



## **AN EVALUATION OF FORCES SUPPORT**

**A STUDY OF THE SERVICE OFFERED TO MILITARY BEREAVED PARENTS**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **BACKGROUND**

Since its inception in 2009, *Forces Support* has provided practical support to families bereaved in a military context. The support comprises of household and garden projects and was initially offered to help families with the practical household tasks that arose as a result of the death of the person who would 'normally' have undertaken them. Over time, however, a greater understanding of the relevance of the support that has been offered to families in these circumstances has developed, and additional elements have been included in the project work. In the context of recent military action, many of those who died are young adults who leave behind not necessarily partners and children, but also or only bereaved parents. An independent research study was commissioned by Forces Support to identify the appropriateness of the support offered and to identify what benefits bereaved parents felt they gained.

### **AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The aim of the research was to evaluate the service *Forces Support* offers to parents bereaved in a military context, and to:

- Consider the role of *Forces Support* in the bereavement support community
- Identify the most valued aspects of their support service
- Identify any shortfalls in the service provision which could be improved for the future
- Contribute to the development of an evaluation framework for future use by *Forces Support*.

The research addressed three questions:

1. What leads parents to access the services of *Forces Support* in preference to other bereavement support organisations?
2. What specific tangible and non-tangible benefits do parents obtain from *Forces Support*, both in the content and timing of service delivery?
3. How can *Forces Support* continue to evaluate and improve their service in the future?

### **METHODS**

The study adopted a reflexive design and the principles of constructivist grounded theory. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 15 parents who had been supported by *Forces Support* between 2012 and early 2014. With one exception where the interview was conducted by telephone, participants were interviewed in the parental home. These were digitally recorded and then fully transcribed. Each participant and any reference names were allocated a pseudonym.

Transcripts were then imported into NVivo, a computer based qualitative data analysis and management package. Initial analysis was undertaken independently to provide descriptive data, whilst the development of 'nodes' or categories enabled further elaboration. The content of the key themes were discussed and negotiated between the two researchers and a consensus was reached.

## **THE PARTICIPANTS**

The study comprised just under a third of the eligible 34 households (n=12) comprising 15 parents, all of whom had been bereaved of a son whose age at the time of death ranged between 19 and 29 years. The deaths had occurred between 2003 and 2012; three had occurred in Iraq, seven in Afghanistan, and two within the European Union. All deaths were sudden; the majority (n=9) had been killed as a result of hostile action, whilst the remaining three had died in an accident or from a rapidly declining illness. The parents' use of *Forces Support* varied between one and nine years after the death of their son. The characteristics of the participants varied to include parents living in England (7), Wales (2), and Scotland (3); widows (2), and parents who were divorced or separated (2). With one exception, all parents had other children, with seven sets having other children living at the family home at the time of their brother's death. Two sets of parents had also experienced the loss of their partner and/or another child. Only three of the 15 parents were known to have accessed any other forms of support, apart from the initial support offered by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Armed Forces. At the time of their death, two sons were married, one with children; two were engaged, one with children; one was in a long term relationship; and seven men were single. Four members of staff from *Forces Support* were also interviewed to obtain background information about the nature of the work.

## **ETHICS**

The study was conducted following ethical approval from Heriot-Watt University, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society.

## **SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS**

The overwhelming finding of the study is the extent to which the work carried out by *Forces Support* has had a wide-ranging and significant impact on the parents who participated, offering bereaved parents a valuable form of bereavement support mediated through the restorative practical help that they offer. Specific findings from the study include:

### **1. PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LOSS**

Parents were still experiencing enduring feelings of grief that have changed in their nature but have not abated and which have had a shattering effect on their life course and that of their family, leaving them with a sense of the enduring presence of their deceased son and, often, feelings of isolation and loneliness.

## **2. ISSUES RELATED TO THE CONTEXT OF MILITARY LOSS**

Several aspects of the military context of the death exacerbated the experience of these parents including: the sudden and often violent nature of the death often in the course of combat; the way in which parents were informed including, for some (and despite recent improvements in the MOD's notification policies), the traumatising effect of this process; the military and civilian processes including post-mortem often involving delays and feelings of a loss of control over their son's body, and, where they were not the designated next-of-kin, ambiguity about the importance of their status as bereaved parents.

