

OP HERRICK 12



SURVEY OF FAMILIES

aff

army families federation

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Aim

Between February and November 2010, AFF surveyed the experiences and concerns of the families of soldiers deployed on OP HERRICK 12. The aim was to specifically identify issues which may not come to light in a Families' Continuous Attitude Survey or AFF's own Families' Concerns. Where possible to address low-level issues from the perspective of those left behind caring about loved ones, while 4 Mechanised Brigade were in harm's way in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The results have revealed a wide disparity in how Army families 'feel' before, during and after their brigade was engaged in protracted and well-publicised combat in Helmand. Contributions have been made from families whose soldiers have been significantly physically injured, and from those whose soldiers have been significantly mentally altered as a result of their experiences. The data is presented in three sections; Pre-deployment, Deployment, and Post-Deployment; themes are identified and conclusions drawn together in the summary.

Overall the experiences of families have been positive and they remain supportive of their soldier and unit. They generally empathised with the very difficult situation of unit rear parties, and understood the practicalities of Notification of Casualties (NOTICAS) and the difficulties of providing accurate information in the confusion of combat ops; "praise and thanks can never be enough for all that has been done for my soldier and us as a family". Others have been less supportive of the whole experience and advised others to; "get divorced and marry a civvie". There are however, many themes of best practice that emerge throughout the report and it is these that AFF seeks to present as recommendations to the Army, from the families' perspective.

Sources of data

Questionnaires: Qualitative data was compiled from voluntarily completed questionnaires, which were distributed by email to unit welfare teams, on the AFF Yorkshire Facebook page and by email to a group of volunteers. The questionnaires were completely confidential. Each questionnaire was trialled and tested on a small focus group before being distributed.

Focus groups

AFF extended an open invitation to 4 Mechanised Brigade families via the Welfare Offices, HIVE, Facebook and word of mouth to attend two separate focus groups. The first group focused on pre-deployment and was held in March and the second in June. Around thirty families' spouses attended. Focus group comments are located in the Appendices.

Acknowledgements

AFF would like to sincerely thank those spouses, parents, and wider family who took the time to complete surveys and attend focus groups, as well as the sterling work that the Unit Welfare Officers and their teams have undertaken. The surveys were completed in confidence, and where units have been mentioned it is to highlight the outstanding contribution they have made. Thanks must also be given to Michelle Amos, AFF Regional Manager North, who without her support this report could not have been written.

(These were submitted to PS4, their response can be found on page 6-8)

AFF's recommendations:

- Brigades carefully coordinate the information contained in the units' pre-deployment briefs and leaflets; they should also prescribe which agencies speak at the briefings.
- JPA should have an 'opt out' box introduced to enable automatic information provision to Next of Kin.
- Unit welfare teams are audited to ensure Individual Augmentees (IAs) and unaccompanied families have been contacted and supported.
- Army families have access to professional and immediate counselling for close family members where they are concerned about their soldier before, during, and after combat operations.
- Units strive to improve their soldiers' and families' understanding and engagement with social networking sites.
- The self-kinform process is fundamentally flawed and requires immediate revision.
- AFF continues to urge the Army to support the policy of Accompanied Service and the provision of military housing patches.

Personal Support (PS4) responses

Brigades carefully coordinate the information contained in the units' pre-deployment briefs and leaflets; they should also prescribe which agencies speak at the briefings

PS4 comment:

Head Quarters Land Forces (HQ LF) already provides direction on the information to be contained in unit level briefings along with the types of external speakers to consider. Responsibilities lie with the chain of command and in the case of unit's COs, to ensure that briefings are tailored to individual unit circumstances.

AFF comment:

We are aware that direction is provided on the content of briefings. We support the units tailoring the brief to individual unit circumstances. However, some part of the briefs, such as finance and communication (including Facebook), should be prescribed to ensure that families are receiving the same information.

PS4 comment:

This is a Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Personnel) (DCDS (Pers)) lead on behalf of all three Services. A recent SPVA trial failed to produce reliable data, which is the main reason why it has not yet been delivered. DCDS (Pers) is therefore not according this a high priority. It remains an aspiration.

AFF comment:

The ability to contact families is key especially if we are to be encouraged into home ownership. We urge DCDS (Pers) to reconsider.

JPA should have an 'opt out' box introduced to enable automatic information provision to Next of Kin

Unit welfare teams are audited to ensure Individual Augmentees (IAs) and unaccompanied families have been contacted and supported

PS4 comment:

HQ LF Mounting Order for OP HERRICK already provides direction for linking families of IA to sources of support. This is also covered pre-deployment briefings and on Commanding Officers' Designate Course CODC and UWO/ROSOS training courses. Reminders also appear in *Welfare Matters* and on BFBS/Garrison Radio for families to contact the Army Welfare Information Service (AWIS) if they don't know which UWO to turn to. Soldiers and their families must also take on a degree of responsibility for finding out who will support the family left behind before the soldier deploys. There are no HQ LF resources or plans at this stage to audit this process given the range of ways of accessing support if required. There will be differences in the support provided despite clear direction, due to personal circumstances and the personality and drive of the Welfare teams; this is an issue for the chain of command to address.

AFF comment:

Our evidence strongly suggests that the HQ LF direction is not cutting the mustard and that IA families continue to be low down on the priority list of units.

Army Families have access to professional and immediate counselling for immediate family members where they are concerned about their soldier before, during, and after, combat operations

PS4 comment:

AFF is reminded that families requiring publicly funded counselling (for soldiers and or their families) can access this service through any Army Welfare Service team where they judge there is a requirement. Alternatively, families can seek support through their GP for medical counselling which can be provided by the NHS.

AFF comment:

The NHS system is not geared up to deal with the unique problems that military families face. If the Army is going to continue to send soldiers on dangerous deployments then it must acknowledge that this can cause mental distress to families, especially if spouse is injured, and give them the mental support they deserve.

PS4 comment:

HQ LF Mounting Order for OP HERRICK already provides direction to units to cover this in families' pre-deployment instructions. Guidance is also being added to the British Army's Family Deployment Guides.

AFF comment:

AFF welcomes guidance being added to Deployment Guides but continues to urge the Army to ensure it is given suitable time at briefings.

Units strive to improve their soldiers' and families' understanding and engagement with social networking sites

The self-kinform process is fundamentally flawed and requires immediate revision

The self-kinform process has been reviewed in the light of the 4 Brigade experience and is being revised to ensure it is more coherent. The new safeguards should reduce the possibility of concerned relatives being given inaccurate information or left unsupported once the call has been made. Information about self-kinforming is also being added to the British Army's Family Deployment Guides.

AFF comment:

AFF welcomes the acknowledgement that this process failed and looks forward to seeing the new safeguards.

AFF continues to urge the Army to support the policy of Accompanied Service and the provision of military housing patches

PS4 comment:

Accompanied Service is important to the Army but we are seeing an increasing number of people who want to settle their families for second income and children's education reasons. The Army Living Strategy looks to provide stability and compensate for mobility so the need for Accompanied Service is recognised.

The way that military housing is provided in the future will change as it is unaffordable to continue with the same system that we run today. This is the subject of further work under the New Employment Model and one of the workstrands is the provision of accommodation. HQ LF will be fully engaged in this process.

AFF comment:

AFF urges the Army not to confuse the increasing number of people wanting to settle their families with a waning desire for Accompanied Service. Accompanied Service is strongly supported and adopted by families. The ability to do so in the future must be supported.

Pre-deployment

Pre-deployment Briefs

The AFF Yorkshire Co-ordinator Louise Simpson, took the opportunity to attend nine pre-deployment family briefings covering combat, combat support and combat service support roles.

There was considerable variation in how families were invited, how many attended, and the content of each briefing. Considerable effort was undertaken by some units to encourage the wider family (such as parents and siblings) to attend. Where units recruit from specific geographical areas, some unit welfare teams went to those areas to carry out briefings; this should be commended. For other units who draw their soldiers from all across the UK accessing the wider family is considerably harder.

Units advise families that a briefing is scheduled by communicating via the soldier. Should the soldier choose not to pass this information on to his/her family, (which is their prerogative), they should be allowed to do so. However, AFF's experience is that much more effort should be placed on explaining the benefit of attending families' briefings and AFF believes soldiers should have to 'opt out' not 'opt in' of a contact button on JPA (the main HR database), allowing units to communicate with families automatically.

Type

Many of the units approached their pre-deployment briefs differently. For example the Infantry Battalions organised big family days using the Next of Kin (NOK) list to invite families directly rather than rely on soldiers passing the invitations on. The briefing was only one part of the day; families appreciated the opportunity to see the military kit, especially the armoured vehicles and body armour on show. Other units hosted several pre-deployment briefs at different times in their messes and had drinks afterwards.

"Handling the safety equipment gave us reassurance especially regarding the body armour"

"Our pre-deployment briefing took place at the same time as a VIP visit which was a bit awkward"

AFF recommends the use of technology to reach all the wider family, so that briefings can be viewed online.

AFF recommends consistency on content. It should be mandatory for each unit to provide the same information, so that families don't have to piece together information from their neighbours.

AFF recommends that families be given an opportunity throughout the briefing days to seek out answers in a less formal environment. Not all families will feel comfortable asking questions in front of people.

Some of the units organised a crèche acknowledging that the briefings were being held at either an inconvenient time for parents or that the soldier was away on pre-deployment training. This allowed parents to attend, and significantly, to be able to ask questions they might avoid in front of children.

AFF recommends that if children are going to be included, they should only be in attendance at appropriate parts of the briefing and that during topics such as wills, injuries and compassionates, units should consider offering crèche facilities and warn families that some topics may not be suitable for children.

