter 2 and for overall oversight of the research at all stages. Damian Pinel was a great asset in project managing the qualitative research phases of the project.

We would like to thank Chris Bowden and Colin Slocombe at Marketing Means for managing the fieldwork for the online survey. We would also like to thank Andrew Driver, consultant, for data analysis of the survey responses and Marianne Heathcote Woodbridge, recruiter, for recruiting the qualitative participants.

Ultimately this research would not have been possible without the RAF personnel and their dependants who gave up their time to take part voluntarily in the research. This included:

2,579 RAF personnel and 478 dependent partners who completed our online survey in November/December 2017, 24 of whom went on to complete a 45-minute in-depth telephone interview (12 RAF personnel and 12 partners), 57 of whom went on to take part in a focus group discussion lasting an hour and a half (38 RAF personnel and 19 partners).

## APPENDIX 2: GLOSSARY

### **RAF personnel**

Those currently serving with the RAF Regular Forces or with the RAF Reserve or the RAF Volunteer Reserve constitute the RAF personnel, who are eligible for welfare assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund. RAF veterans are not part of this definition, although they are eligible for assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund in their own right.

### **Dependants**

The adult dependants include dependent spouses (married or civil partnership), dependent partners they are living with or in a committed relationship, dependent divorced/separated spouses and dependent widow(er)s; add to these their dependent children as described below, and this makes up RAF personnel's dependants who are also eligible for welfare assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund.

### **Dependent partners**

This includes both **spouses** of RAF personnel as described above (married or civil partnership), and **partners** who are living with, or in a committed relationship with RAF personnel. Both married and non-married partners are eligible for welfare assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund. In the commentary this group is sometimes referred to as '**partners of RAF personnel**' or shortened simply to '**partners**'.

### **Dependent divorced or separated spouses**

Spouses/partners of RAF personnel as described above, who are divorced or separated and not remarried, and who are also eligible for welfare assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund.

### **Dependent widows and widowers**

Widows and widowers of RAF personnel as described above, who are eligible for welfare assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund. These were out of scope of our research.

### **Dependent children**

Children whose natural parents are RAF personnel are also eligible for assistance from the RAF Benevolent Fund as dependent minors, up to and including age 18 (even if the qualifying person dies before the child reaches 18 or the parents' divorce or separate). In calculations to size the number of dependent children, those aged over 18 but still financially dependent on their serving parent or dependent spouse/partner are also included in the definition.

### **Serving RAF community**

RAF personnel who are currently serving and their dependants, taken together, make up the serving RAF community.

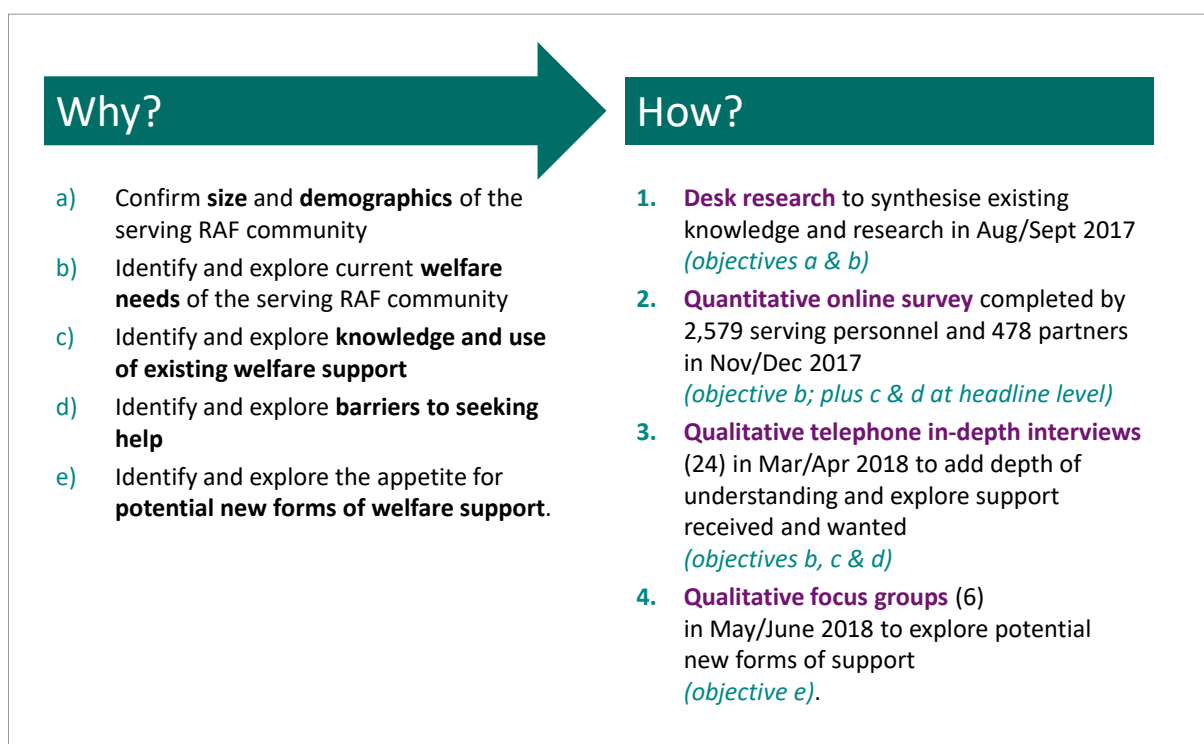
### **RAF Family**

Collective name for all those individuals eligible for RAF Benevolent Fund support, and includes the serving RAF community (i.e. RAF personnel, both Regular and Reserve, and their dependants), plus the RAF ex-Service community (i.e. RAF veterans and their dependants).

## APPENDIX 3: RESEARCH METHODS

This year-long research programme was conducted between July 2017 and June 2018. The first stage of desk research was conducted through July-September 2017, on the population and demographics of the serving RAF community. Then primary research was conducted through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. An online self-completion survey was carried out between October 2017 and February 2018 of more than 3,000 members of the serving RAF community. In March/April 2018 follow-up qualitative telephone in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 respondents of the survey. And in May/June 2018 six focus groups were conducted (with survey respondents) to explore propositions for new forms of welfare support.

**Figure 3.1** Aims and stages of the RAF Benevolent Fund research programme with the serving RAF community



### 3.1 Desk research

Following a briefing meeting with the RAF Benevolent Fund and other stakeholders, various existing research reports and data sources supplied by the RAF Benevolent Fund were reviewed. Some of these were in the public domain while others were unpublished information, supplied to Compass solely for the purpose of producing this summary report. The desk research did not constitute a full literature review on the topics under consideration, as it was agreed this was beyond the scope of what was necessary for this assignment. Key information was synthesised and reported to the RAF Benevolent Fund in an internal working paper.

In this report the findings on the size and profile of the serving RAF community are reported in Chapter 2. The desk research also distilled what is already known from previous research about the scope of welfare need – these insights were used to feed into the design of the RAF Benevolent Fund’s primary research.

## 3.2 Quantitative online survey

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The RAF Benevolent Fund conducted primary quantitative research with a sample of the serving RAF community, which is reported in Chapter 3.

It was recognised from the outset that an inherent risk of this approach is that such surveys can lead to overestimates of the number of people facing difficulties, due to the potential for 'non-response bias'. Steps were taken to mitigate these effects through seeking to maximise participation rates in the survey and correcting for any remaining demographic imbalances in the achieved sample, through corrective weighting. However, the percentages reported from the survey sample should still be treated with a degree of caution. The rank order of problems and the comparisons between different demographic groups are more reliable than the raw percentages, which in turn are more reliable than the grossed up estimates of the numbers of people affected.

### 3.2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed in close consultation with the RAF Benevolent Fund and building upon the findings from the desk research. The questionnaire was scripted into an online survey which took an average of 10 minutes to complete and could be completed on a PC/laptop, tablet or smartphone.

The questionnaire assessed how many people had experienced problems under seven themes covering different areas of their lives over the past few years: community and social isolation, partner's employment, financial difficulties, relationships, children, mental wellbeing and access to healthcare for health needs. The main questions asked "over the past few years have you [or your family] experienced problems with any of these?" and then listed 30 various specific issues under the seven themes with a response scale to indicate whether it had been a 'major problem', 'problem', 'slight problem' or they had 'never' experienced it. The reporting of the scale of problems experienced in Chapter 3 of this report focuses on the percentages who answered that they had experienced 'major problems' or 'problems'; ('slight problems' were disregarded). There were also questions covering what types of welfare support they had received, barriers to seeking support and suggestions for improvements. RAF personnel were asked briefly about preparation for the transition from military to civilian life.

### 3.2.2 Sample and fieldwork

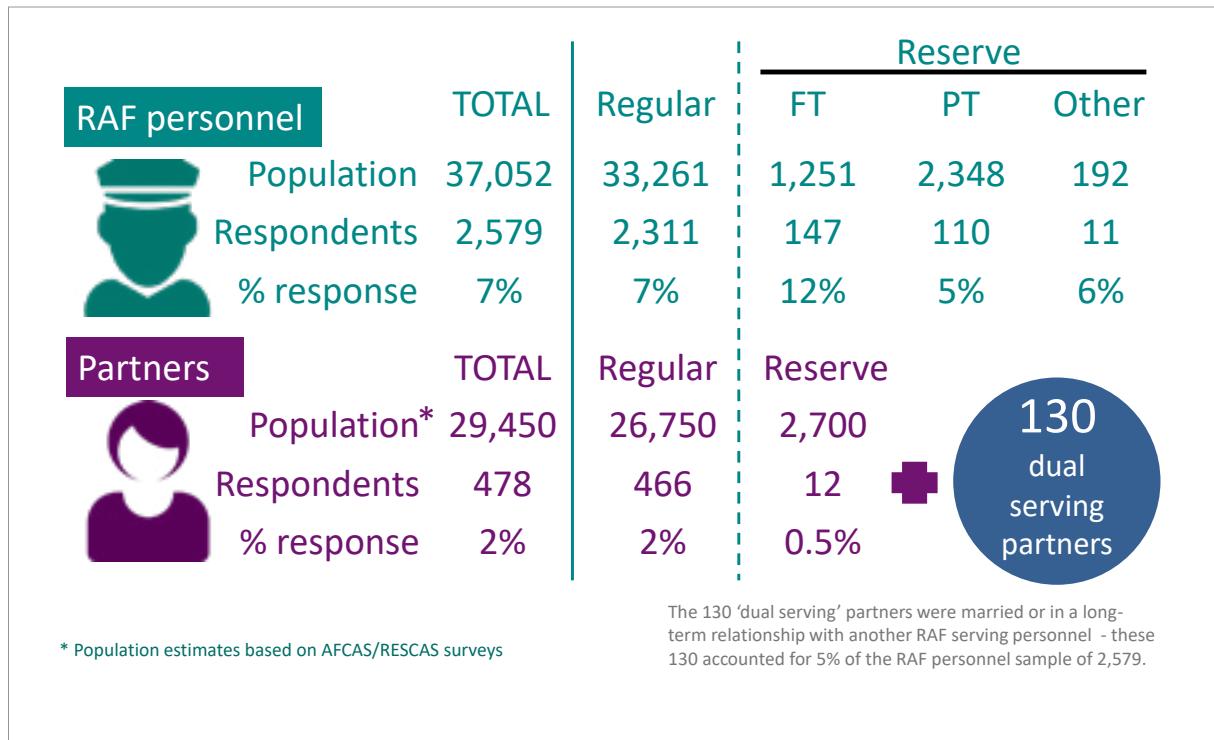
Email invitations were sent to all RAF personnel via station and Unit Commanders (via RAF Community Support). RAF personnel were asked in the email to pass the invitation onto their partner also. A later reminder email was also issued. The fieldwork period ran from 15 November to 18 December 2017. So, as such, the research was an 'attempted census' of the whole serving RAF community.

