

army families federation

families' concerns - January-March 2010

introduction

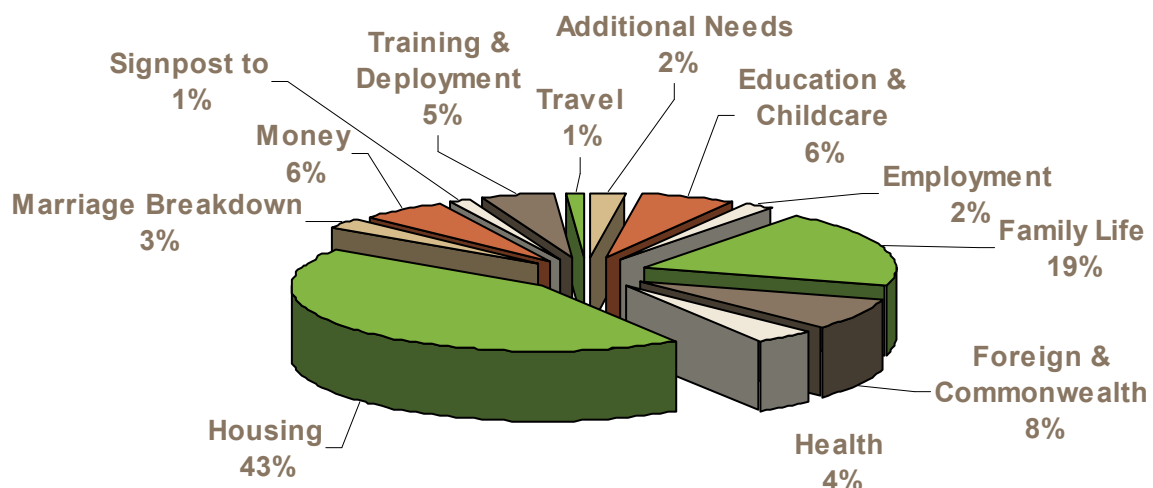
AFF Families' Concerns is produced quarterly to illustrate the issues and concerns that bring Army families to the Army Families Federation. Enquiries are gathered from Army families worldwide, and thus provide an accurate reflection of matters affecting the community. Some families contact AFF to find resolution to problems, some to talk to people who understand their issues and can raise them up the chain of command on their behalf; to log them and try and find resolution for the next generation of Army families. All issues included in this report have been raised with the appropriate agency or member of the chain of command for resolution.

This report is distributed to all those who have an interest in developing and delivering policy and assistance to families - who can help AFF secure a fair deal for all Army families.

methodology

This is a qualitative report. Families contact AFF staff around the world with their issues which are anonymously logged. This information is then entered onto a central database and used to provide the evidence for this report.

AFF worldwide activity chart



worldwide activity

Between January and March 2010 there was an **increase of 8% in enquiries** (up from 1,656 to 1,782) to AFF staff compared to the previous year quarter.