Location/timings

Units offered a wide variety of timings for briefings. Some units had one main briefing on one day, others hosted several on different days and at different times. It is acknowledged that timings will never be convenient for everyone. Many units had the briefings in their gyms which supported the amount of people attending but some were very cold and had sound and acoustic problems.

Content

While the briefings generally followed the theme, the content varied at each unit. Briefings which had already been rehearsed in front of a selection of families and modified accordingly, ran more smoothly than others.

Families (wider family especially) wanted to know why the British Army is in Afghanistan.

"The purpose [of why they are there] is so unclear"

Tackling difficult subjects should not be avoided but families must know that the units simply cannot debate the rights and wrongs of the British involvement in Afghanistan. This and the media should be dealt with up front by the COs; one Commanding Officer stated at the beginning of his brief that *"we are there to make the country a better place and this is not the time or place to debate the ethics of being in Afghanistan"* and this seemed to put the subject to bed. The briefing should not shy away from the issue of equipment shortages (or not) or the working relationship with the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan Police. Any topic that is currently in the media should be addressed as this is often the only perspective that families will have prior to the briefing.

- The content of the briefs differed to such an extent that some families missed out on information that they might have considered essential such as notification of casualties, viewing photographs of Afghanistan, the process of R&R.
AFF recommends that each Brigade HQ should prescribe the content in more detail to avoid inconsistencies and provide a bank of photographs of Afghanistan for all units to use. Units can still brand any presentation with their cap badge should they wish.
- Pay and bonuses differed in each briefing:
Many tackled Wills and insurance as their first subject. This was felt to be quite a brutal opening subject by some families.
AFF recommends that Regimental Admin Officers (RAOs) should start with Pay and Allowances and ease into the more sensitive subjects.
- ADT (Army Dependants' Trust) appeared to be geared towards married personnel.
AFF recommends that ADT is recommended but needs to be explained in more realistic terms to encourage uptake by single as well as married personnel.

Pre-deployment continued

- Soldiers' pay and allowances differed at each briefing. Only one unit tackled the Unpleasant Living Allowance which would have applied to several units. At one briefing it was explained that soldiers can draw on cash up to \$100 per week - families need to be aware that this can happen if they are on a budget.

AFF recommends that the Brigade produce a PowerPoint slide that prescribes what should be discussed regarding allowances and give some examples.

- The Emotional Cycle of Deployment was a difficult subject to tackle and each unit had a different approach. Some using their UWO and others using their Padre.

AFF recommends that this should be delivered in a briefing by an AWS member of staff who attends all briefings so all families receive the same consistent professional message. The parents of soldiers should also be aware of the Emotional Cycle as evidenced later in this report when dealing with the aftermath of injuries and post-deployment.

"The Padre did the six core values of the Army, (as his part of the emotional cycle) I couldn't believe it, it was so inappropriate"

"The unit did not fluff around it. They said this will happen - which is fantastic as there is no hiding place"

- Notification of casualties was tackled in a variety of ways. One unit barely mentioned it other than to reassure families that if they heard about it on the news, it wasn't their soldier.

- There was a lack of consistency in which agencies spoke at briefings. This meant some families had access to more information than others. At one briefing there was a presentation from BFPO which was really informative but they did not speak at any other briefing.

Many charities used the opportunity of a large amount of families in one location to promote themselves. AFF noted a number of families struggling to sit through long presentations. Consideration should be given to whether this was the most opportune moment to introduce families to such a large number of agencies and charities.

AFF recommends that the families get the same level of access to information as everyone else. The Brigade should issue a list of agencies that should speak at the presentation and allow others to have stalls for families to browse in their own time.

"Royal British Legion came and needed to stick to the point, it was too long"

- The pros and cons of using Facebook to communicate with soldiers was mentioned at some but not at all briefings.

AFF recommends a section at the briefing advising families about Facebook security and not posting updates on injuries and deaths until the MOD have released names to the media. Units should give examples of the inappropriate comments and damage that Facebook can do.

AFF has a bank of examples from this deployment!

"There was a briefing to the soldiers that [said] you must not put things on Facebook. It should have been to the families too and the entire unit"

- Some families from attached units, arms or corps felt the briefing was not always directed at them.

AFF recommends that the briefing be made relevant to all present in the unit.

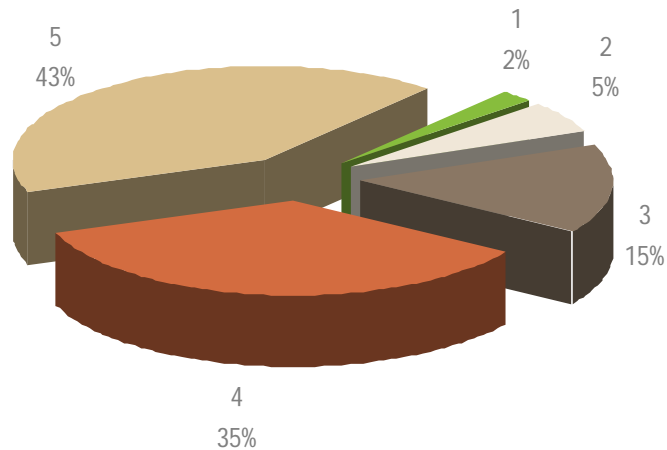
Pre-deployment Survey

The pre-deployment survey was designed to investigate how families felt about the run up to the deployment and how it was handled by the units and welfare agencies ¹.

Q1 Did you attend your unit's pre-deployment brief?

Yes	67%
No	33%

Q2 If yes, how did you rate it on a scale of 1-5 (5 being excellent, 1 being poor)?



Respondents liked the clear level of detail at the briefings and welcomed the tackling of sensitive issues such as casualty notification. They liked being able to collect the deployment booklet and other pieces of information pertinent to them. Families did comment that they often struggled with the military terminology such as 'op minimise'.

"It was comprehensive [and] covered any possible question and gave us a sense of community"

"It also made me feel a little better about my husband going to Afghan as I had only seen and heard things through the media and not from an 'actual' source. I felt so much better after the brief"

"I felt it was important to go as sometimes things you haven't thought about are aired and answered"

¹Survey was sent to AFF Yorkshire's email volunteer list. 136/150 responded.

Pre-deployment Survey continued..

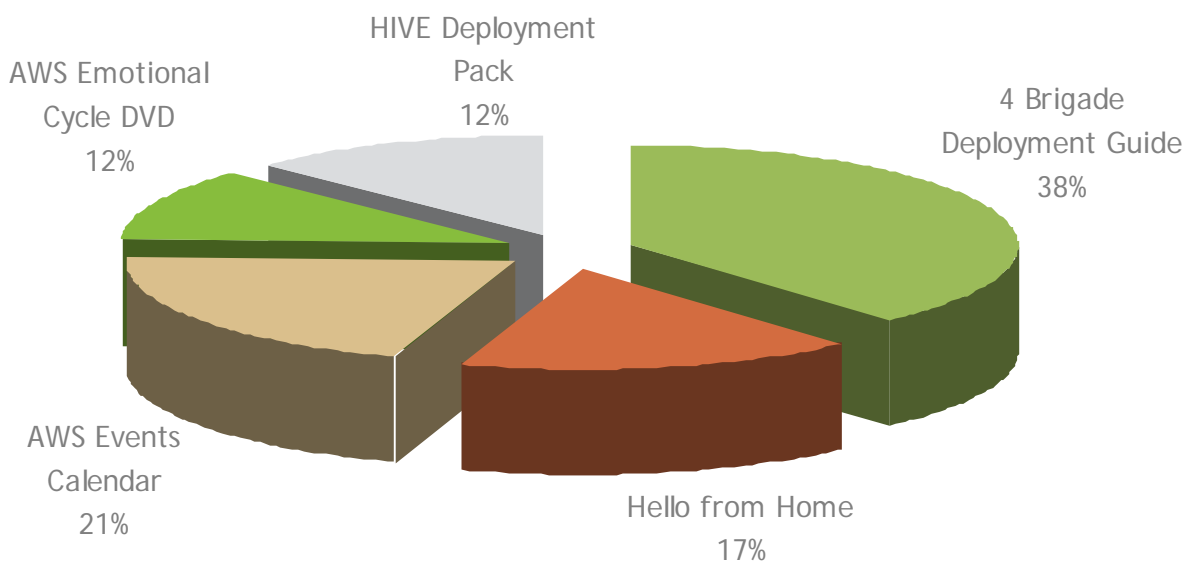
Q3 What reason did you not attend?

“My husband informed me of all I need to know. I have done this numerous times, so I'm an old hand at this”

“My husband is with another unit. I emailed my families office who were very helpful and forthcoming with information. I tried to contact the [attached unit] families office by email and phone with no success”

AFF recommends that it should be made absolutely clear which welfare team is responsible for Individual Augmentees (IA). Whilst policies exist regarding this topic, welfare teams still do not seem to be aware of their IA families or their responsibilities toward them. The receiving unit welfare team should be responsible for contacting IA families to introduce themselves. This should be mandatory and audited.

Q4 Have you seen the following?



Whilst there are a number of useful sources of information available, families do not seem to be in receipt of them resulting in fractured information provision. A single pack of information should be given to all families (not via the soldier) without exception to ensure no family suffers from a lack of information.

Q5 Did your soldier get pre-deployment leave?

Yes	89%
No	11%

Q6 Have you informed your children’s school that a member of your family is deploying?

Yes	39%
No	11%
N/A	50%

Six months before the deployment, schools in the Catterick area sent leaflets home emphasising the importance of the school knowing if a parent was going to be away. The schools reported this a success.

Q7 Are you aware of any AWS or unit entertainment arranged for deployment?