Various strategies were employed in order to maximise the response rate and reduce the potential for significant non-response bias – by encouraging all types of people to reply to the survey not just those who had experienced challenging circumstances. In the lead-up and during fieldwork, there was proactive engagement with RAF Station Commanders and the survey was promoted via the RAF and the RAF Benevolent Fund social media, RAF communication channels, *RAF News* and RAF FF weekly newsletter and via the Fund's local contacts (e.g. Fund Station Champions). Individual and station incentives were offered including a prize draw for participants with £500 as a first prize, and 75 runner-up prizes ranging from £20–£100 in Amazon vouchers; and a £15,000 grant for the RAF station with the highest response rate to spend on suitable welfare projects.

At the close of fieldwork a total of 3,057 completed online replies had been received – this included 2,579 from RAF personnel (representing a 7% response rate from the total eligible population) and 478 from partners of RAF personnel (representing an estimated 2% response rate). The response rate from RAF personnel is very respectable given their busy jobs and young working age profile; few online surveys exceed a 10% response rate.

78% of respondents chose to complete the survey on a PC/laptop, 20% on a smartphone and 2% on a tablet.

**Figure 3.2** *Response to the online survey*



### 3.2.3 Data processing, statistical reliability and limitations

The verbatim comments from the open-ended questions were coded. A small amount of editing was applied to resolve inconsistent answers. Comprehensive data tabulations were produced which cross-analysed each question by the various demographic variables.

The sample composition was compared with that of the known population and the demographic profile of the survey respondents was found to be mostly in line with the population. A few sub-groups were over-represented in the achieved sample: among Regulars: 35–44-year-olds and NCOs and among Reserves: those aged 55+ and officers. Conversely a few sub-groups were under-represented in the sample: among Regulars: 18–24-year-olds and airmen/airwomen, and among Reserves: 18–34-year-olds and airmen/airwomen. Among partners, women, those not in work, and those living in Service Accommodation were over-represented and men, those in work and those living in their own home were under-represented.

Therefore corrective weighting was applied to enhance the representativeness of the sample and remove any significant demographic skews. The survey data was weighted by age, gender, rank, presence of children and employment to be more representative of the known populations of RAF personnel and partners. Figure 3.3 shows which variables were weighted for which types of respondents. Full details of the weighting matrix are available from Compass Partnership upon request.

Even after weighting to correct the demographic profile the potential for bias in the survey results remains. Since only 7% of the eligible population responded to the survey it is possible that this minority was somehow biased e.g. towards people who were more positive or were more negative towards the RAF or the RAF Benevolent Fund, or who had more time available to complete surveys. There is also the possibility that those who had experienced greater welfare needs were more likely to complete the survey, leading to an inherent risk of somehow over-inflating the prevalence of reported problems – therefore a degree of caution should be exercised in interpreting the proportion reporting each difficulty, and even more so for the grossed up estimates of how many people in the total population might have experienced each problem. However, the provision of an initial email invitation from Station Commanders, a reminder email and prize draw incentive were intended to encourage all types of people to take the survey, not just those who have experienced problems or had contact with welfare agencies. And if certain demographic sub-groups have a heightened susceptibility for welfare problems then the corrective demographic weighting will have resolved this. Overall it is fair to say though that the rank order of specific problems is more reliable than the actual % reporting each, which in turn is more reliable than the grossed up estimates of number of people affected.

**Figure 3.3** Variables for which corrective weighting applied

	REGULAR RAF PERSONNEL	RESERVE/ OTHER SERVING PERSONNEL	NON-SERVING PARTNERS
Age	✓	✓	✓
Gender	✓	✓	✓
Any dependent children	✓	✓	✓
Rank	✓	✓	
Relationship status	✓	✓	
Employment status		Part-time only	✓



### 3.2.4 Sample profile

The responses to the online survey are reported separately for RAF personnel and partners. Figures 3.4 and 3.5 show the demographic profile of the final weighted survey sample, split out for RAF personnel and partners of RAF personnel separately. Key points about each sample are summarised below.

#### RAF personnel

- The majority of RAF personnel were men (85%)
- Their average age was 35; 55% were aged 18–34, 44% were aged 45–54 and 2% were aged 55+
- 58% were married, 22% were living with their partner or in a committed relationship, 14% were single and 6% were separated, divorced or widowed. Half had children under the age of 18
- 90% were Regulars and 10% Reservists. Their rank profile was 35% airmen/airwomen, 18% JNCOs, 25% senior non-commissioned officers (SNCO) and 22% commissioned officers. 28% had been serving for up to five years, 21% for six to 10 years, 15% for 11–15 years and 36% for 16 years or more.
- 32% lived in Single Living Accommodation, 34% in Service Family Accommodation, 40% in their own home (owned outright or with a mortgage), 6% rented their own home and 2% had other arrangements<sup>15</sup>. Eight in 10 said their partner was working.

#### Partners of RAF personnel

- The majority of partners of RAF personnel who responded to the survey were women (89%).
- Their average age was 39; 39% were aged 18–34, 59% were aged 45–54 and 2% were aged 55+.
- The vast majority were married (94%) and just 6% were living with their partner or in a committed relationship. Over three quarters had children under the age of 18.
- Nearly all (97%) were partners of RAF Regulars and 3% were partners of Reservists. The rank profile of their serving partner was 20% airmen/airwomen, 15% JNCOs, 33% SNCOs and 26% commissioned officers – so a somewhat more senior profile compared to the sample of RAF personnel. Their partners had also served for somewhat longer: 10% had been serving for up to five years, 17% for 6–10 years, 21% for 11–15 years and 51% for 16 years or more.

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<sup>15</sup> Percentages sum to more than 100% as some people had multiple living arrangements.

**Figure 3.4** Demographic profile of online survey respondents

	RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 2579)	PARTNERS OF RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 478)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	85%	11%
Female	15%	89%
Other/prefer not to answer	*	-
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	15%	2%
25-34	40%	37%
35-44	28%	36%
45-54	16%	23%
55-64	2%	1%
65+	-	1%
Prefer not to answer	*	-
Average	35	39
<b>Marital status:</b>		
Single	14%	*
Living with my partner/in a committed relationship	22%	6%
Married/civil partnership	58%	94%
Separated	2%	*
Divorced	3%	-
Widowed	*	-
<b>Presence of children:</b>		
Yes, children aged 0-18 years	50%	77%
Yes, children aged 19+, who are still dependent on me due to long-term illness or disability	1%	1%
Yes, children aged 19+, who are not dependent on me due to long-term illness or disability	8%	11%
No	44%	17%
Not stated		

**Figure 3.5** *Employment and housing profile of online survey respondents*

	RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 2579)	PARTNERS OF RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 478)
<b>Serving person's service</b>		
Regular RAF	90%	97%
RAF full-time Reserves	3%	2%
RAF part-time Reserves	6%	*
Other	1%	*
<b>Rank of serving person:</b>		
Airman/airwoman	35%	20%
Junior non-commissioned officer (JNCO)	18%	15%
Senior non-commissioned officer (SNCO)	25%	33%
Commissioned officer	22%	26%
Other	1%	3%
Prefer not to answer	1%	3%
<b>Length of service of serving person</b>		
0-2 years	12%	4%
3-5 years	16%	6%
6-10 years	21%	17%
11-15 years	15%	21%
16 years or more	36%	51%
Prefer not to answer	*	1%
<b>Employment status of non-serving partner*</b>		
Full-time employment (30+ hours per week)	55%	47%
Part-time employment (less than 30 hours per week)	20%	26%
Self-employed	4%	6%
Unemployed but available for work	3%	2%
Unemployed but not able to work	1%	1%
In full-time education/government training scheme	3%	1%
Not working, looking after family or home	11%	15%
Other	2%	2%
<b>Housing status</b>		
Single Living Accommodation or substitute (SLA/SSLA)	32%	1%
Service Family Accommodation or substitute (SFA/SSFA)	34%	70%
Own home (owned outright or with a mortgage)	40%	27%
Own home (rented)	6%	2%
Other	3%	2%

\* For employment status, the base for RAF personnel was those who had a non-serving partner (unweighted 1,935, weighted 1,963)

- Most (70%) lived in Service Family Accommodation, 27% lived in their own home (owned outright or with a mortgage), 2% rented their own home and 2% had other arrangements<sup>16</sup>.
- Eight in 10 were working: 47% full-time, 26% part-time and 6% self-employed. 15% per cent were not working but looking after the family or home. 2% were unemployed but available for work, 1% were unemployed but unable to work and 1% were in full-time education or on a government training scheme.

### 3.3 Qualitative telephone in-depth interviews

The third stage of research, conducted in March/April 2018, was qualitative telephone in-depth interviews with respondents to the online survey. The RAF Benevolent Fund took the decision to focus in on three themes only, and explore these in greater detail through the in-depth interviews. These were:

- Community and social isolation
- Mental wellbeing
- Partner employment.

These three topics were chosen by the RAF Benevolent Fund as they affected significant numbers of people and the Fund was keen to consider how more could be done to help with challenges faced in these areas. The results are reported in Chapter 3.

#### 3.3.1 Topic guide

The topic guide was developed in close consultation with the Fund and building upon the findings from the online survey.

The purpose of the interviews was to understand, among those who had experienced 'major problems' with social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment, the narrative behind the statistics reported in the survey. The topic guide covered the nature of their problems, whether they had sought or received any assistance, awareness of sources of help, barriers to help seeking, and the discussion also touched upon ideas for potential new forms of support.

A topic guide is not a questionnaire. It is used as an aide memoire for researchers to ensure that topics are covered, but the questions are not necessarily asked in the way they are written in the topic guide and are not always covered in the order they are written. The aim of qualitative work is to give people a chance to 'tell their stories', therefore, to an extent, the way in which they do this is up to them. The researchers guide the interviews, with a view to covering all the main themes.