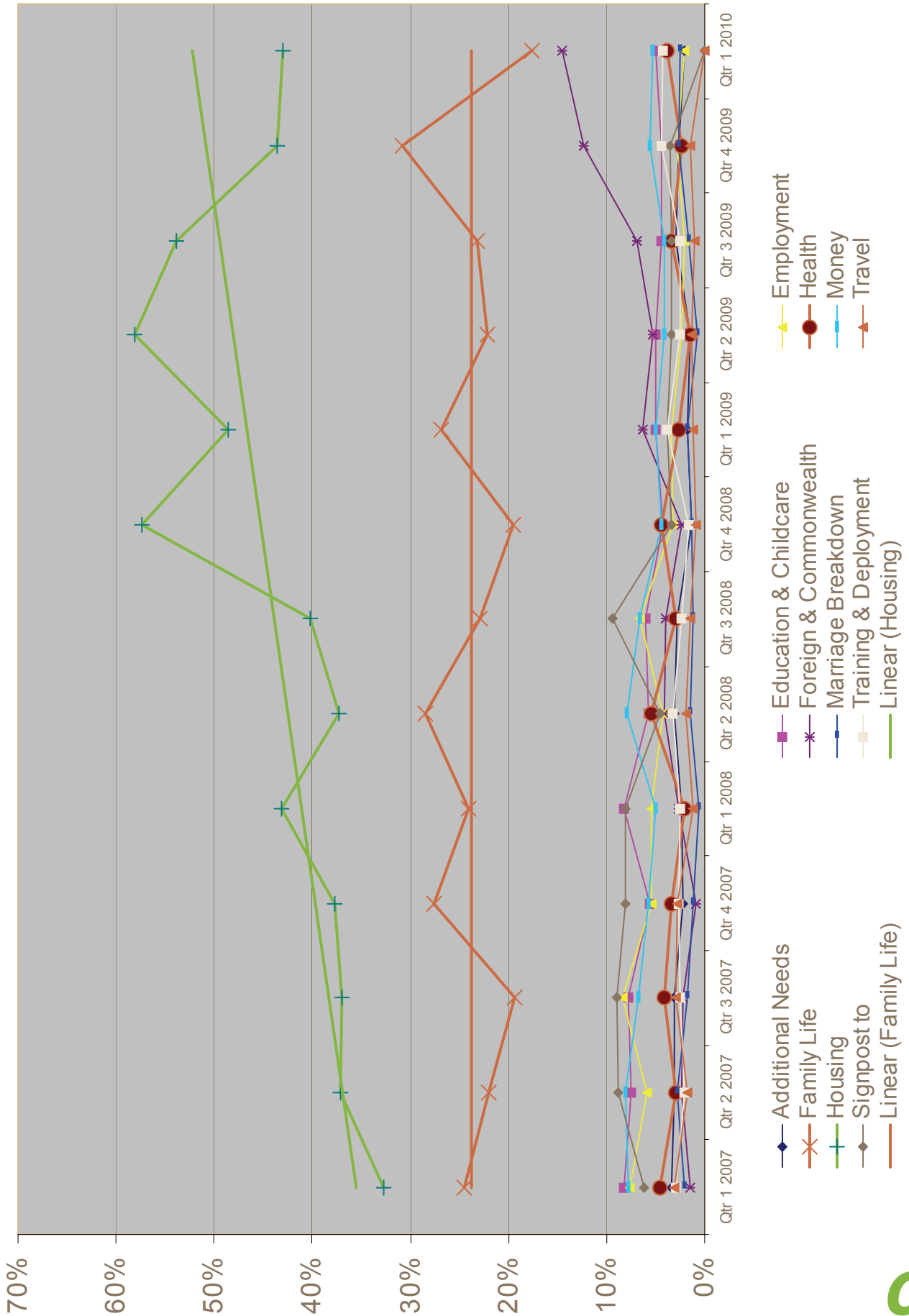
In comparison with the previous quarter, several areas saw significant increases in the number of enquiries received; Education and Childcare 49% to 107, Health 85% to 74 and Training and Deployment 15% to 83.

trends

Trends since January 2007 illustrate the fluctuations in the number of contacts to AFF for the types of issue being raised.

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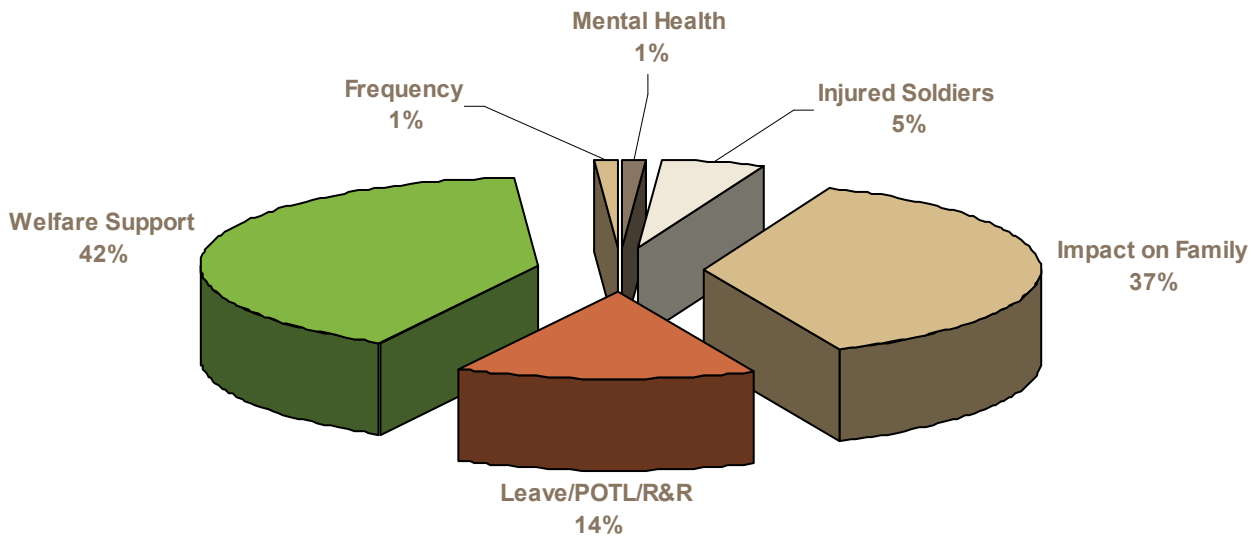
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training and deployment (5% of all enquiries)



For the first time this quarter the enquiries linked to training, deployment and separation have been collated in their own category. This was in reaction to a growing number of enquiries in this area and it was felt that further, more detailed analysis of this topic would yield useful information. **83 enquiries** were received this quarter.