50% were aware of entertainment arranged. It should be noted that many of the units had not yet completed their schedule of events when this questionnaire was released in April 2010. However, not knowing about events so close to deployment caused some disquiet.

“I am unsure if the Unit or AWS entertainment is for married couples with families [and] not parents”

Q8 Do you intend to attend any events?

68% were planning to attend an event run by the unit or AWS.

Q9 Do you feel children should attend the pre-deployment brief due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed?

Yes	35%
No	65%

“Having children present may make others feel they cannot talk as freely as they would like to”

“I think parents should get all the information and then decide what they tell their children, depending on the age and how mature the child is”

“Perhaps having a pre-deployment briefing or part of the main briefing aimed at children would be helpful”

Pre-deployment Survey continued..

Q10 The Next of Kin (NOK) list is used to notify named Next of Kin of an emergency. Do you think that the NOK should be used by units as a database to communicate with the families of deployed soldiers?

Yes	94%
No	6%

"Only with the permission of the soldier"

"Relying on soldiers is inadequate"

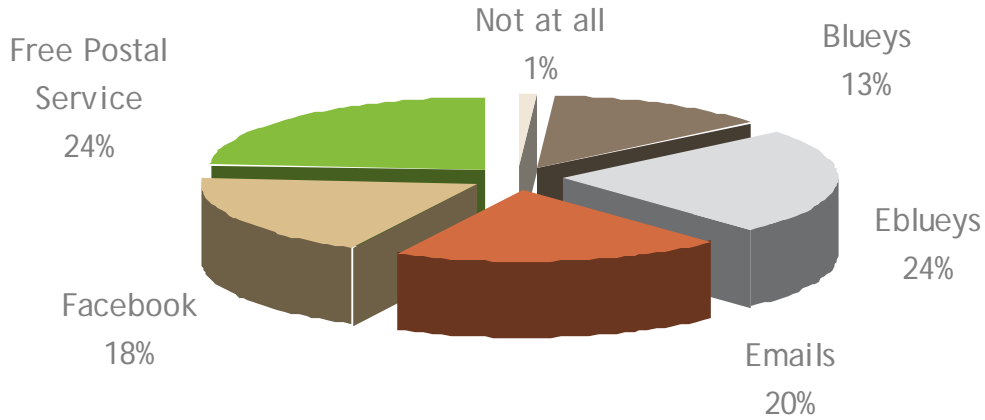
AFF recommends an 'opt out' box to be added to JPA allowing the soldier to opt out of allowing direct contact with his/her family for anything other than an emergency. This result shows that families are desperate for more information and connection with the Army.

During deployment

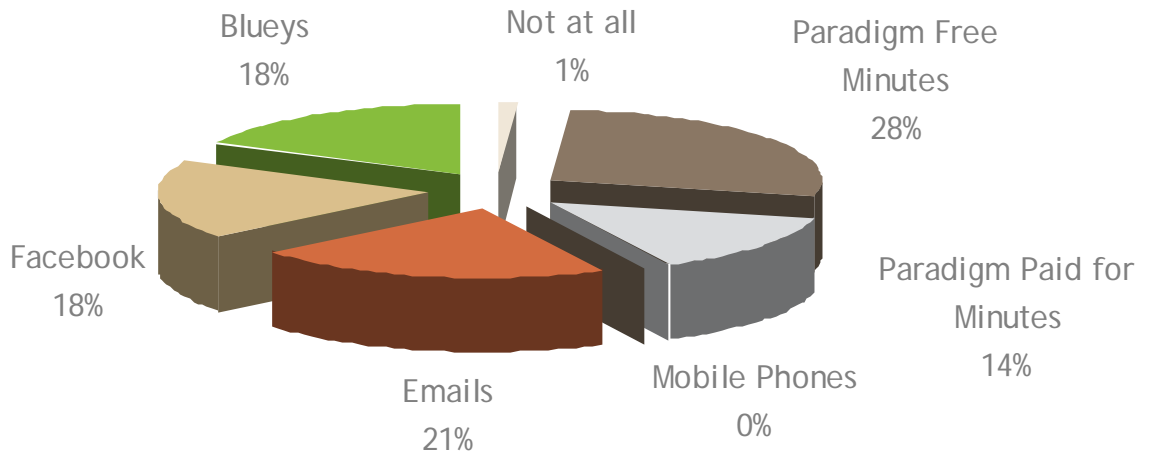
Mid-deployment survey

This survey looked at communication and how families coped half way through the tour ².

Q11 How have you communicated with your soldier? (You can tick more than one box)



Q12 How has your soldier communicated with you? (You can tick more than one box)



The results of this survey proved that the ban on mobile phones in theatre for security reasons has been understood and has been successful.

² The units were very helpful during this survey and AFF received the highest number of respondents - 267. Of these respondents, 44% were parents/guardians of a serving soldier.

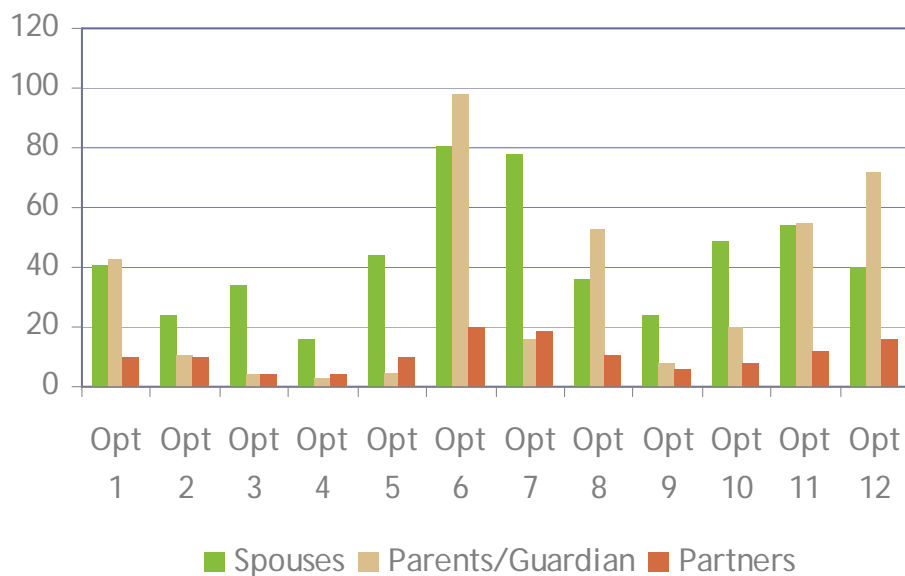
Mid-deployment survey continued.....

Q13 What problems or issues have you experienced so far?

- Option 1 - lack of communication from soldier
- Option 2 - lack of support from unit
- Option 3 - practical household problems
- Option 4 - financial difficulties

- Option 5 - difficulties with children’s behaviour
- Option 6 - more worried/anxious
- Option 7 - Loneliness
- Option 8 - lack of someone to talk to in the same situation

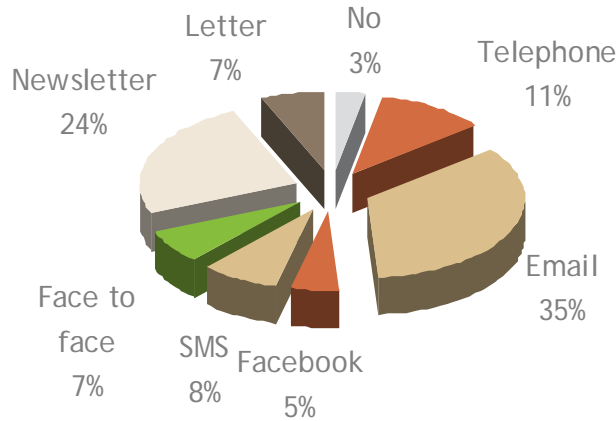
- Option 9 - loss of confidence
- Option 10 - lose temper more easily
- Option 11 - upset by media coverage
- Option 12 - concern over your soldier’s equipment



The responses clearly demonstrated that when someone is away from the protection of the military bubble, feelings of anxiety and isolation are much higher than those that have the units near them.

AFF recommends that the Army Living Strategy, which looks at persuading military families to move into their own homes, will need to take into account that the current welfare support is inadequate for dealing with families housed away from the units.

**Q14 How have you been contacted by the Unit Welfare Team?
(You can tick more than one box)**



From the majority of people asked, most prefer email as a method of contact. 97% have received some form of communication.

"The contact is sufficient for my needs. Sometimes too much information can also be worrying. It is a hard job for you to get the balance right for all concerned"

"I am happy with all the methods they use and have a good rapport with the members of the team"

My partner has been on Op Herrick 12 for three months and I have only had one newsletter and one email which both arrived today"

Q15 What's the best thing your soldier's unit has done during the deployment for you?

"By having regular meetings, telling us where and how the soldiers are, showing us pictures, telling us the good and the bad things to a degree. Getting feedback from the higher ranks, telling us about the morale of the lads and women too"

"They haven't done anything, only ignored my emails. They are not interested in anyone who is not local to them"

"Their support and frequent communication is greatly appreciated, if not always responded to"

This continues to demonstrate that IAs, including TA and families that live away from the unit, do not feel encompassed by the military bubble. If the military are to encourage families to move into their own homes, then the welfare system on offer is simply not up to it.

Mid-deployment survey continued.....

Q16 What items have you mailed to your soldier that you consider the British Army should be supplying?

Toiletries, sun block, snacks and items of clothing seemed to be the main thing that families sent to their soldiers. Generally respondents did not seem unhappy at having to send these out, many commenting that they felt they were contributing to their soldier's wellbeing. However, many feel that the NAAFI prices were expensive. It is rather odd that free postage is being used to provide items that are too expensive to be bought in the official trading company of the military!