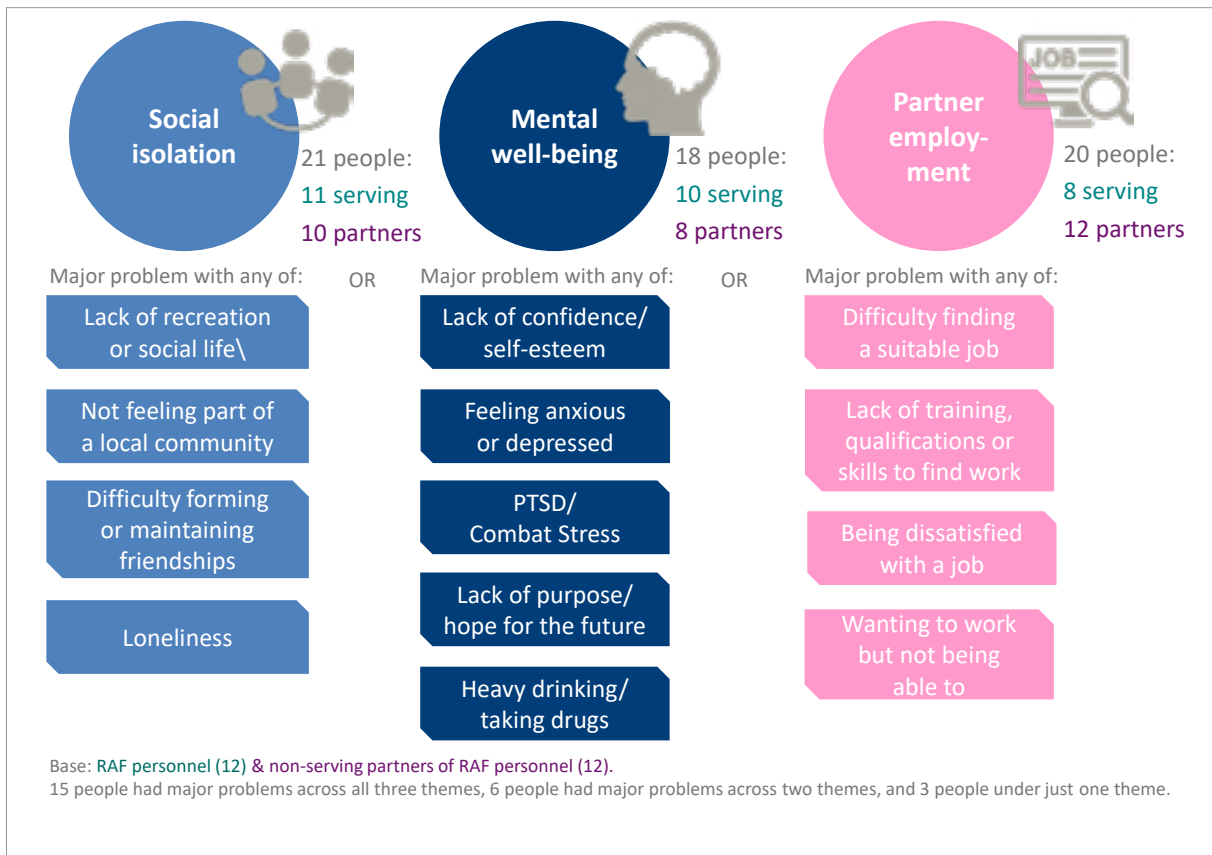
#### 3.3.2 Sample and fieldwork

To be eligible to take part in the interviews respondents had to have cited in the survey a 'major problem' with at least one of: social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment. Each of these themes had several specific issues within it and these are shown in figure 3.6.

Email invitations were sent by the Fund to respondents of the online survey who answered at the end of the survey that they were willing to be re-contacted and who reported in the survey a 'major problem' with at least one of: social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment. A professional recruiter telephoned potential interviewees to ask whether they were willing to take part and booked 24 appointments – 12 RAF personnel and 12 partners of RAF personnel<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Percentages sum to more than 100% as some people had multiple living arrangements.

<sup>17</sup> All of these were actually married partners rather than people who were living together or in a committed relationship.

**Figure 3.6** Selection criteria for participants of the telephone in-depth interviews

All of the 24 interviewees had experienced 'major problems' in at least one of these three areas, and the majority had experienced 'major problems' in all three areas. Figure 3.6 shows precisely how many had experienced 'major problems' under each theme. Among the RAF personnel, 11 cited 'major problem(s)' with social isolation, 10 with mental wellbeing and eight with their partner's employment. Among the partners, 10 cited major problem(s) with social isolation, eight with mental wellbeing and 12 with their employment. As such, these individuals do not represent a picture of life in the RAF – rather they highlight the concerns and experiences of individuals with particular needs.

The demographic profile of the participants is shown in figure 3.7. The interviewees were mainly in the 25–34 age bracket. The 12 RAF personnel comprised nine men and three women; of whom seven were married, one living with their partner/in a committed relationship and four singles. All 12 partners interviewed were married women. The RAF personnel were mainly airmen/airwomen (eight), with two non-commissioned officers and two commissioned officers whereas partners were associated with personnel from a broader spread of ranks (four airmen, five NCOs, two COs and one other). There was a good spread of people from large, medium and small-sized stations.

**Figure 3.7** *Demographic profile of qualitative telephone in-depth interviewees*

	RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 12)	PARTNERS OF RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 12)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	9	-
Female	3	12
Other/prefer not to answer	-	-
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	1	-
25-34	9	9
35-44	1	3
45-54	1	-
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	4	-
Living with my partner/in a committed relationship	1	-
Married/civil partnership	7	12
<b>Major problem(s) experienced:</b>		
Social isolation	11	10
Mental wellbeing	10	8
Partner employment	8	12
<b>Serving person is based at:</b>		
Large station	4	4
Medium station	5	3
Small station	3	5
<b>Rank of serving person:</b>		
Airman/airwoman	8	4
Junior non-commissioned officer (NCO)	1	3
Senior non-commissioned officer (SCO)	1	2
Commissioned officer	2	2
Other	-	1

Two researchers from Compass undertook the interviews: Graham Kelly and Jacinta Ashworth. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes on average.

### 3.3.3 Analysis

All the interviews were digitally recorded and then entered into a master spreadsheet of findings. Thematic analysis was undertaken to determine recurring themes and the full range of opinions. Qualitative methods neither seek, nor allow, data to be given on the numbers of people holding a particular view nor having a particular set of experiences. The aim of qualitative research is to define and describe the range of emergent issues and explore linkages, rather than to measure their extent.

## 3.4 Qualitative focus groups

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The fourth and final stage of research, conducted in May/June 2018, was qualitative focus groups, again undertaken with respondents to the former online survey. The results are reported in Chapter 4.

The purpose of this stage was to test the reaction to four propositions for potential new welfare support services among the serving RAF community.

The Fund developed four propositions for testing:

- Provision of RAF Benevolent Fund Community Engagement Workers on RAF stations
- Provision of a welfare app
- Provision of workshops and seminars for partners
- Provision of life coaching.

The full descriptions of each proposition as shown to participants, are at figures 3.8, 3.9, 3.10 and 3.11 overleaf.

### 3.4.1 Topic guide

The topic guide was developed in close consultation with the RAF Benevolent Fund and building upon the findings from the previous survey and in-depth interviews. Each focus group covered the following topics for each proposition:

- Target audience – who would benefit? Who might miss out? How to publicise?
- Strengths and weaknesses and potential refinements to the concept
- Perceptions of relevance (whether it is addressing a significant difficulty for at least some people), likely take-up (whether people would actually use the service) and credibility (whether it would be appropriate for the RAF Benevolent Fund to provide or fund this).

The order in which the four concepts was discussed was rotated within the focus groups, to minimise any order effects.

**Figure 3.8** *Description of the Community Engagement Workers proposition, as shown to research participants*


**Proposal 1: Provision of RAF Benevolent Fund Community Engagement Workers on RAF stations**

**Purpose**  
To raise awareness and promote engagement in activities on stations and in communities, helping to reduce social isolation.

**Background**  
We know that many of the social, recreational and educational opportunities on stations are under used, perhaps because people are unaware, and perhaps because some people lack the confidence to join in.

**Vision**  
The Community Engagement Worker would work alongside the Station Community Support team to provide practical assistance to serving personnel and families, enabling them to access opportunities. This role could include the following:

- Accompanying people to activities on their first visit
- Developing a “buddy” system within clubs for potential new members
- Acting as a focal point for single personnel to encourage them to join in with activities
- Encouraging people to join in with activities both on the station and in the local community.



**Figure 3.9** *Description of the welfare app proposition, as shown to research participants*

**Proposal 2: Provision of RAF Benevolent Fund welfare app**

**Purpose**  
An easy to access source of welfare information for the RAF Family, helping to reduce problems that arise because people feel they do not have the welfare information they need.


**Background**  
Service life presents extra challenges. Although support is available not everybody knows how to get it. For example:

- Serving personnel do not always pass on information to their dependents
- People may not understand the questions that they need to ask in order to get the most relevant, up-to-date information.

There is currently no single point of information on welfare provision, support, benefits and entitlements.

**Vision**  
To produce an app containing information about welfare, support, benefits and entitlements for the RAF family. It would contain a directory of welfare providers across a range of different needs. It would be continually updated in order to remain accurate. It would be user friendly and avoid jargon and complex terminology. Subjects covered in the app could include the following:

Housing	Medical
Education	Special educational needs
Childcare	Veterans
Youth support	Resettlement
HIVE	RAF Benevolent Fund
MOD agencies	Other service charities.





**Figure 3.10** *Description of the workshops and seminars for partners proposition, as shown to research participants*

**Proposal 3: Provision of RAF Benevolent Fund workshops and seminars for partners**

**Purpose**

To provide workshops/seminars that will aid transitions and help to increase family income, reduce loneliness and enhance mental well being. They would help partners gain skills and information on subjects including the following:

- Employment - opportunities, skills and career prospects
- Relationships
- Life skills
- Emotional resilience
- Other subjects for which there is a need.


**Background**

There are currently few opportunities for RAF families to be involved in workshops/seminars. Where they have taken place attendance has sometimes been disappointing due to lack of childcare support and/or because the serving person has not always passed on information to their dependants.

The pilot parenting workshops run by Airplay have shown that there is a need to provide opportunities for partners to develop their skills.

**Vision**

A series of workshops/seminars for RAF partners, improving skills and knowledge, and ultimately enhancing quality of life. Events to be held in venues and at times accessible to partners, with appropriate childcare and other support in place to encourage attendance.



**Figure 3.11** *Description of the life coaching proposition, as shown to research participants*

**Proposal 4: Provision of life coaching**

**Purpose**

Providing coaching for members of the RAF community, enabling individuals to identify personal and professional goals, and achieve lasting change. This can include excelling in their career, exploring their potential and achieving ambitions, as well as being happy and fulfilled outside of work.

Targeted at serving personnel transitioning to life outside of the RAF, as well as helping partners with issues such as employability and family wellbeing.

**Background**


Coaching is known to be an effective method of helping people during transitions, such as the move to civilian life, or returning to the family after deployment. Though not focusing on very specific skills, coaching helps the individual to develop resilience and the ability to develop their own solutions to situations that they face.

There is evidence that coaching produces benefits for those who engage with it.

**Vision**

To be initially targeted at serving personnel transitioning to civilian life, as well as partners. Life coaching can help to empower individuals to more effectively deal with the challenges they face in employment, family life, social networks, home/accommodation, and emotional wellbeing.

Coaching would be offered for a set number of sessions following an initial assessment of potential commitment and benefit.



### 3.4.2 Sample and fieldwork

Six focus groups were held - four with RAF personnel and two with partners of RAF personnel – and involving a total of 57 people (38 RAF personnel and 19 partners). Because the focus groups were convened face-to-face, in order to keep travel costs down, these were held at just three different stations, with two focus groups at each station:

- RAF Odiham on 21 May, attended by 10 serving personnel
- RAF Odiham on 21 May, attended by eight serving personnel
- RAF Brize Norton on 23 May, attended by nine partners of serving personnel
- RAF Brize Norton on 23 May, attended by 10 serving personnel
- RAF Marham on 5 June, attended by 10 serving personnel
- RAF Marham on 5 June, attended by 10 partners of serving personnel.

To be eligible to take part in the interviews respondents had to be serving at one of the three selected stations, or a partner of someone attached to those stations.

Email invitations were sent by the RAF Benevolent Fund to respondents of the online survey who answered at the end of the survey that they were willing to be re-contacted and who were attached to RAF Odiham, RAF Brize Norton or RAF Marham.

The Compass recruiter telephoned potential interviewees to ask whether they were willing to take part and secured eight to 10 attendees for each focus group. Participants were offered a £25 incentive as a thank you for their time, and to cover any travel expenses (a few declined to accept this).

Of the 57 participants, 44 had reported in the survey a major problem over the past few years with at least one theme of: social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment<sup>18</sup>.

Seven had problems in at least one of these themes but not major; six had not had problems in any of these areas. So the participants were intentionally skewed towards those who might have greater need of the new services.

The demographic profile of the participants is shown in fig. 3.12.

Two researchers from Compass co-moderated the focus groups: Graham Kelly and Jacinta Ashworth. Focus groups lasted 90 minutes.