The majority (**42% or 34**) of the enquiries regarded Welfare Support. A number of the enquiries were from Territorial Army and Reserve Forces spouses, partners and extended family whose soldier was deploying for the first time. They were unsure about who their welfare contact would be during the deployment and were also seeking to talk to other families in the same situation. In some cases this was simply because it was too early on the pre-deployment cycle and the 'system' had not kicked in. In other cases it was because the soldiers themselves had not passed on information to their family member(s). When talking to the wider family it has become apparent that information is desired on learning of the operational tour rather than in the months leading up to departure. The AFF Mob Buddies scheme has proved successful in putting TA families in touch with one another and is being widely publicised to families.

AFF has had concerns for some time regarding the support provided to TA & RF and Individual Augmentee families. The information booklets received from AFF and the Reserve Mobilisation and Training Centre, Chilwell, are well received, informative and useful, but families are frequently unsure who they can ask for practical advice and assistance. AFF has been working with PS4 (Army) on this issue.

"I've received no information about emergency contacts", "I'm worried about how I'll stay in touch with the Regiment when my son deploys", "I feel very removed from the process", "I am feeling isolated with no personal support"

A number of the issues raised to AFF staff concerned the stresses to all the family when dates for departure, R&R and homecoming are changed:

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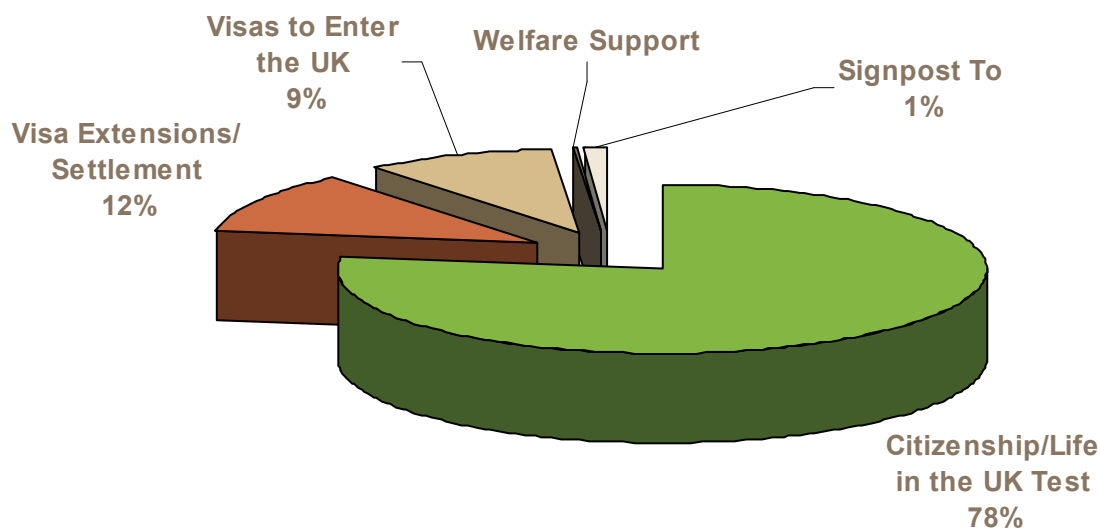
training and deployment continued...

“Uncertainty about departure dates means that it is like having a plaster ripped off slowly rather than quickly”

“Uncertainty is hugely stressful and puts the soldier in a hideous situation seeing the distress it causes the family. Hardly a good note for them to leave on”

“Tour durations frequently seem to be extended. Husband goes for six weeks and returns twelve weeks later - not good for mental preparation”

foreign and commonwealth (8% of all enquiries)



Since 1 January, enquiries relating to issues affecting Foreign and Commonwealth personnel and their families, which are specifically caused by their immigration status, have been collated under a separate heading. As with the previous category this has been to enable more detailed analysis of the issues being raised to AFF staff.

The AFF Foreign and Commonwealth Specialist has seen a substantial increase in enquiries in recent years - **205 in 2008 rising to 584 in 2009 and 149 already in this quarter**. Many issues relate to confusion over which visa is suitable for the spouse and how he or she goes about obtaining Citizenship or settlement. Well over 50% of our enquiries come from families in British Forces Germany who find themselves in difficult circumstances due to confusion over the appropriate visa.