There appears to be a belief that the Army does not provide SPF sun cream. AFF has been told that it is provided up to Factor 30. This information does not seem to be getting back to families.

Media Coverage of Afghanistan

Prompted by The Sun newspaper’s coverage of B Company (Malta), 1 Mercians being attacked on foot patrol in June, AFF asked families how they felt about the level of media coverage being offered to the public.

Q17 Do you support this sort of coverage?

Please click the following link (warning, you may find this distressing): www.thesun.co.uk/Shock-footage-from-the-front-line-in-Afghanistan

Yes	54%
No	23%
Don't Know	23%

47% of spouses and 60% of parents/guardians supported this coverage.

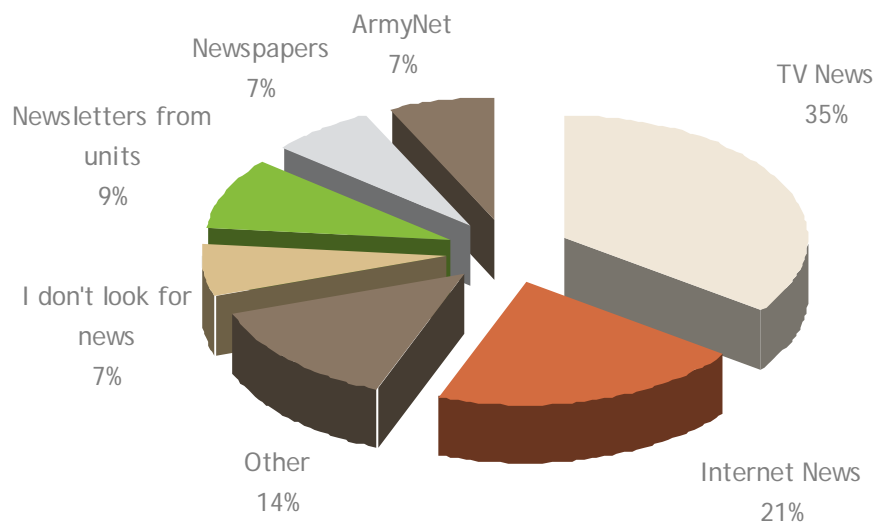
Q18 How does this coverage make you feel?

“Distressing and chilling to see especially when my husband is deployed over there, but shows a realistic picture of what our boys are up against”

“I like to know what is going on and it helps me understand what they are going through. As much as I don't like to know, I also want to see it so I can understand when he returns home”

“Sick to the stomach! The only way I can deal with my son's tour is to think this is not what happens. My son is 18; I can't think that he is in this situation”

Q19 Which one of the following options do you most use to look for news about deployment in Afghanistan?



Media Coverage of Afghanistan continued

Q20 During the current deployment, do you think that media coverage has:

Increased	57%
Decreased	12%
Stayed the same	31%

Q21 Regarding the current deployment in Afghanistan do you think the media reporting is:

Mostly positive	19%
Mostly negative	42%
A balance between positive and negative	39%

Q22 Should the media inform the public of the running death toll each time they announce there has been a death?

Yes	86%
No	9%
Don't know	5%

"Those lads [women too] are there for us. There's more airtime given to footballers/murderers"

"Showing the total just makes families' concerns increase in an already difficult situation"

"We should also be told of Taliban deaths whenever possible, it could make our losses just a little easier to bear if we knew they were losing too"

Q23 Do you think there should be more information regarding the number of injuries announced in the media?

Yes	84%
No	7%
Don't know	9%

"Most definitely - my husband came home injured. Nobody is aware of how many of our soldiers get injured and lose limbs"

"I hear of the injuries through contact with the welfare team and my son. Those injured may feel betrayed at the lack of detail of the suffering they and their mates are going through"

"We just don't hear anything at all about the level of injuries - it's as if no one is getting hurt at all which we all know is not true"

The MOD and media outlets need to consider how realistic their current coverage of the number of injuries is, as it is clear from our survey that families are extremely keen to have this information available on the main media newstreams.

Q24 Do you have any other comments you wish to make about the media coverage of Afghanistan?

"The positive news story about David Beckham going to visit troops was really good. I have also really liked programmes such as Ross Kemp and Newsnight (2 Yorks) but there needs to be much more so the average civilian sits up and takes notice. I also like the fact that The Sun and other newspapers have a separate section for Forces"

"I would like more positive coverage. More on congratulating those who have finished their tour, and more on educating the public on the job they are doing, and on the impact it would if we pulled out now"

"The practice of embedding media representatives does show the general public the full horrors of this conflict and the harshness of the conditions that our soldiers have to work under. It is to be commended"

Social Networking Sites Survey

Throughout this study, AFF has received many comments about the pros and cons of social networking sites such as Facebook. UWOs and other welfare agencies are not fans of these sites having seen first-hand the damage they can do to families.

"If I had my way Facebook would be banned" - UWO.

"The worst thing ever invented, the rumour mill starts things off. People post things like 'he's been hurt, he's coming home next week', I want to say 'be quiet and look after your own'"

AFF's concern was the frequency of casualties' names appearing on these sites before the 24-hour media grace period to allow the Next of Kin to be informed. AFF was able to identify on Facebook at least six casualties before names had been formally released and three of these were posted on pages by soldiers serving in Afghanistan.

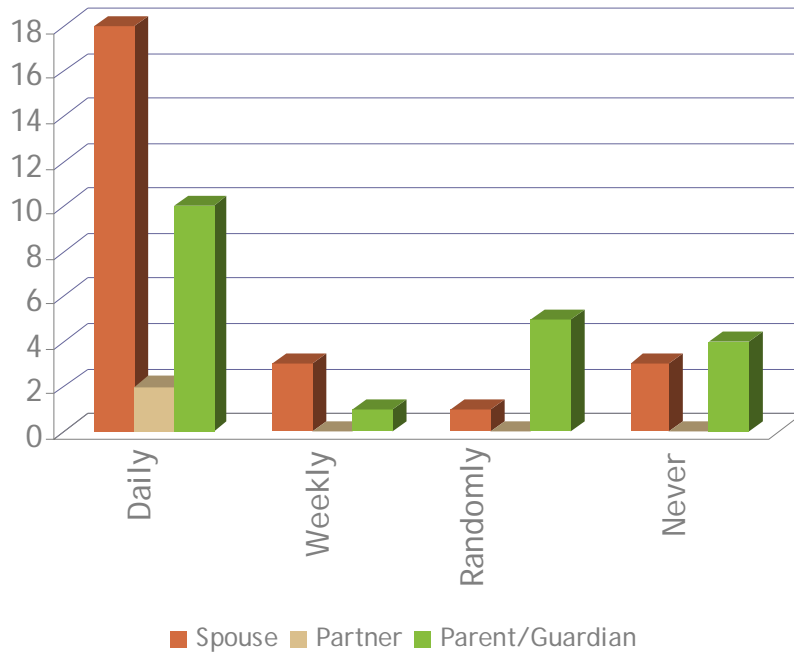
"Soldiers have been briefed by the Army not to discuss such matters on social networking sites but families seem to ignore this"

"Families were also using Facebook to talk about R&R dates and final return dates"

"Even soldiers on tour are posting pictures/videos that should not be shown on these sites"

However, these sites are clearly here to stay and play a very important role in some families' lives. Families use it to stay in touch with their soldiers in Afghanistan and soldiers find it a good way to maintain links with family and friends at home.

Q25 How often do you use social networking sites such as Facebook?

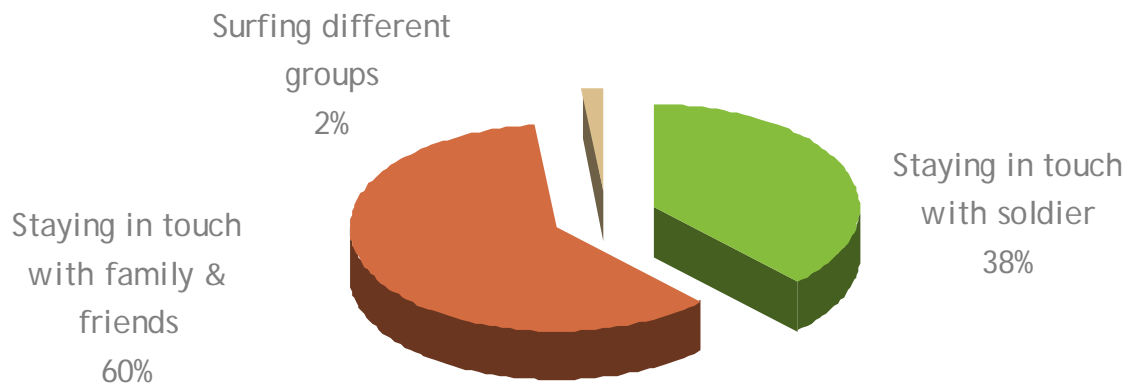


Q26 Are your wall privacy settings set on:

Everyone	2.3%
Friends of friends	9.3%
Friends only	83.7%
Custom	4.7%

AFF was surprised during our research by how many soldiers' Facebook pages had no privacy settings at all, enabling access by anyone. The result of this survey does not reflect this.

Q27 What is the primary reason you use social networking sites for?