### 3.4.3 Analysis

All the focus groups were digitally recorded and then entered into a master spreadsheet of findings. Thematic analysis was undertaken to determine the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each proposition and how they could be improved.

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<sup>18</sup> Definitions were the same as per the qualitative depth interviews, as shown in figure 3.6 earlier.

**Figure 3.12** Demographic profile of qualitative focus group attendees

	ODIHAM SERVING (BASE: 10)	ODIHAM SERVING (BASE: 8)	B.NORTON PARTNERS (BASE: 9)	B.NORTON PARTNERS (BASE: 10)	MARHAM SERVING (BASE: 10)	MARHAM PARTNERS (BASE: 10)
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	8	6	-	8	8	-
Female	2	2	9	2	2	10
<b>Age</b>						
18–24	-	1	1	-	1	1
25–34	3	4	3	2	5	5
35–44	6	3	2	6	3	4
45–54	1	-	2	2	1	-
<b>Marital status</b>						
Married/civil partnership	7	6	8	6	6	10
Living with my partner/ in a committed relationship	3	1	1	2	2	-
Single	-	1	-	-	1^	-
Divorced	-	-	-	2	-	-
Separated	-	-	-	-	1	-
<b>Problem(s) experienced:</b>						
Major problems(s)*	7	5	3	10	10	9
Problem(s) but not major*	1	1	5	-	-	-
No problems*	2	2	1	-	-	1
<b>Rank of serving person:</b>						
Airman/airwoman	1	3	2	2	2	4
Junior non- commissioned officer (NCO)	4	1	2	-	5	3
Senior non- commissioned officer (SCO)	5	4	2	8	3	3
Commissioned officer	-	-	2	-	-	-
Other	-	-	1	-	-	-

Partner's employment status:						
Working full-time	6	2	1	4	2	3
Working part-time	1	2	4	2	1	4
Unemployed, available for work	-	-	-	1	-	-
Unemployed, not able to work	-	-	-	1	1	-
Full-time education or government training scheme	-	-	1	-	2	-
Not working, looking after family or home	3	2	3	-	2	3
Not stated	-	1	-	-	-	-
Not applicable	-	1	-	2	2	-

\* In any of the three themes: social isolation, mental wellbeing or partner employment.

^ Was living with partner at time of survey but now single again.

## APPENDIX 4

# ESTIMATES OF POPULATION SIZE OF THE SERVING RAF COMMUNITY

This appendix sets out the calculations used to estimate the total size of the serving RAF community, as summarised in Chapter 2 of this report.

### 4.1 Sources of data for calculations

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An estimate of the total size of the serving RAF community has been produced using total numbers of RAF personnel in April 2017 (MOD 2017b) combined with estimates of numbers of financially dependent adults and children based on the two main MOD surveys of RAF personnel: AFCAS (MOD 2017d) and RESCAS (MOD 2017c).

The surveys are, however, based only on a subset of the population. AFCAS includes full-time Trained Regular Forces (93% of all Regular Forces – MOD 2017b) and RESCAS includes the Volunteer Reserve (72% of the Reserve Forces – MOD 2017b). In order to provide estimates of the total size of the population, an assumption has been made that the estimates from AFCAS and RESCAS apply equally to the remaining population. There is, therefore, an unknown margin of error in the final estimates. Because of this, all estimates cited in the main body of the report will be rounded, while exact figures will be used for numbers of RAF personnel, as these are taken from MOD statistics.

### 4.2 Calculations

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#### 4.2.1 RAF personnel

In April 2017 there were 33,261 RAF Regular Forces and 3,791 RAF Reserve Forces (MOD 2017b). This gives a total of **37,052 RAF personnel**.

#### 4.2.2 Adult dependants

The number of adult dependants was estimated using AFCAS/RESCAS data (MOD 2017d, MOD 2017c) as per figure 4.1. Each estimated total was based on the total number of RAF personnel set out above.

**Figure 4.1** *Estimated number of adult dependants of RAF personnel (MOD 2017d, 2017b, 2017c)*

	REGULAR FORCES		RESERVES	
	% from AFCAS	Estimated total	% from RESCAS	Estimated total
Married/in a civil partnership	58%	19,291	53%	2,009
Established relationship	22%	7,317	18%	682
Separated/divorced	5%	1,663	9%	341
Estimated adult dependants		28,272		3,033
Estimate after reducing separated/divorced		27,723		2,920

This provides an estimated total of 31,305 adult dependants. It should be noted that not all RAF personnel who are separated or divorced still have an adult financially dependent on them, as some ex-partners may have re-married or found a new partner. This is, therefore, likely to be a slight over-estimate. RAF figures suggest there are around 1,500 separated dependants, which is roughly two thirds of the above estimate of around 2,300 (in fig 4.1), suggesting that around two thirds of separated or divorced partners remain financially dependent. Based on this, we have reduced the number of separated/divorced dependants in the estimate by a third and this reduces the estimate to 30,643 or around **31,000 adult dependants**, rounded to the nearest thousand.

**Figure 4.2** *Estimated number of dependent children for RAF Reserve Forces (MOD 2017c)*

	RESERVES	
	% from RESCAS	Estimated total
One	17%	644
Two	19%	1,441
Three	5%	569
Four+	2%	303
<b>Estimated dependent children</b>		<b>2,957</b>

**Figure 4.3** *Estimated number of dependent children for RAF Regular Forces (MOD 2017d)*

	REGULAR FORCES	
	% from AFCAS	Estimated total
Children under five		
One	19%	6,320
Two	6%	3,991
Three	0.3%	299
<b>Estimated children under five</b>		<b>10,610</b>
Children 5-17		
One	16%	5,322
Two	13%	7,983
Three	3%	2,993
Four+	0.4%	532
<b>Estimated children 5-18</b>		<b>16,830</b>
Children 18+		
One	5%	1,663
Two	2%	1,330
Three	0.4%	399
Four+	0.1%	133
<b>Estimated children 18+</b>		<b>3,525</b>
<b>Estimated dependent children</b>		<b>30,965</b>

### 4.2.3 Child dependants

The estimated numbers of child dependants are based on the numbers of financially dependent children of any age reported in AFCAS and RESCAS. For RAF Reserves the total numbers of children are indicated. For RAF Regular Forces this is broken down by age. The two calculations are set out in figures 4.2 and 4.3 on the previous page.

After rounding, this provides an estimated total of **34,000 dependent children**.

### 4.3 Total estimated size of serving RAF community

This gives a total estimated population of:

**37,052 RAF personnel + 31,000 adult dependants + 34,000 dependent children =  
102,052 total population**

After rounding totals to the nearest 500, this estimate is broken down for the purposes of this report as per Figure 4.4.

**Figure 4.4:** *Estimated size of serving RAF community (note: all figures other than number of RAF personnel are rounded to the nearest 500)*

	REGULAR	RESERVE	TOTAL
RAF personnel (known)	33,260	3,790	37,050
Adult dependants (estimate)	28,000	3,000	31,000
Dependent children (estimate, any age)	31,000	3,000	34,000
<b>Estimated Total</b>	<b>92,000</b>	<b>10,000</b>	<b>102,000</b>

Given the (unknown) margin of error, this suggests **a total serving RAF community in the range of 95,000 to 105,000.**



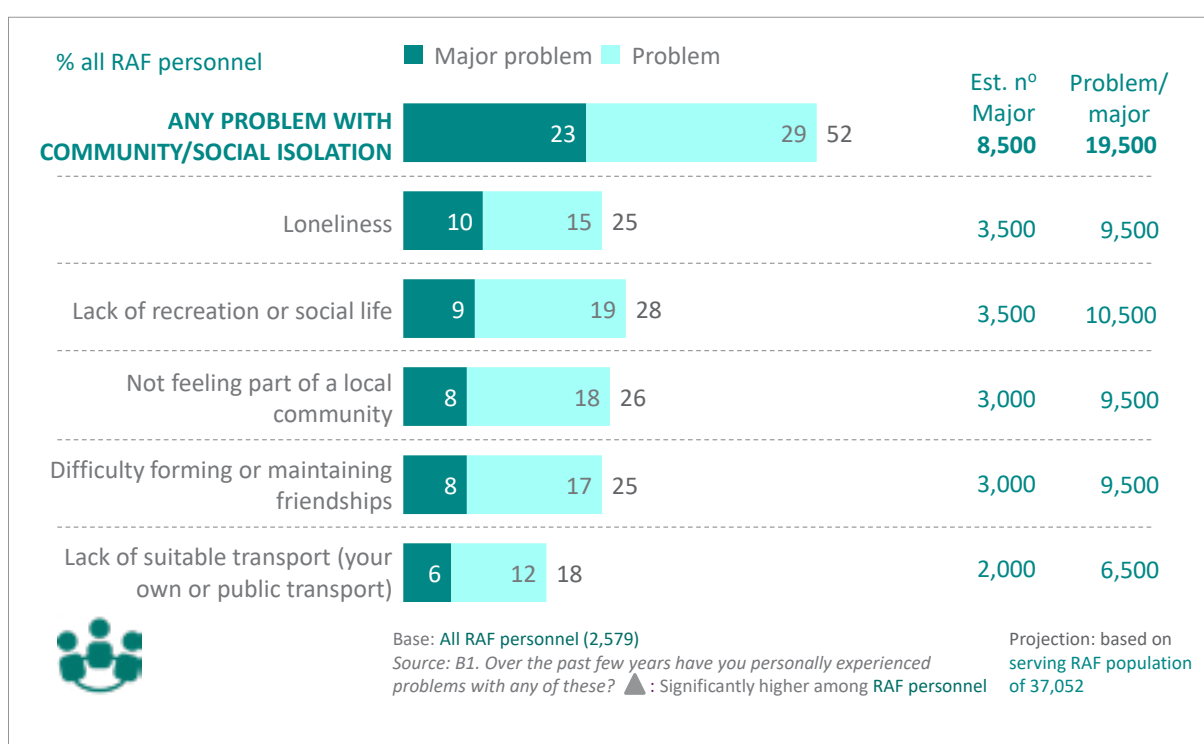
## APPENDIX 5 SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The tables and charts included here provide additional supporting evidence from the primary research.