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foreign and commonwealth continued

Much work is being done both by UKSC and HQ LF staffs into this area and significant improvements have been seen in recent years. However, the following cases illustrate well the difficulties still being experienced by families:

Problems due to visas

A woman in Germany whose husband is going to Afghanistan contacted AFF as her two-year spouse visa expires in May. She was very angry that she cannot get a visa for the UK, except a 'visit visa'. She would be eligible to apply for settlement if she was in the UK. She was very concerned about how she would get to UK if something were to happen to her soldier. Also, she will have to apply and pay for a visit visa just to be able to get to the UK for his medal parade.

Another spouse in Germany contacted us when she was recently issued with a visa for the UK because her husband has been posted back to the UK. The visa was stamped 'to accompany spouse'. She used this visa to visit the UK and was very nearly refused entry by the Immigration Officers at Stansted because she was not with her husband. She was very angry that she was treated like a terrorist. She is now worried because she is due to travel to Fiji with her husband but he will be returning a week early and she is concerned that she will have similar difficulties.

A soldier stationed in Germany called us because he wants his son to attend boarding school in the UK. His son and wife have no current visa. He wanted to know which visa his son required to attend the school and how his wife would be available to visit him there. He is an ex-Gurkha who has served for 18 years and is very angry at the treatment of families in Germany.

A spouse in Germany has been trying to get her daughter in Sierra Leone to join her in Germany. She has made more than one application for a visit visa to the UK, as it was her intention to fly to the UK and then to fly to Sierra Leone and transit back via the UK. However, her visas have been refused because you are not allowed to transit out of UK whilst on a visit visa. She also did not provide enough supporting documents to back up her application. Her daughter has been living with her Grandmother, who is now too sick to look after her. The daughter has already been issued with a visa for the UK and has been waiting to join her mother since before Christmas. She is not able to travel alone as she is too young.

Problems getting to Germany on a posting

A spouse called AFF having been advised by her UWO that she needed a visa to fly to Germany on a posting. The UWO had heard of SOFA stamps but said it was nothing to do with him and that she will get one when she gets to Germany. Her husband is currently away and she is trying to organise it all herself. She is very stressed as she also has young children.

AFF took a call from a soldier whose wife is in South Africa and he is being posted to Germany in May. He has been told by his unit that he will have to go to Germany and his wife will have to transit via the UK on her own. She has never been to the UK. He is also being told different things by different people.

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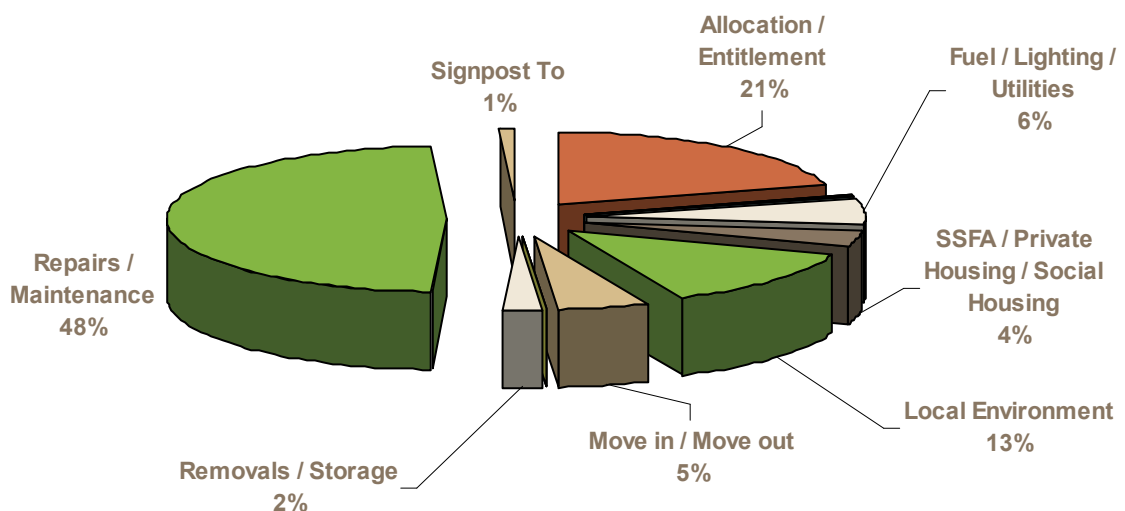
foreign and commonwealth continued

All of the above problems would be alleviated if F&C spouses and dependants were given the same immigration status as soldiers. The soldier is given an 'exempt' stamp in recognition of the fact that they are expected to travel with their jobs.