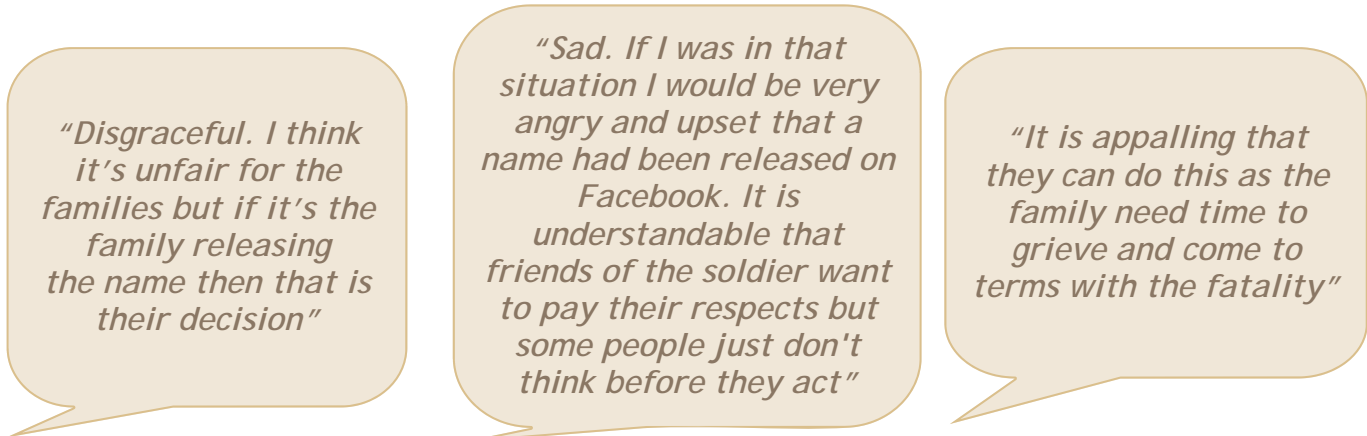
Social Networking Sites Survey Continued.....

Q28 Have you learned the names of any casualties or deaths on social networking sites before it has been announced on the news?

Yes	19%
No	81%

We asked people did they know the source of these announcements. Three had learnt from soldiers serving in Afghanistan. Others had found out from soldiers back in the UK or from families or friends of the casualty.

Q29 How would/does it make you feel seeing casualties names released on Facebook before the 24-hour NOK grace period is up?

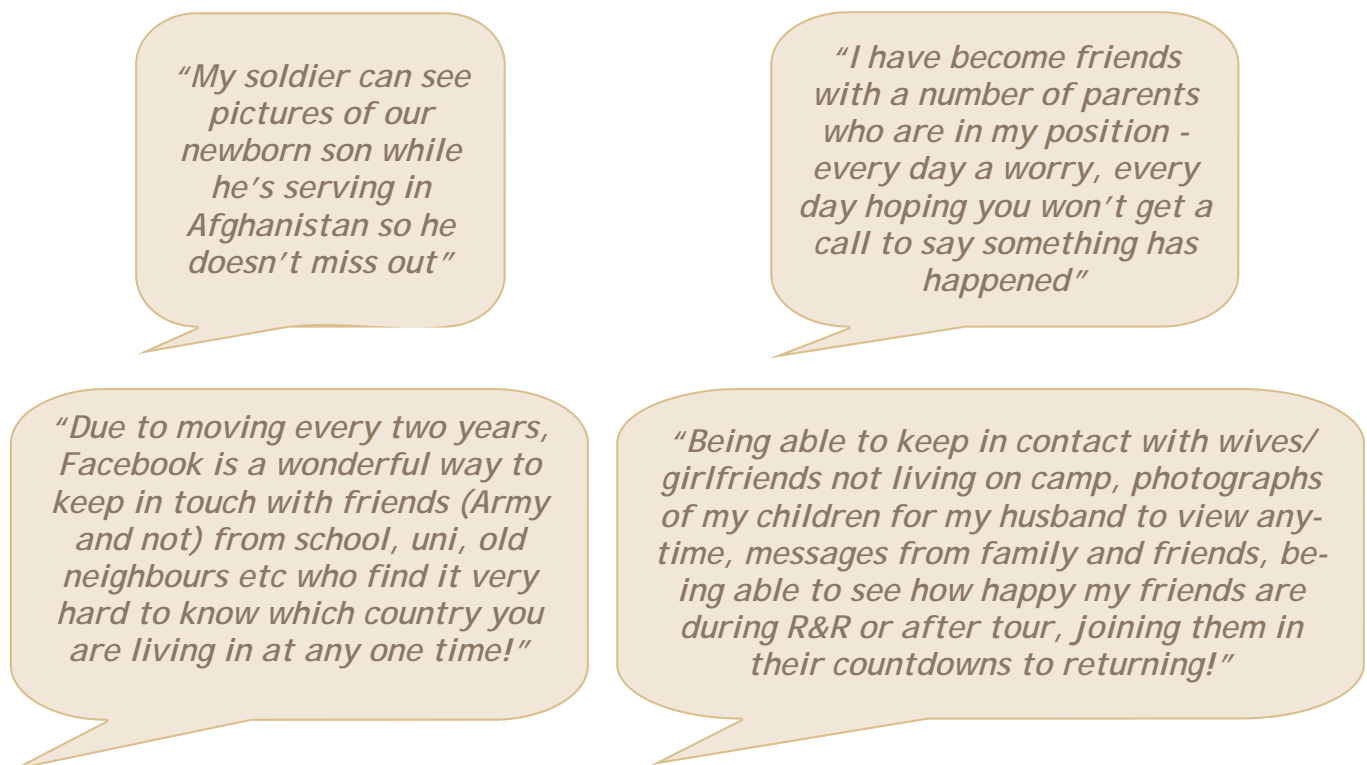


“Disgraceful. I think it’s unfair for the families but if it’s the family releasing the name then that is their decision”

“Sad. If I was in that situation I would be very angry and upset that a name had been released on Facebook. It is understandable that friends of the soldier want to pay their respects but some people just don’t think before they act”

“It is appalling that they can do this as the family need time to grieve and come to terms with the fatality”

Q30 What do you think the positives of social networking sites are?



“My soldier can see pictures of our newborn son while he’s serving in Afghanistan so he doesn’t miss out”

“I have become friends with a number of parents who are in my position - every day a worry, every day hoping you won’t get a call to say something has happened”

“Due to moving every two years, Facebook is a wonderful way to keep in touch with friends (Army and not) from school, uni, old neighbours etc who find it very hard to know which country you are living in at any one time!”

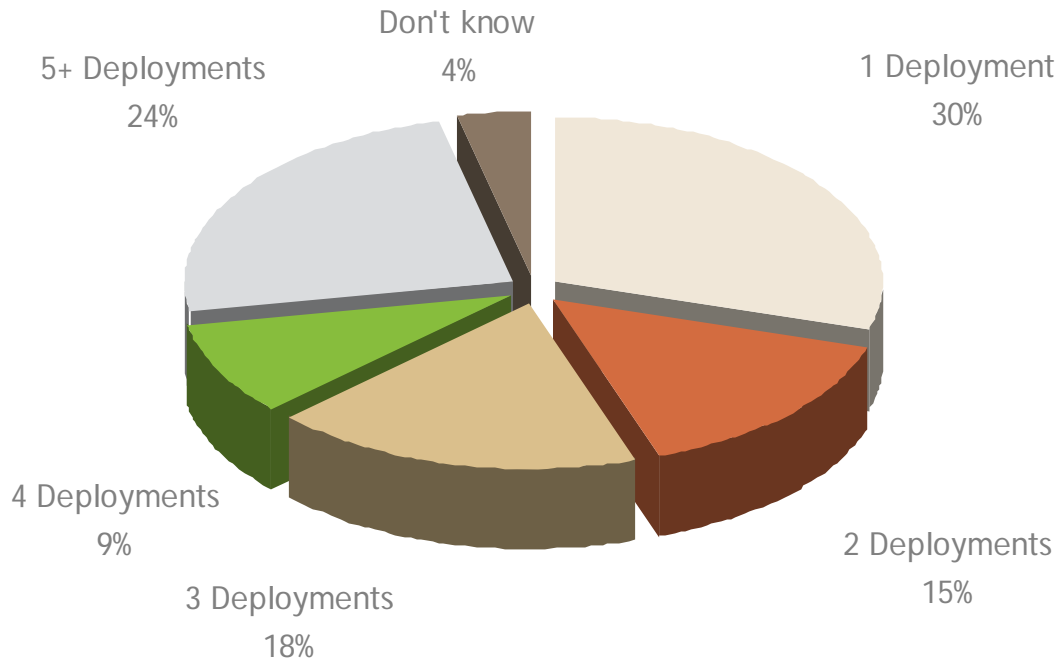
“Being able to keep in contact with wives/girlfriends not living on camp, photographs of my children for my husband to view any-time, messages from family and friends, being able to see how happy my friends are during R&R or after tour, joining them in their countdowns to returning!”

Post-deployment

Final deployment survey

AFF used this survey to look at R&R, casualties and the homecoming.

Q31 How many deployments has your soldier done since joining the Army?



R&R

Q32 Did your soldier get R&R?

89% got R&R, those who did not were either short-toured, scheduled for half a tour or injured part way through.

Q33 Did your soldier receive his full entitlement to R&R?

Yes	76%
No	19%
Don't know	5%

"He was dropped down south, so his R&R had started but he had to use eight hours of it travelling home"

When we asked how many had been delayed in transit, 39% said their soldier had been delayed - some for four days.

It was welcome news that any R&R lost would be included in POTL (Post Operational Tour Leave) but many families would prefer the full fourteen days R&R and many did not want more days added to POTL.

"Nearly four days of travelling was included in his two weeks' R&R"

Q34 Do the advantages of R&R outweigh the disruption to the family unit?

Agree	58%
Disagree	27%
Don't know	15%

"The family is less important than the soldier. It is the benefit that he receives which is important. My son was exhausted, and told me that although he had thought that he could soldier through without a break, he was probably wrong"

"Definitely not. My husband was apprehensive the whole time and the children had just got used to having daddy back home, then he disappeared again"

"I know it's good for the boys to get back, but it's hard seeing him go again, when R&R is over"

AFF recommends that a further research study is carried out on the disruption versus the advantages of R&R, and what mitigating circumstances there are to make a vital part of the deployment better for those who find it disruptive.