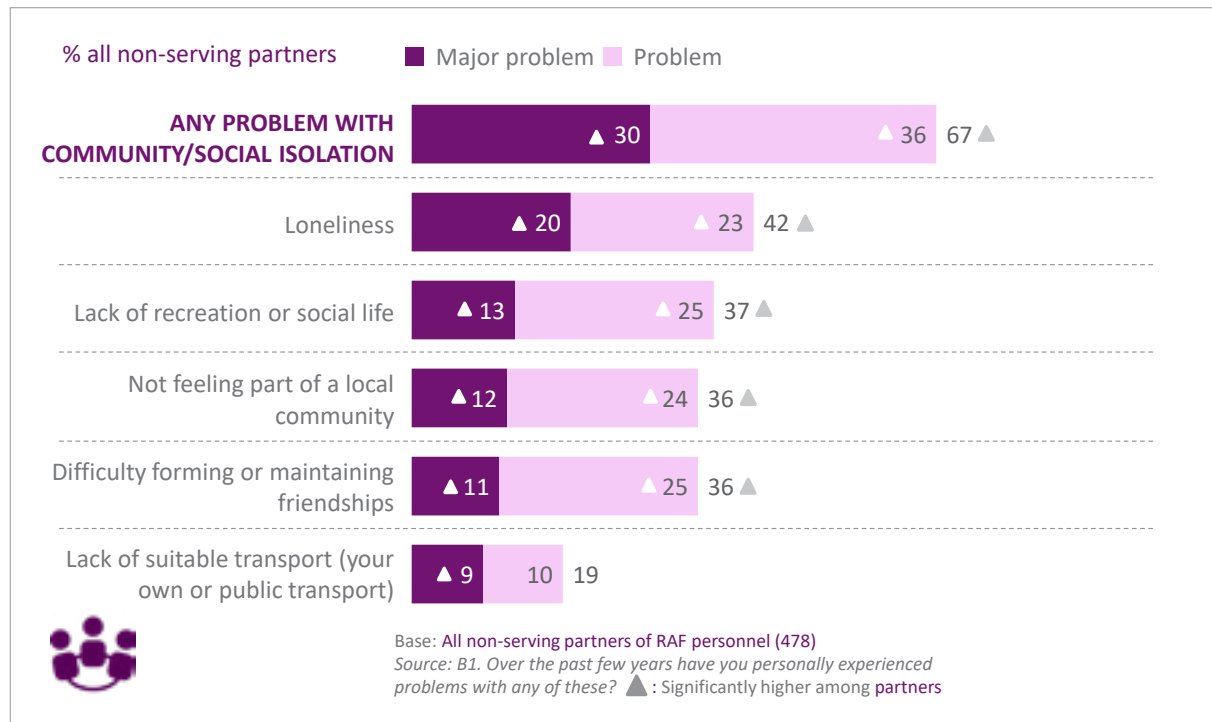
**Figure 5.1** Number of issues cited as 'major problems' over the past few years (from the 30 specific issues presented in the survey)

	RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 2579)	PARTNERS OF RAF PERSONNEL (BASE: 478)
None	45%	39%
1	17%	16%
2	10%	11%
3	7%	9%
4	5%	6%
5	4%	4%
6-10	9%	11%
11-15	2%	4%
16-20	1%	1%
21-30	*	-
<b>Average (mean)</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>2.6</b>

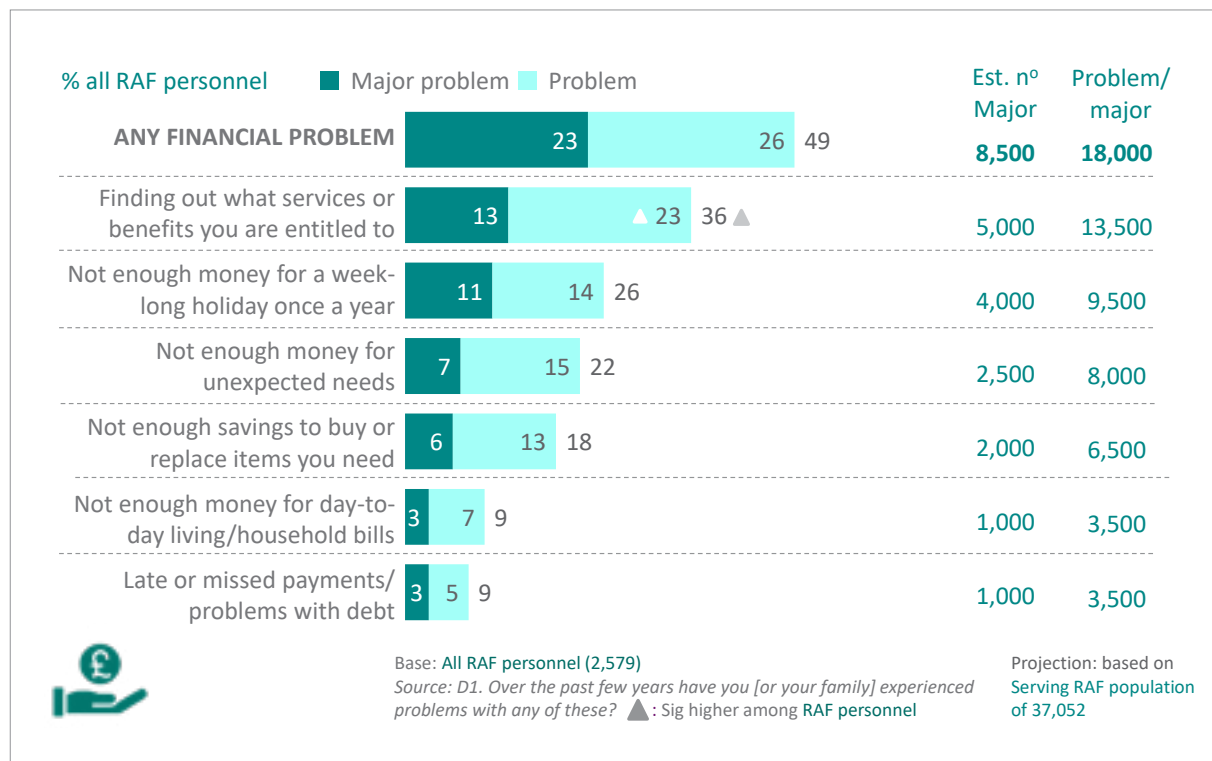
**Figure 5.2** Problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of community and social isolation



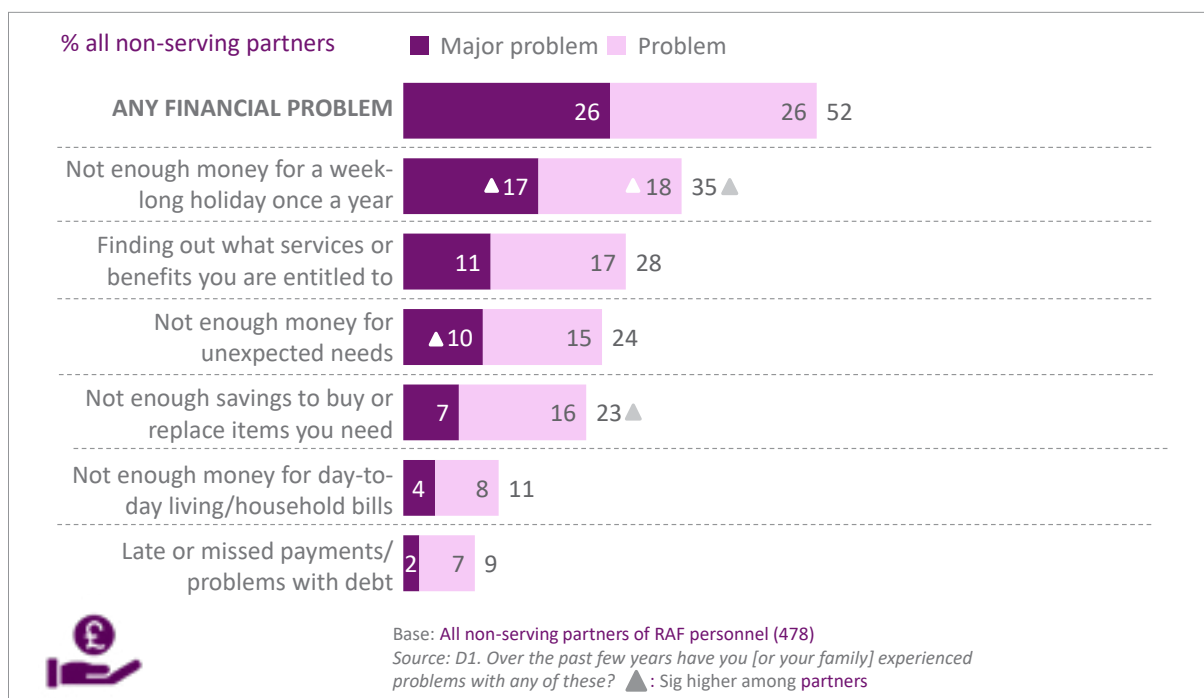
**Figure 5.3** Problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of community and social isolation



**Figure 5.4** Problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of financial means



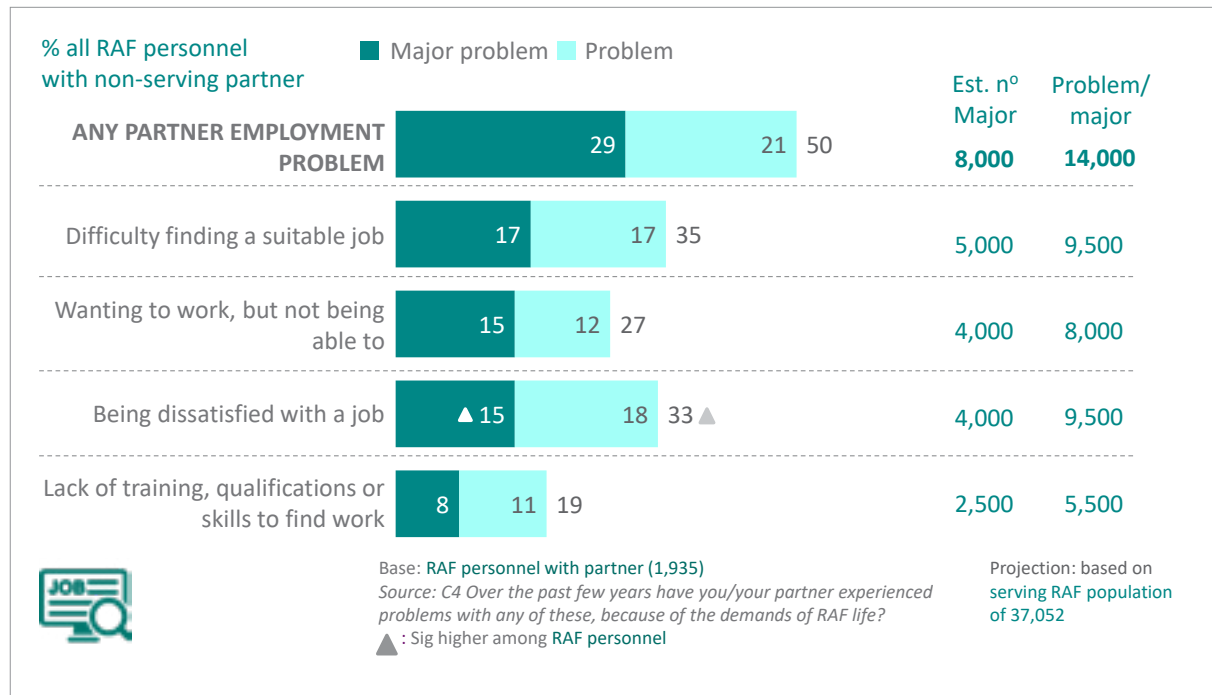
**Figure 5.5** Problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of financial means