## **3. ISSUES RELATED TO SEEKING HELP AND SUPPORT**

Parents sought help for a variety of reasons: they were unable to manage some of the maintenance jobs that had previously been carried out by their deceased son; they were struggling with the extent of the task; or because the task itself brought back painful memories. The bereaved parents found out about the work of *Forces Support* in a variety of ways including through attending events where *Forces Support* gave a presentation; via social media; through word of mouth; or through direct contact initiated by *Forces Support* following publicity around military death. Parents felt apprehensive about asking for help, in some cases finding it difficult to apply for 'charity'.

## **4. PARENTS EXPERIENCE OF *FORCES SUPPORT***

Despite initial concerns about having workmen in and around the house, and without exception, parents had a great deal of praise for the friendly and professional attitude of the *Forces Support* team as well as their personal qualities, including: their humour; sensitivity; and hard work. Many parents' experienced *Forces Support* as less rule-bound than in their encounters with the MOD or Armed Forces, with a more flexible style that felt responsive to their needs. They also considered that having to find their own contractor - as an alternative approach - would have been too burdensome; they valued that *Forces Support* knew that their son had died and that the work was being undertaken for compassionate reasons.

## **5. THE IMPACT THE WORK HAS HAD ON MILITARY BEREAVED PARENTS**

The effects of the work has had an influence on the physical, social and emotional aspects of these military bereaved parents' lives that appears to persist long after the work was carried out. Parents' felt a deep and enduring sense of gratitude, not only for the physical improvements to their environment, but also because it helped them to feel less ashamed about not coping, and enabled them to be able to make more social use of their home or garden. On-going home or garden maintenance was also a less burdensome task. Parents also felt significant emotional effects including: gratitude at the kindness they experienced, and relief at having their sorrow understood and accepted and their needs responded to. Other consequences included increased levels of motivation and an improved sense of self, as well as a desire to 'give something back' to *Forces Support*.

## **6. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINISHED WORK TO PARENTS**

The finished work held many meanings for parents. Despite the poignancy, it appeared to have enabled or strengthened links to their dead son. It represented a form of posthumous 'gift' *from their son*, and it offered parents a more tranquil space in which to connect with memories *of their son*, and - as *Forces Support* developed in its understanding of the needs of this group of bereaved parents making use of relevant artifacts, providing plaques and creating an attractive dedicated space - it acted as a site of private memorial *to their son*.

## **7. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PRACTICAL WORK OF *FORCES SUPPORT* TO AMELIORATING PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF BEREAVEMENT THROUGH MILITARY DEATH**

*Forces Support* appears to provide parents with an encounter that involves three specific forms of communication that contributes to recovery in bereavement. In offering their service, *Forces Support* does not 'turn away' from the magnitude of the grief of parents, but acknowledges the intensity of it and that it is likely to last over time. It offers bereaved military parents something which many had never felt before: the experience of unconditional kindness. The experience of this 'practical compassion' gave them a sense of being listened to without judgment that recognised the importance to parents of the sacrifice that their sons had made. Parents regarded the experience with *Forces Support* as deeply affirmative. They felt uplifted and supported during the time the teams were working in or around their home, by the improvements that were made, and by the memory of the kindness that had prompted the work that had been carried out for them.

## **8. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PRACTICAL WORK OF *FORCES SUPPORT* TO BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT**

Drawing on three contemporary bereavement theories, the practical work of *Forces Support* appears to have made a contribution to the bereavement support of these bereaved parents in three ways. Firstly, at a time when parents are overwhelmed and incapacitated by the enormity of the task before them, *Forces Support* appears to have 'kick started' a degree of parental capacity towards a more *restoration-focussed coping*. Secondly, parents found *meaning* - in the 'gift' of the work that was carried out, in the gift from their son, and in the significance of *Forces Support* as a source of practical compassion. Lastly, as well as the tangible benefit of the work that had been carried out, externalised *continuing bonds* were facilitated by the work carried out by *Forces Support* though the inclusion of a 'special' and accessible place within which they were able to remember their deceased sons, but which also offered opportunities for friends or wider family members to reminisce about them.