Q35 In future, would you be happy if R&R was discontinued if offered a slightly shorter tour?

Yes	22%
No	22%
Depends on length of tour	52%
Don't know	4%

Q36 Did your soldier return from deployment on the day expected?

Yes	52%
No	44%
Don't know	4%

"The flights really need to be sorted out and stop mucking families around regarding homecoming dates and R&R"

"Tour was extended, several times"

"Dates change on a daily basis"

15/60 of the 'no' responses were due to injuries.

AFF acknowledges that this question should have been better phrased as it is not made clear if and when the changes occurred. However, AFF does believe that the fragility of the airbridge should be emphasised to the families and that their expectations should be better managed.

Q37 Is your soldier scheduled to have all his/her post operational leave?

Yes	76%
No	9%
No, due to posting	3%
Don't know	12%

Q38 Has your soldier received his/her deployment bonus?

Yes	83%
No	4%
Don't know	13%

The 'don't knows' are mainly from parents/guardians.

Q39 Did your soldier's unit organise a homecoming briefing?

Yes	78%
No	11%
Don't know	11%

However, only 63 out of 122 respondents attended. 34 of those were spouses.

Return continued.....

"As I was a fiancée at the time, I was not contacted about briefings"

"They tagged it on to the medals parade and it lasted less than five minutes"

"The welfare office was brilliant and kept us well informed throughout the whole tour"

AFF is surprised that only 78% of units held a homecoming briefing as reintegration into family life can be fraught with problems. With just over half of those who knew about the briefing attending, serious questions need to be asked by units about the reasons for this to help prevent post-operational problems.

Q40 Did your soldier's unit send you information about how to prepare for homecoming and what to expect from your soldier on his/her return?

Yes	58%
No	39%
Don't Know	3%

Almost 40% of families asked did not receive information about what to expect from their soldier's return. AFF acknowledges that the 4 Mechanised Brigade Deployment Guide covers this area but it is highly likely that families might be using the guide for outgoing but not homecoming advice.

Q41 Has your soldier's unit organised a welcome home event/parade/medals parade?

Yes	95%
No	2%
Don't know	3%

Q42 As a result of this tour, have you and your soldier had discussions about him/her leaving the Army?

Yes	56%
No	44%

"My son is well aware of all the dangers as am I too and his family, but my son loves the Army and wants to stay. We will all support him 100% in his choice"

"He is TA/Reservist and I made it very clear I could not cope with him going away again. He is remaining in the TA but hopefully will not volunteer for Afghanistan again. Fingers crossed"

"Before the tour, my husband was adamant about leaving the Army - he still has in the back of his mind that he would leave should a suitable job become available to him. However, he is more focused on his job and promotion since the tour"

Q43 Was your soldier injured whilst on tour?

13% of respondent’s soldiers had experienced injuries. Please see the following chapter (page 35) on injured soldiers for case studies.

Q44 Has your relationship with your soldier changed since they returned home?

Significantly affected positively	6%
Slightly affected positively	26%
No change	40%
Slightly affected negatively	24%
Significantly affected negatively	4%

Parents and guardians mainly responded with ‘No change’; spouses generally recorded the most responses for change on this question.

“I’m finding it tough after being independent for so long. My husband has come back and taken over. It’s stressful as he is doing things differently to the way I have done them over the last six months”

“It has been VERY hard to readjust. I was signed off with depression/ anxiety while he was away and he finds it very hard to be empathetic to this”

“My husband saw several kids drown next to where he was and we both felt like we had to put our marriage on hold for six months because we could not talk about anything for fear of giving the other one more to worry about in an already difficult time. I understand that it is all part of it but you think once they are home that it will all get better but we are still struggling. My husband doesn’t talk about what happened and right now it feels like as a couple we are struggling, trying to find our way back to as close as we can get to how it was before he left but with little success. I just hope that time will fix things”

Return continued.....

Q45 AFF is interested in the effect of deployment on the soldier's children. Have you noticed any changes in their behaviour specifically relating to the tour?

Of those this question was applicable to, 39 had seen changes in behaviour and 48 had not.

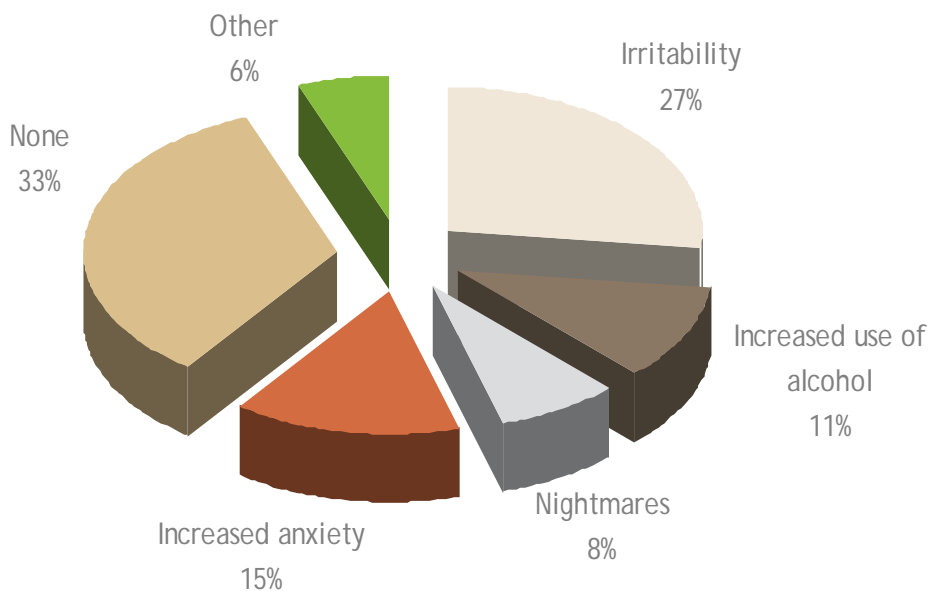
"Both children became easily upset and have a lot of aggression in them which they didn't have prior to the tour"

"Our eldest child became quiet and insular, whilst our youngest child became extremely emotional, having outbursts at home and school. Our child also started bedwetting, not sleeping and having nightmares. When my husband returned, our child was very angry with him and has screamed at him when he has been away since"

"My son is two and doesn't understand what is happening. But now that my husband is home he follows him round like he's his shadow"

Only fourteen out of 59 of the above respondents had attended the homecoming briefing and only 24 out of 91 had received information from their units about what signs of stress to look out for on homecoming. Perhaps if more of these families had received information about homecoming, they would have been more prepared for it. AFF believes that further research needs to be considered with a view to offering guidance on techniques to help children cope.

Q46 Have you noticed any of the following in your soldier since returning from tour? (please tick all that apply)



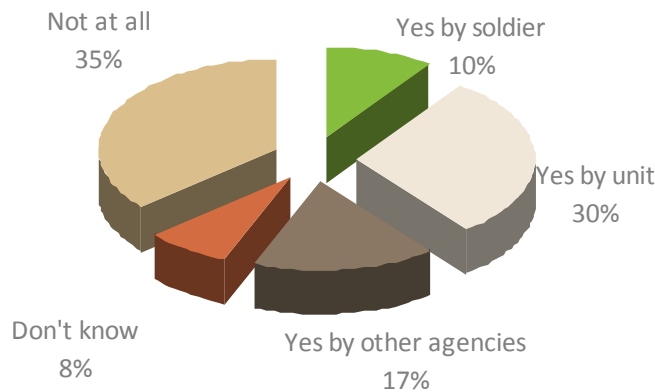
“Doesn't like being in crowded areas or noisy areas. Bonfire night was only one month after returning from duty and the sound of the fireworks going off and explosions made him nervous. He needed reassuring that he was safe. He gets jumpy at night when he is sleeping and will wake at the slightest noise”

“My husband has been having problems when going to bed at night. He seems quite anxious and is very ‘jumpy’”

“Short tempered especially when driving”

Almost three quarters of respondents (145/220) had noticed negative traits in their soldier when he/she returned.

Q47 Have you been informed how to recognise the signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



36% of families asked had had no information about recognising the signs of PTSD.

Q48 Have there been any positives to your soldier being on this operational tour?

Yes	39%
No	61%

“The only positive to this tour was that the difference in pay has allowed our family to have a better quality of life for a bit”

“Appreciates day-to-day life more than before, more thoughtful towards family and family matters”

Largely the financial gain was the most recorded positive, with maturity coming second.

"The bonus and extra pay are always a big positive. Getting to know our welfare team and other unit spouses has also been very positive. I have made a lot of good friends this tour and our welfare team have been outstanding"

Q49 What advice would you give to another family about to go through deployment?

Many people advised to keep families and friends close, and many warned about watching too much news.

"I guess the only thing that saved me and my children was staying busy. I didn't realise at the time that I was going through a severe depression with the worry of all that was going on. One of my closest friends lost her husband. I didn't know how to deal this and I didn't want to talk to my husband about it because I didn't want him to worry about me so my family was my rock through everything. It doesn't even have to be blood family. Being close to others in the same unit might be better because they understand what you are going through. Your civilian family will want to help but aren't going through the same so they won't really understand"

"Look on the internet for support groups of people in the same situation I found these very helpful"

"Make sure you ask the UWO for help if you require it. If you have any questions, it's okay to ask friends, but they don't always give you the correct info, so ask the UWO"

"I would say to keep an open mind and expect the unexpected. Always take R&R dates and homecoming dates with a pinch of salt! Make good use of the welfare facilities on offer. Go on all of the day trips and family days. It's a great way to meet people, helps pass the time, and takes your mind off things for a while. It's a good way for your children to stay occupied and meet new friends too"

Q50 Do you have anything else to add regarding your experiences of this deployment?