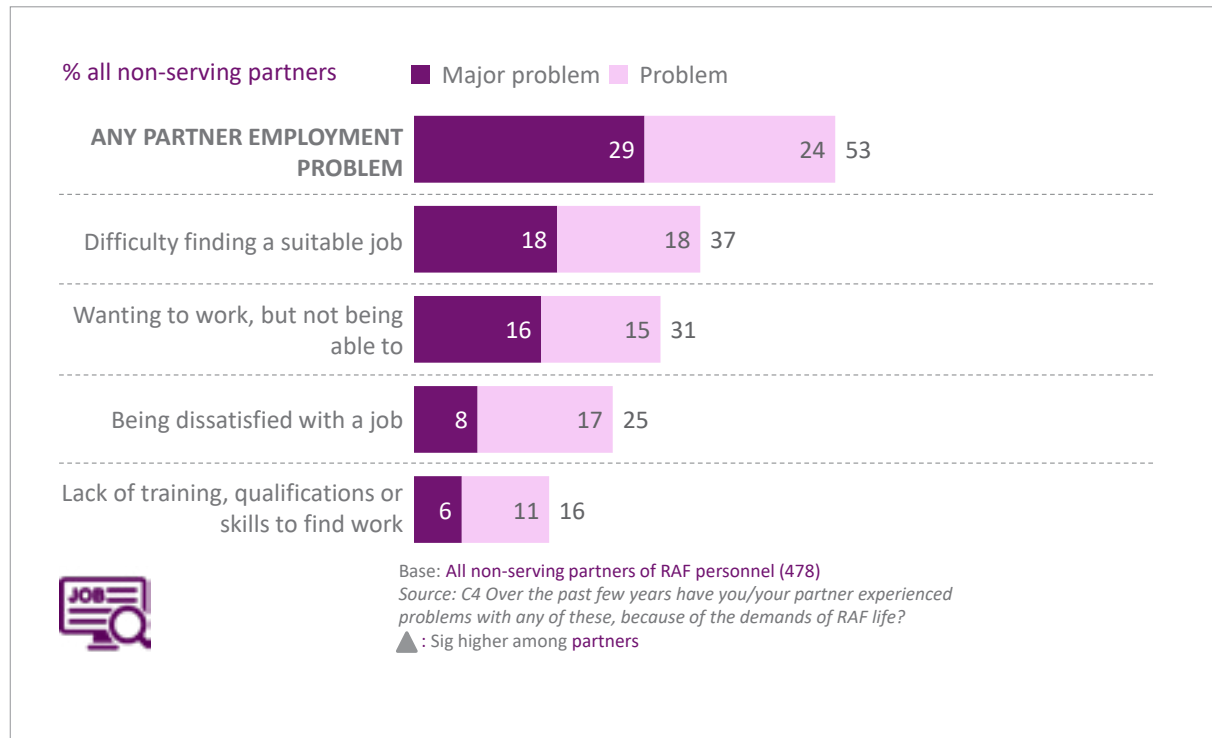
**Figure 5.6** Support and preparation received for leaving the RAF, among those planning to leave in next 12 months and those planning to leave in one to two years.

Bases: Planning to leave in next 12m (120) Planning to leave in next one–two years (235) Row percentages	BASE:	NOT ENOUGH SO FAR	HAD ENOUGH SO FAR	GAP
Financial planning for the future	Next 12m	37%	43%	+6
	1–2 years	41%	28%	-13
Financial management skills for day-to-day life	Next 12m	31%	55%	+24
	1–2 years	37%	39%	+2
Job application skills/CV writing	Next 12m	22%	60%	+38
	1–2 years	38%	24%	-14
Planning your future career	Next 12m	27%	62%	+35
	1–2 years	40%	33%	-7
Vocational skills training	Next 12m	35%	57%	+22
	1–2 years	37%	42%	+5
Training in personal skills e.g. leadership, team working	Next 12m	19%	73%	+54
	1–2 years	20%	65%	+45
Life skills to cope with the change to civilian life	Next 12m	38%	40%	+2
	1–2 years	40%	24%	-16
Your housing needs after transition	Next 12m	25%	54%	+29
	1–2 years	31%	35%	+4

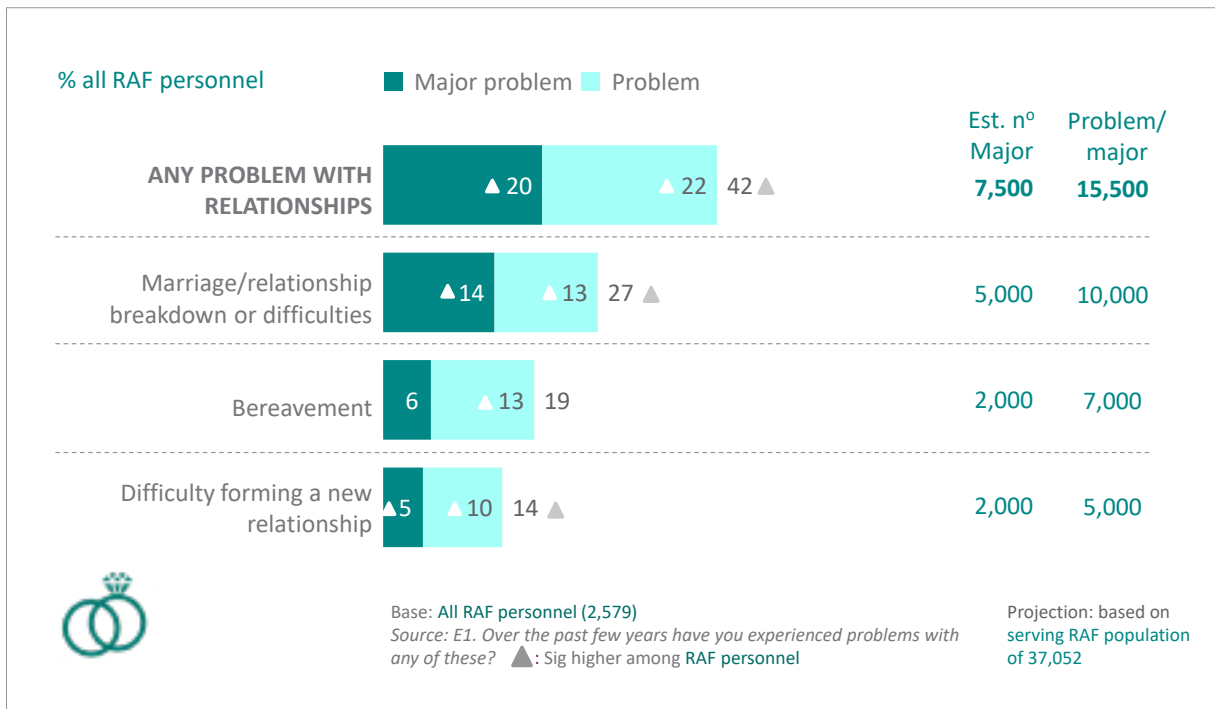
**Figure 5.7** Problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of partner’s employment



**Figure 5.8** Problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of their employment



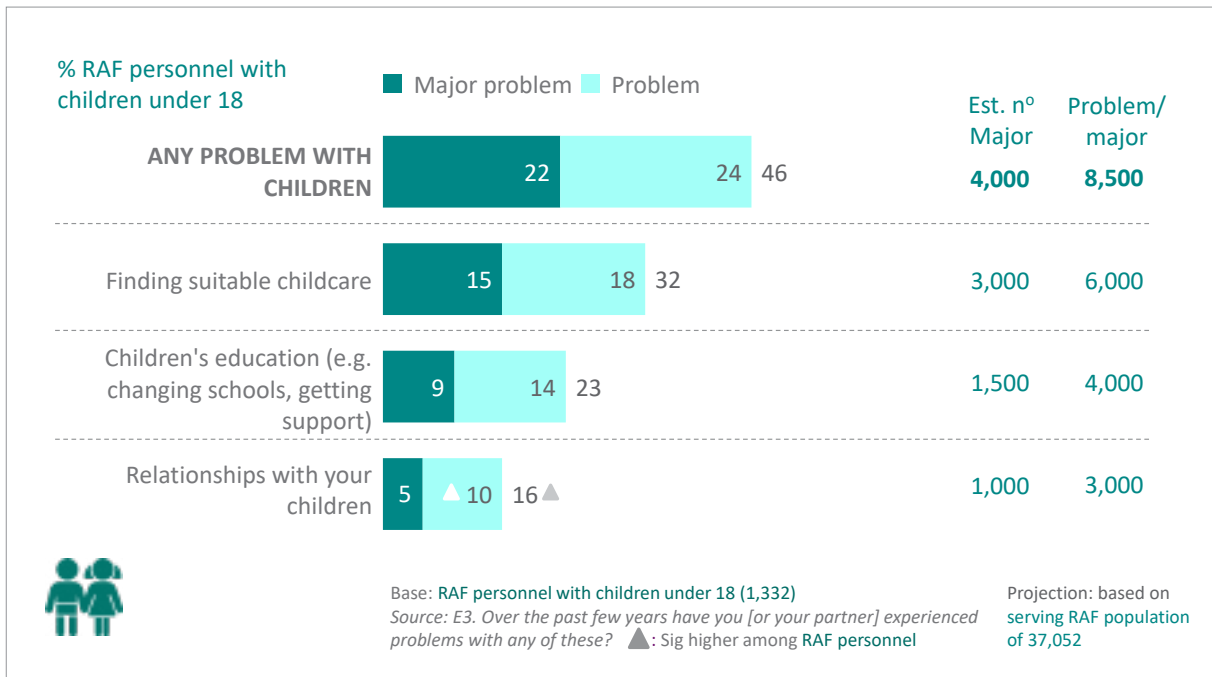
**Figure 5.9** Problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of relationships



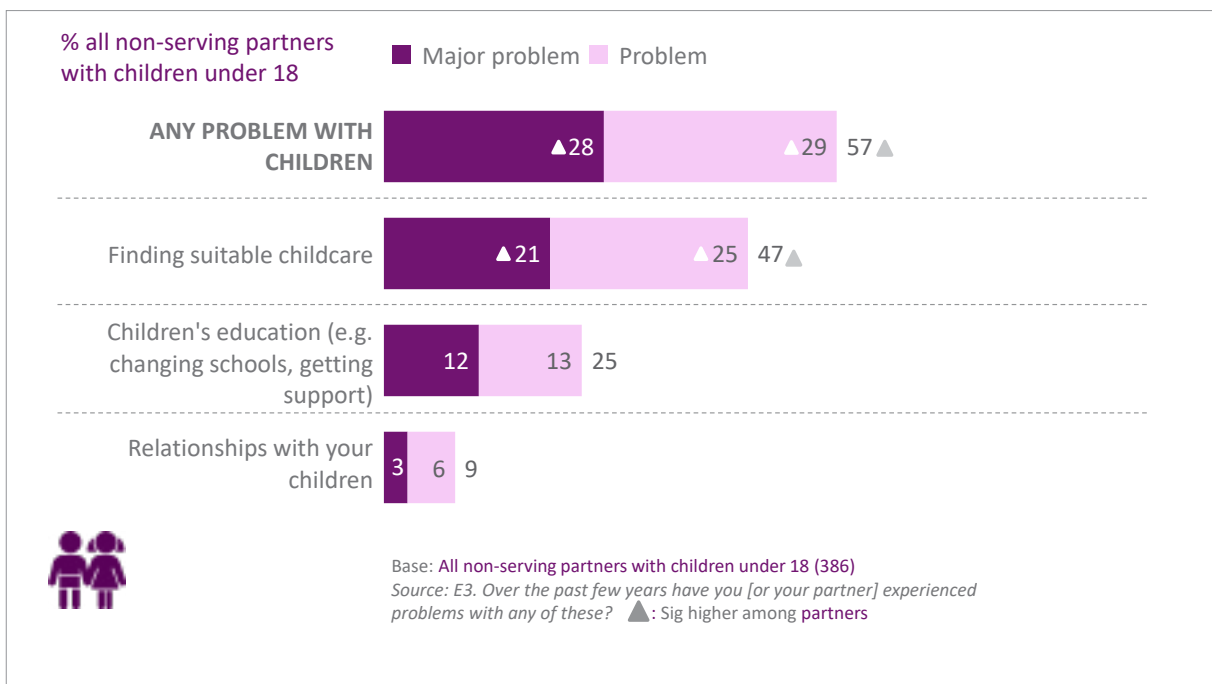
**Figure 5.10** Problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of relationships