"My husband is in the TA. I was only contacted to attend a briefing by his unit after I contacted AFF. TA families seem to be forgotten"

"Due to the fact that my soldier is a Lieutenant, myself and his family were left totally uninformed as everything is geared towards Privates' families"

"In Germany everyone pulls together and the welfare office is the place to be, but in the UK it's totally different. I felt like I could disappear unnoticed at times"

"I just wish that there was more that could have been done for the families living unaccompanied as I found it extra hard not knowing anyone and not being able to talk to anyone about how I felt"

"We were very impressed by the fantastic support and information we received from his regiment, especially as he was deployed over the Christmas/New Year period last year"

Injured soldiers and their families

AFF approached six families to ask them about their experiences with the injury process. We are extremely grateful for their honesty and insight into a particularly traumatic time. Four were spouses, including a TA wife, and two were parents of serving soldiers. They were all the NOK. Four out of six of the injured soldiers had to return to the UK for immediate treatment.

Self-Kinform

This is the process whereby if the soldier is well enough to inform his/her NOK of their injuries, by telephone from theatre then they may do so. This has the benefit of allowing families to hear directly from the soldier which they may find reassuring.

AFF had heard anecdotal evidence to suggest that the self-kinform process was not working as it should. This was supported by several units who told us that they had had to re-evaluate the process.

Q51 On the telephone (when your soldier rang you to advise they were injured) were you offered the opportunity to speak to a medical practitioner to discuss your soldier's condition?

Yes	0%
No	100%

"Our son had rang to notify us but there was confusion, we were told that he had only minor injuries, when in fact he was in intensive care with a bleed on the brain"

JSP 751 01.01.0409 states:

'Medical staff must ensure that the casualty has sufficient knowledge of all relevant aspects of their care prior to making the call. The EC(emergency contact)/NOK may seek a depth of reassurance regarding the injuries sustained and details of when, or if, the casualty is likely to be medically evacuated; medical staff must be on hand to answer any pursuant questions raised'

The families who spoke to AFF wanted to talk to a medical practitioner for reassurance and to check that their soldier was not underplaying their injury. They were 'angry' that they were not given the opportunity to do so. While there were Army personnel overseeing the phone call in Afghanistan, the families commented that it was to ensure that the soldier did not reveal operational details and also to 'rush' the soldier as other wounded soldiers were waiting to make phone calls.

Q52 Were you satisfied that your soldier's unit contacted you within what you regarded as a reasonable amount of time?

Yes	0%
No	100%

"I sat on my own in the house after the phone call in the morning. The unit eventually called later in the afternoon - why couldn't they have called me sooner?"

"Utterly disgraceful that my son's unit could not even be bothered to contact me at all"

“NOTICAS (Notification of Casualty - the formal process involving a Notifying Officer visiting the NOK’s house) was not used as my husband was able to phone me himself. He was injured with a colleague who was much worse than him, so rightly the unit welfare staff concentrated on his family”

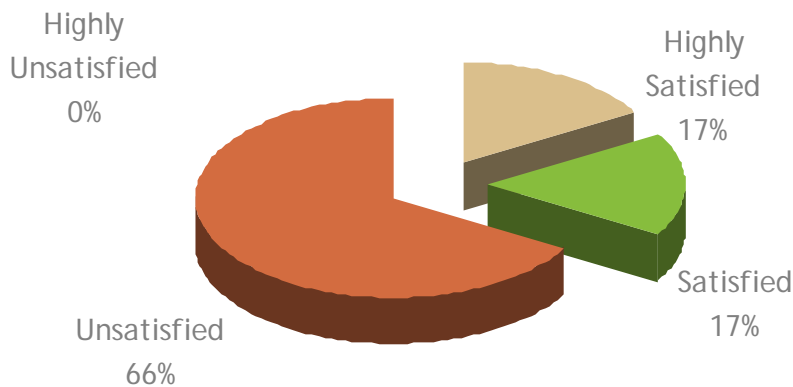
Early on in the tour it appears that units were not informed by theatre about self-kinform casualties as quickly as other injuries required Casualty Notifying Officers (CNOs) to be called out to families. Units found this frustrating but worked hard to speed up their processes.

AFF understands that in both circumstances examined there were multiple casualties, many classified as more serious than the two soldiers affected. Both soldiers however, went on to develop complications and their stay at Camp Bastion became quite a lengthy one. AFF feels that it is reasonable to expect the unit to maintain a level of contact with the family.

In addition, AFF has found that a great deal of training for CNOs relates to the process relating to the deaths of soldiers. AFF would like to see a greater emphasis on training for CNOs to assist families of injured soldiers.

Whilst AFF appreciates that a great deal of outstanding work is carried out by CNOs, and the process in recent years has been greatly improved, AFF feels that the self-kinform process now needs further examination to ensure that families do not put the phone down on their soldier and receive no further help.

Q53 Were you satisfied with how the notification process worked under the circumstances?



“I got a phone call from the unit informing me my husband had been injured. I heard nothing more for eleven hours when my husband called - he was allowed two minutes on the phone. I then received two visits later in the day from someone in my husband’s TA Regt to talk me through the details of going to Birmingham [hospital]”

Q54 Did you feel that you knew the appropriate person/agency to go to if you needed something?

Yes	40%
No	10%
Sometimes	50%

“My CVO (Casualty Visiting Officer) had never visited Birmingham [hospital] before and so he took all the information at the initial briefing - I never saw it again. When my husband was discharged earlier than we expected, the CVO was not around and we didn’t really know who to ask for help in getting him new shoes [for his damaged feet]. In the end we took a bus into Birmingham to buy him a pair of shoes that would fit - it was very unsettling as he kept seeing IEDs everywhere”

“When I got back from the hospital, I opened my handbag and just tipped the 40 plus business cards out on to the floor. They all told me to contact them if I needed something. We didn’t know where to start”

Q55 Would you like to comment on anything about your experience at the hospital or rehabilitation?

“First stint at Selly Oak, I was welcomed and looked after and I could visit at any time. Once the ward moved to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital was told that I had to wait to visit my husband. I had to travel three and a half hours each way within a day, work around childcare arrangements but I did not have that flexibility. The inflexible nature of the civilian staff on the ward was extremely insensitive to Service families. My husband could not be admitted to my local hospital and I couldn’t just pop in at the hospital’s convenience”

“I struggled with the Army jargon”

“As a parent of an injured soldier the help and assistance given to myself and the family was second-to-none and I cannot praise highly enough the welfare team and the staff who cared for us at Selly Oak Hospital”

Q56 Have you at any point been offered counselling?

Yes	17%
No	83%

Q57 Do you feel that counselling should be offered as part of the process in helping you cope with what happened to your soldier?

100% agreed that counselling should be on offer even if some would not have taken it up.

"Nobody in the Army offers any support for the children of the injured soldier. You feel shell-shocked. I think the Army could do more"

AFF recommends that professional and immediate counselling is on offer to military families suffering injuries or bereavements due to operational tours as part of the Military Covenant. AFF understands that the MOD position on counselling is that families should access it through the NHS system however, it does not consider this a sufficient response from the Government.

Q58 Did you feel supported by your soldier's unit?

Yes	33%
No	17%
Sometimes	50%

"The support I have had following my husband's medical evacuation from theatre was faultless. I was taken back and forth to Selly Oak at times that suited me and the team were always available if I called"

"My husband's unit couldn't give two hoots about me because he was TA"

"I think the Army do a fantastic job looking after you, let them do it. They picked me up and drove to Birmingham - makes it so much easier when the practicalities are all arranged for you"

Q59 What advice would you give to another family dealing with an injury?

"Use the system and ask for anything you need. Ask for your entitlements to be clarified"

"Make notes of everything. Lots of different people will come and see you. Write everything down because you will forget what everyone says"

SUMMARY



SUMMARY

AFF considers that there is a great deal of excellent work being carried out by units to keep families informed and allay their fears. However, as shown in this report there are gaps in provision. Some units are far more successful at offering and providing support to both the close and wider family. AFF would like to see a more consistent service regardless of which unit a soldier serves in, or where their family are based.

Brigades carefully coordinate the information contained in the units' pre-deployment briefs and leaflets; they should also prescribe which agencies speak at the briefings

AFF seeks the provision of a presentation template for the pre-deployment briefings provided by Brigades to ensure that all families receive the same relevant information. Units could then brand it with their cap badge and add unit specific information.

4 Mechanised Brigade clearly prescribed the basic content contained in the pre-deployment briefs. Units however, then went on to personalise and 'improve' upon the basic information to greater or lesser extent. The 'improvements' meant then that each unit gave out differing information to their families. Photographs differed with some unit's showing families what Camp Bastion looked like, and other units showing photographs of a bed in a Forward Operating Base (FOB), which families really appreciated. A generic set of photographs should be held in a central bank for units to borrow.

RAOs talk/briefing on pay and allowances differed even within infantry battalions that were conducting similar roles. There should be no disparity in the presentations given by RAOs in the different units.

The presentation of the Emotional Cycle in some instances was simply inappropriate. AFF questions whether UWOs have the right training to present this sensitive and very important information and would recommend that AWS is utilised for this part of the presentation. The DVD produced by AWS on the Emotional Cycle is highly commended by AFF but AFF believe more copies would have been distributed if the DVD had been free to UWOs.

The length of briefings should be minimised - some of the presentations lasted over two hours without a break. Units should consider a rehearsal to a select group of family members prior to the actual briefing.