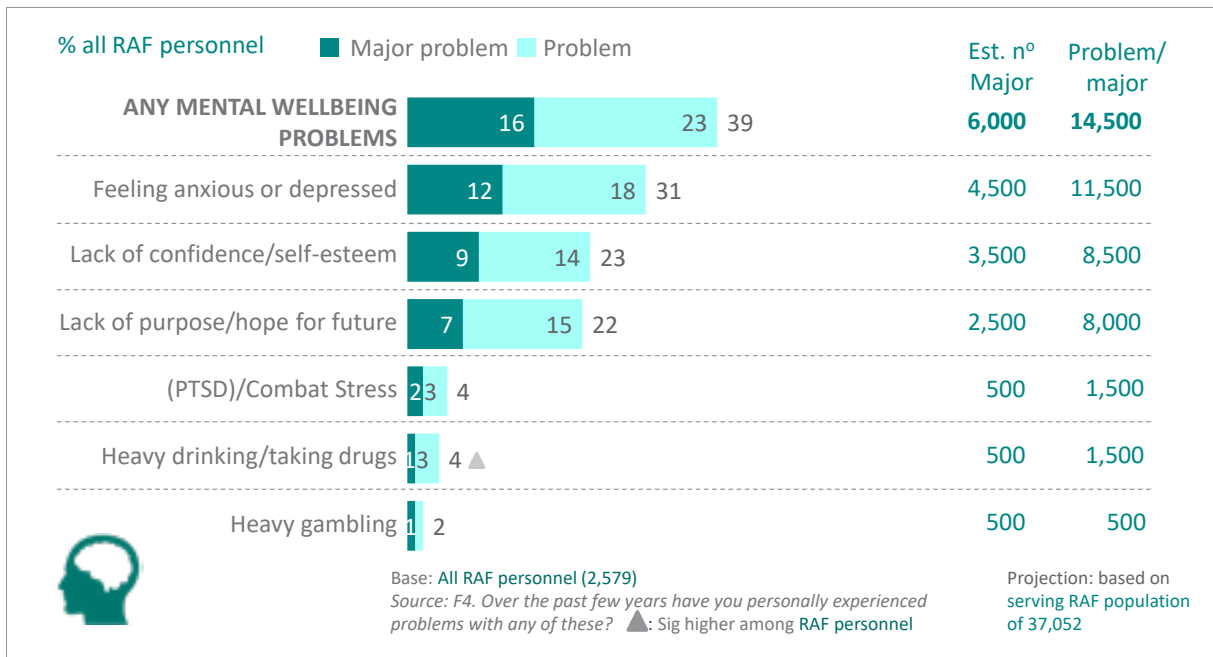
**Figure 5.11** Problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of children



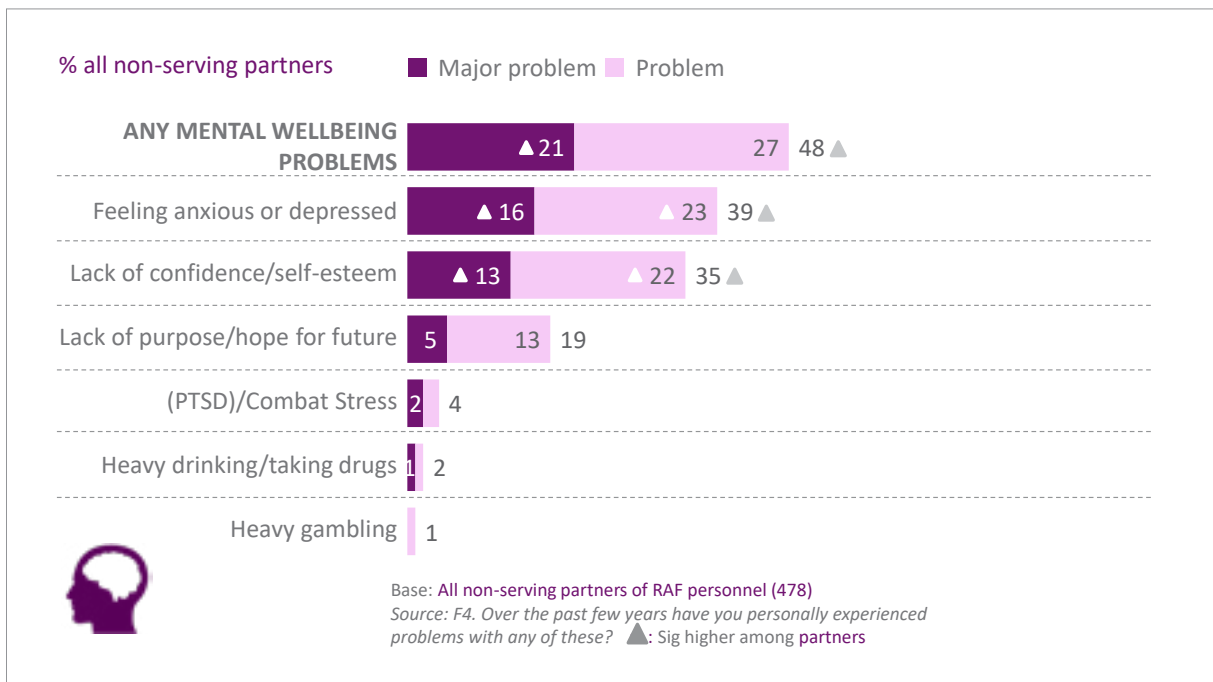
**Figure 5.12** Problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of children



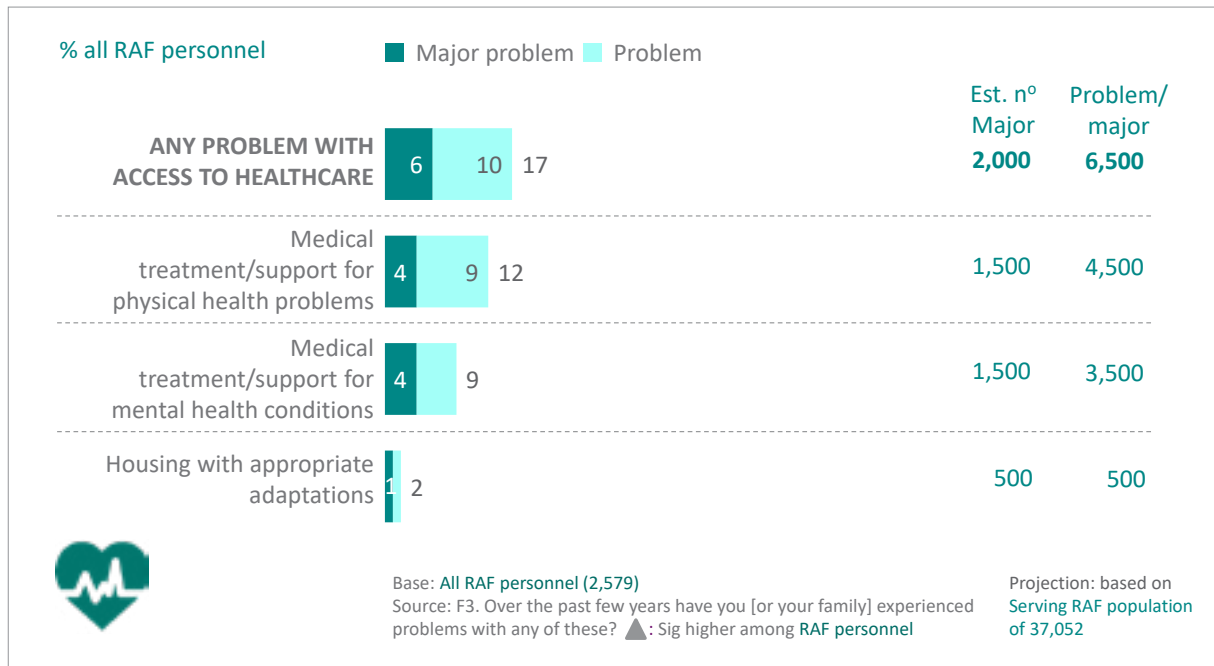
**Figure 5.13** Problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of mental wellbeing



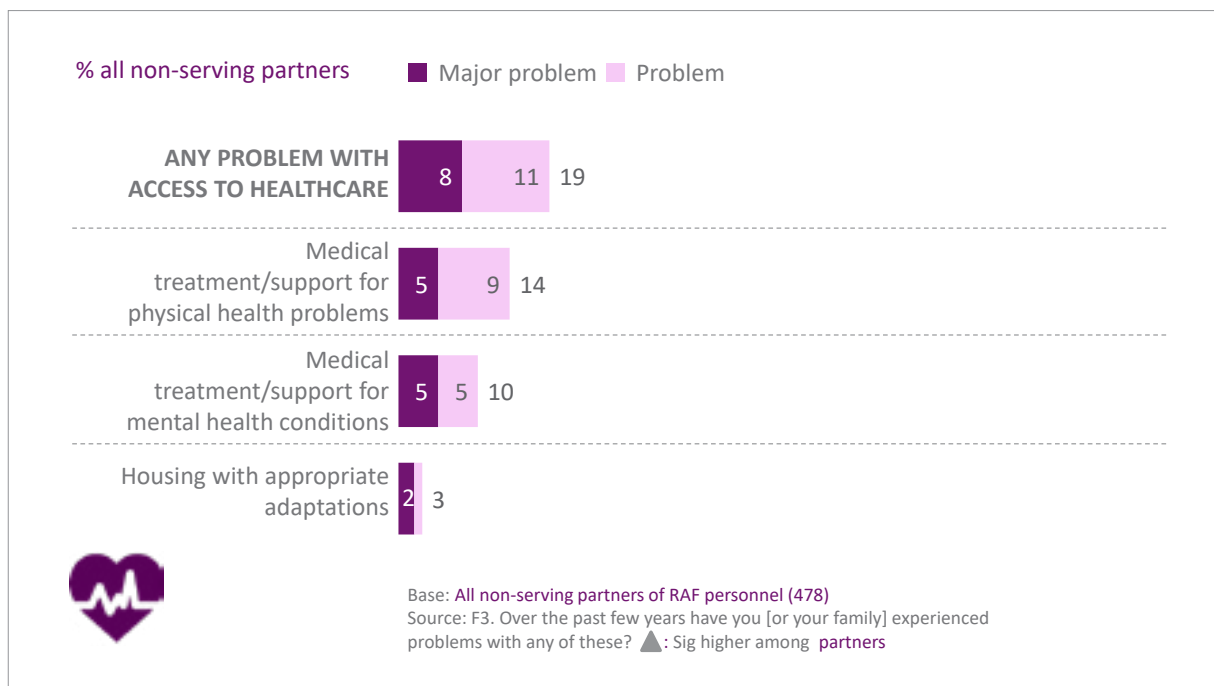
**Figure 5.14** Problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of mental wellbeing



**Figure 5.15** Problems experienced by RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of access related to health needs

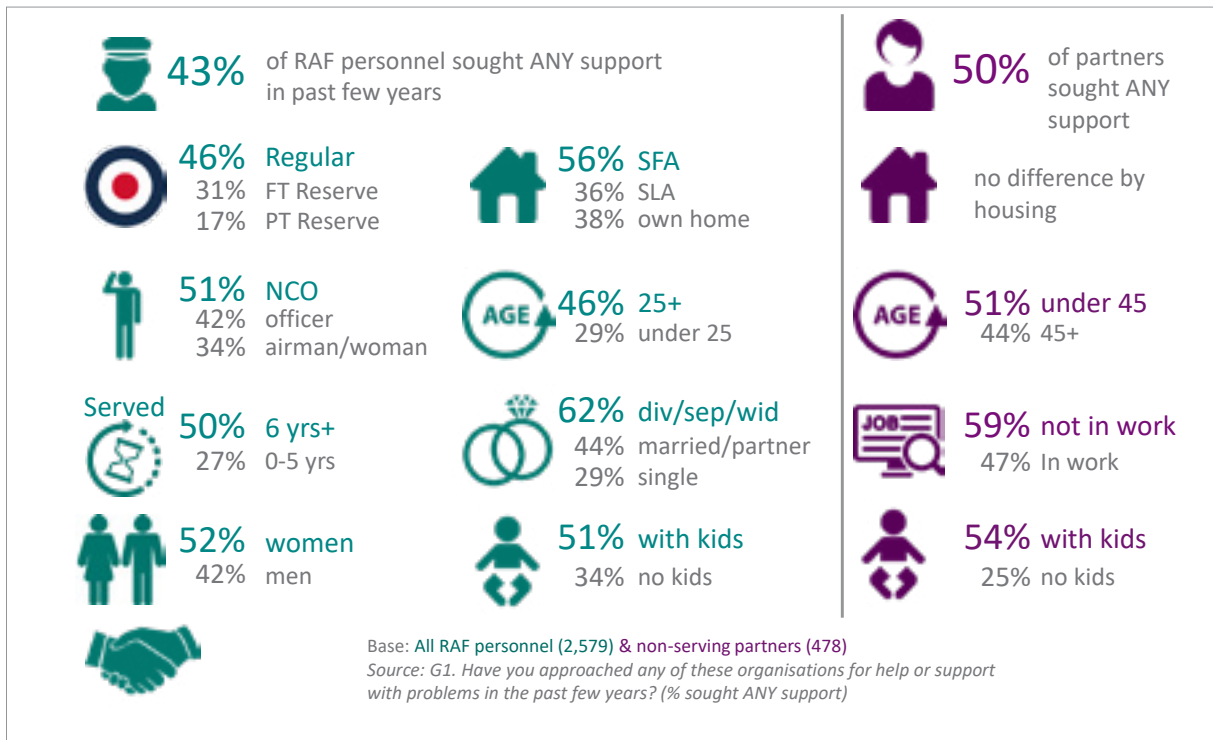


**Figure 5.16** Problems experienced by partners of RAF personnel over the past few years – under the theme of access related to health needs

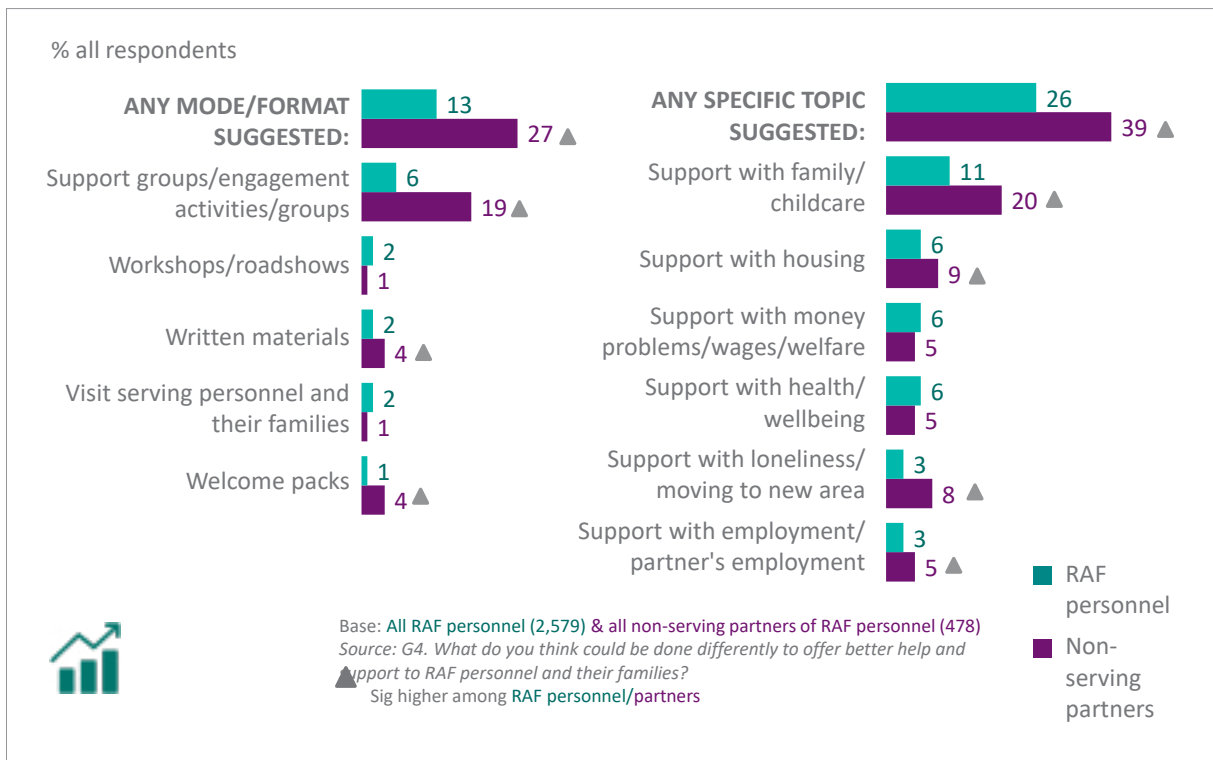




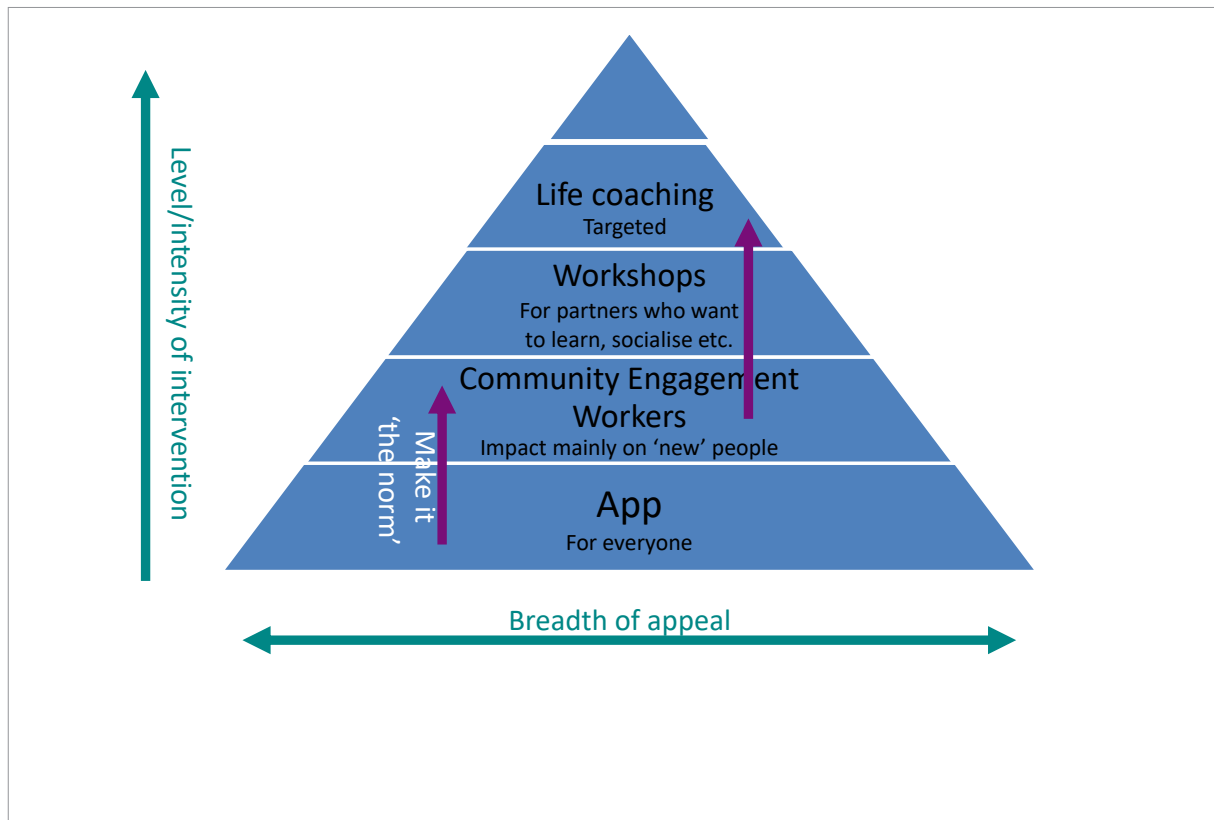
**Figure 5.17** Proportion who had sought support from any organisation for any problem experienced over the past few years – variations by sub-groups



**Figure 5.18** Suggestions made for what could be done differently to offer better help and support to RAF personnel and their families



**Figure 5.19** *Integration of propositions to enhance impact*



## APPENDIX 6 REFERENCES

### References for Chapter 2

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Ministry of Defence (2017a) UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics 1 April 2017

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2017](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2017)

Ministry of Defence (2017b) UK Armed Forces Monthly Service Personnel Statistics 1 April 2017

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-monthly-service-personnel-statistics-2017](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-monthly-service-personnel-statistics-2017)

Ministry of Defence (2017c) Tri-Service Reserves Continuous Attitude Survey 2017

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Ministry of Defence (2017d) UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2017

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/armed-forces-continuous-attitude-survey-2017](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/armed-forces-continuous-attitude-survey-2017)

**Further figures in Chapter 2 were taken from unpublished RAF data, provided in confidence:**

RAF statistics (2017) on Personal Status categories (PStat) and length of service

# APPENDIX 7 RAF BENEVOLENT FUND SUPPORT TO THE SERVING RAF COMMUNITY

**Figure 7.1** Range of support provided to the serving RAF community – current and planned enhancements

CURRENT KEY AREAS OF IMPACT	CURRENT SUPPORT	ADDITIONAL FUTURE SUPPORT	
<b>Social Engagement and Cohesion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grant funding to provide and enhance facilities and play parks on RAF stations</li> <li>Grants to support Station Families Days</li> <li>Airplay youth support programme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Station Engagement Workers on RAF stations (pilot)</li> <li>Additional grant funding for facilities, play parks and areas</li> <li>Expansion to Airplay youth support programme</li> </ul>	Digital tool to increase access to support
<b>Financial Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grants for individuals</li> <li>Benefits advice</li> <li>Grant funding for CAB clinics on RAF stations</li> </ul>		
<b>Mental Wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening and Counselling Service (for Reservists and RAF partners)</li> <li>Grant funding to support mental health first aid on RAF stations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding access to the mindfulness app Headspace</li> <li>Piloting a gambling support project (following feedback from RAF stations)</li> </ul>	
<b>Family Life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship support for individuals, couples and families</li> <li>Cottages available in West Sussex to provide respite breaks for families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Workshops and coaching for RAF partners (pilot)</li> <li>Evaluating a pilot providing respite breaks for RAF families across the UK</li> <li>Funding enhancements to childcare centres on RAF stations (as identified by the RAF)</li> </ul>	
<b>Independence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Immediate needs grants for the wounded, injured or sick</li> <li>Transition grants and housing support for the wounded, injured or sick</li> <li>Equipment and adaptations to support family members with disabilities</li> </ul>		

In 2017, the RAF Benevolent Fund's support to the serving Royal Air Force amounted to £4.4 million.





## About the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund

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The Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund is the RAF's leading welfare charity, providing financial, practical and emotional support to serving and former members of the RAF, as well as their partners and dependants. Founded in 1919, we help members of the RAF Family with everything from disability, injury, financial hardship and youth support to living independently and providing dignity in retirement.

For more information visit [www.rafbf.org](http://www.rafbf.org)



## Compass Partnership

### About Compass Partnership

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Compass Partnership is a management consultancy specialising in the leadership, management and governance of civil society organisations. Founded in 1982, we have worked with more than 900 clients and have built a reputation for delivering top quality consultancy tailored to suit the culture and values of civil society organisations.

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[www.rafbf.org](http://www.rafbf.org)

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