A decision must be made about the appropriateness of children attending briefings and provision put in place to ensure that they are not exposed to information that they will not understand.

JPA should have an 'opt out' box introduced to enable automatic information provision to Next of Kin - thereby bypassing the soldier in the process

Those units that had sent out invitations to attend pre-deployment briefings directly to families had a bigger turnout. In recognition of how far families would have to travel, the mega-briefings were expanded to include equipment, lunch and fun activities. Free transport was laid on for those units that recruited in one specific geographical area. This report reflects the wider families' appreciation of the effort expended by units to encompass them within the military bubble.

It is a generally accepted fact that relying on a soldier to pass details on about pre-deployment briefings is an unreliable way of doing things. Young soldiers especially, cannot be expected to fully grasp the importance of their NOK being included in this process. One mother whose son was injured commented, "the first time I had anything to do with the Army was when two soldiers stood on my doorstep to tell me my son had lost his legs". AFF considers this a devastating example of such an easily rectified situation.

Time and time again, IAs and unaccompanied families have been poorly informed and treated differently to the remainder of the unit. The policy of Accompanied Service offers families a support network in a military environment; families are encouraged to live in their own homes in documents such as the Army Living Strategy but this will create a much wider geographical area for already stretched UWO/CNO/CVOs to cover.

It is not easy to achieve 100% coverage of families, but it is the IAs and unaccompanied families that suffer the consequences of overstretched UWOs concentrating on 'centre of mass'.

Unit welfare teams are audited to ensure Individual Augmentees (IAs) and unaccompanied families have been contacted and supported

"As an individual augmentee, there is no welfare unit - there is no support"

Army families should have access to professional and immediate counselling to immediate family members where they are concerned about their soldier before, during, and after, combat operations

AFF recommends that professional and immediate counselling is on offer to military families suffering injuries due to operational tours as part of the Military Covenant. AFF understands that the MOD position on counselling is that families should access it through the NHS system however, it does not consider this a sufficient response from the Government.

Children also must not be forgotten. Our report demonstrates how many children struggled to cope with a parent being away. Too much reliance is placed on the parent staying at home to 'know' how to deal with the issues that crop up. Undoubtedly and without exception, children whose parent is injured must be given extra support.

Greater use of technology such as email, SMS and social networking sites offer speedier transit of gossip, but also an opportunity for UWOs to provide reassurance and information. UWOs need to engage with technology, monitor it and get involved 'online'.

Families must be guided on the safe use of Facebook to protect their own and their soldier's privacy. This medium has a fundamental effect on the way information is exchanged among dependants. AFF understands that it is impossible to control these sites but there has to be comprehensive advice on using it.

Units strive to improve their soldiers' and families' understanding and engagement with social networking sites

"Utterly disgraceful that my son's unit could not even be bothered to contact me at all"

The self-kinform process is fundamentally flawed and requires immediate revision

Based on the families who have experienced this process it has clearly failed them.

Families were not given the opportunity to speak to a medical practitioner following the phone call. They found this unsettling as they were not sure whether their soldier was playing down his/her injuries.

Follow up by the UWOs was incredibly poor as the system informed them much later in the process. The volume of work the UWOs are tasked with is huge when multiple casualties occur. As a consequence, families felt very let down by their soldier's unit. The reactions from families are evident:

SUMMARY Continued...

"Being close to wives you are in the same unit with helps because they understand what you are going through, whereas your civilian family will want to help but aren't going through the same thing, so they won't really understand"

AFF continues to urge the Army to support the policy of Accompanied Service and the provision of military housing patches

APPENDICES



Focus Group One

Using the survey results, AFF asked thirty families to take part in a focus group to explore the issues highlighted in more detail:

Q1 How were you informed about your pre-deployment brief?

Units had used a variety of methods; letters, emails, facebook, newsletters, words of mouth and on military orders.

We debated whether the NOK of list should be used as a means of keeping families informed during the deployment. Generally families felt it should be used as long as the soldier was complicit in the approval. Again, the idea of an opt out box rather than an opt in box on JPA was discussed favourably.

Q2 Were you given a variety of dates and times?

There did not seem to be a one size fits all solution to this. Some wanted just one date, others wanted a variety of dates and times to allow for work etc.

Q3 Was it in a suitable location?

The units tried a variety of locations with the Barrack gym for large groups being the most popular - if it could be heated!

Q4 Was there childcare provision? Does there need to be?

Some units told families that soldiers would be able to babysit while the briefing was on. However, often the soldiers were actually on pre-deployment training so could not physically be at home to babysit - leaving families unable to attend!

Families were complimentary about those units that put on a crèche for the period of the briefing. This allowed them to attend something which families were not always sure had topics suitable for children.

Some families who took their children to the briefing commented that topics such as notification of deaths and injuries were very difficult for children to hear and often had emotional consequences when they got home.

“You couldn’t ask questions. I might talk to my child about these issues but I don’t know if everyone else has, you couldn’t ask the difficult questions because of little ones, my daughter asks me ‘Mummy is my Daddy going to come back’, and I will tell her, but I don’t know what other people have told theirs”

“In the morning there was childcare and in the evening session you had to sort it out yourself so there was a choice”

“Pre deployment training means that saying “the soldier can do the childcare” is an issue for us”

Focus Group One continued.....

Q5 Was the wider family invited?

Generally the wider family were invited to the briefs but their attendance was dependent largely on how the invitation was delivered and whether there was transport. If the units had used the NOK list, attendance was good. If units relied on the soldiers taking a letter home, attendance was often poor.

Q6 Was transport offered?

"We have buses coming in from everywhere which was really good"

"We had transport from Scotland"

"We had nothing at all from our unit - how come there is such a disparity?"

Q7 What did you think of the length of the briefing?

"Too long and due to the bad weather the buses [from Scotland] were 1.5 hours late"

"It would have been nice to have something to eat at the end"

"We had food at the end of ours; it was twenty minutes in length, then food, which was great, the right way to do it"

"We had the whole day to look at the kit (which I was pleased with) - and we had lunch, ration packs, and we would see the vehicles and kit"

"They talked about decompression too much"

Q8 Has anyone contacted you for feedback?

"We had a general chat a week after [the pre-deployment briefing] where the UWO asked at a coffee morning, 'how was it?'"

"No, but one possibility is a comments book is needed"

Q9 What would you have changed? What was missing?

"Take ideas from other regiments"

"All UWOs should get together and compare notes as a Brigade focus"

"Possible joint coffee mornings"

Q10 What was the most useful piece of information?

"The casualty notification process - I really appreciated the frankness"

*"That you could top up Paradigm cards from here [UK]"
(Paradigm is the provider of phone cards to soldiers in theatre to ring home)*

"That you could do texting via Paradigm and they receive it like an email"

"Seeing the safety equipment for the kids and family, the new helmets look more protective"

"Communication, texting and Paradigm"

Q11 What did you really like?

"Wills section"

"Inheritance tax section"

"Next of kin information"

"Knowing where Afghan was"

"What they do out there"

"Practicalities of notification (NOTICAS)"

Focus Group Two

Fifteen families joined AFF for this meeting in June 2010. Many of the units had been deployed for almost half of the tour. We looked at communication and events held by units.

Q1 How have you been contacted by your unit welfare team?

Emails seemed to be the most common and preferable form of communication. Some units were using SMS texting which received mixed comments.

By June, the Brigade had started to take casualties on a weekly basis. This question rapidly became about how the units chose to disseminate information about casualties.

“UWO should email everyone with what has actually happened, the email would reassure people”

“Good to quash the rumour mill, email is more informative, you can go further on email than on SMS”

“Best practice - an email that is formal but reassuring with a ‘please phone us’ if you have extra questions at the end”

“Email - as you are more likely to be at a desk or with other people when you open it, even if you are at work there are people there to support you, imagine you are in Tesco and you get a text [about an injury or death]”

“I would freak out if my welfare team knocked on my door just to see if I am okay”

Q2 Do you want to know about casualties?

“People were talking nonsense [about his injury]; they should send an email as soon as self-kinforming (Next of Kin informed) was done to clarify the situation”

“Someone suggested a once a week update. We didn’t know about any of the casualties, we didn’t know they were treated in Camp Bastion. I assumed if they got shot they would come home. If you know a lad [has been injured] you find out on Facebook”

“When the phones were down for three days, I thought it was notifying of a death, but the phones go down [Op Minimise] for injuries too”

“Only way you hear anything is by overhearing things”

AFF recommends that there is a clear divide between families who want up-to-date information on casualties and those that don’t. AFF believes that that information should be available for families if they wish to receive it. Many of these units are very close knit and the rumour mill can be very damaging.

Q3 What do you think of Facebook during deployment?

Feelings about social networking sites were similar to the results of the AFF survey. It is generally regarded as a good communication tool providing people use it wisely and do not use it to 'publicise' deaths, injuries or flight return dates.

Q4 What have you sent out to your soldier that you think the British Army should be supplying?

Some families stated their soldier was on their third BFPO address since being deployed and that the UWOs were not very timely in giving out the new addresses.

"Flea collars - soldiers are staying in a farm and getting bitten, so it's to reduce the fleas - they put them round their ankles"

"I send food for the sake of it, as a change of taste for them"

"What sun cream?" He said that none has been issued"

Q5 What is the best event your unit has done for you?

The people attending the Focus Group were spouses and so the following answer does not reflect what the wider family think.

"Nights at the community centre"

"Joining in with other regiments as we don't get the numbers attending"

"My unit welfare team try to do a themed night each month"

"Day trip to Scarborough, I don't have to drive, or worry about parking, there was a good group of wives, instead of being in charge I can switch off for the day"

With remembrance of all those soldiers who gave the
ultimate sacrifice during Op Herrick 12