Gaining Citizenship when stationed overseas is not a 'personal choice', it is the only route by which a Gurkha, F&C spouse or dependant can guarantee access to the UK without the hassle and expense of applying for a visit visa each time.

Note: The relevant agencies and MOD Departments are aware of these individual cases and are assisting the families with advice and guidance.

housing (43% of all enquiries)



Housing continues to be a major source of concern and worry for Army families throughout the world, enquiries this quarter have increased. *(by 7% to 1090).*

The pressure on the housing estate in areas of high demand is impacting on families. The move away from regimental patches and the inability of the local HIC to only allocate what's available rather than what would be best suited to a family has been reflected in the comments received:

Squadron families not living together...

"Its really detrimental to both their working and family lives, and has an impact on the support the families receive"

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housing continued

“Why is it that we have been posted to the middle of nowhere when I don't drive and my husband is going to Afghanistan? Who is going to take me and my children to the doctors?”

Families are also reporting that a strict adherence not only to the rules but to timelines is having a detrimental effect:

“ A family received one week's notice of posting (after the posting was changed three times). They sent in 1132s to HIC same day but the HIC staff member was unsympathetic to the family's plight and told them they would have to wait not just the 15 days for an offer, but another 28 days as there were people ahead of them on the waiting list.

If the Army is to continue to rely on the support of families to their soldiers and to champion accompanied service, then serious consideration and attention must be given to those areas of the estate that are under the most pressure. Families need houses now and cannot be left homeless or separated while budget holders determine who will be paying the bills.

...ongoing issue of lack of SFA and SSFA in Hereford. The area now has 24 families awaiting allocation ...

“a married Servicewoman is having to live in single block”, “I'm putting off my wedding plans as the HIC is unable to provide me with SFA”, “my wife and child are living in the spare room at my mother's house”

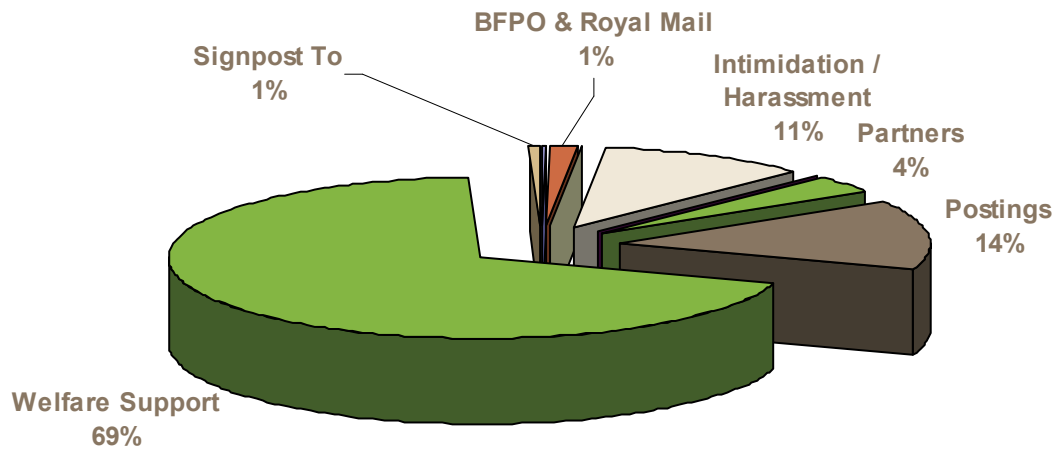
We are pleased to report that the Hereford issue has now been resolved but only after intervention at the highest level. AFF is very concerned that the issue will be repeated throughout the UK as the pressure on the housing estate and on budgets increase.

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family life

(19% of all enquiries)



The recent AFF Discussion Groups held throughout Northern Ireland have revealed the depth to which Army families living in the Province are concerned about their security. In NI, the threat at present is severe - an attack is likely, but there is no policy in place for families/dependants to receive any kind of security brief upon arrival. There is however, a policy which states all military personnel should receive a security brief on arrival. Should a military visitor arrive in NI, even for a short visit, they receive a security brief.

Without the correct and most current information available to them, how do families know not to hang the military uniform on the washing line at their SFA outside the wire, or which areas are recommended as 'out of bounds'?

AFF has been campaigning for security briefs to be delivered to ALL spouses and also to older children living in NI. We believe that on arrival is the ideal time for them to receive this briefing. Families arrive in NI believing that it is 'normal'. Those families who receive the brief can be slightly shocked and shaken about what they are told, as it contradicts what they had been led to believe. It is different living in NI to the mainland but if families are armed with facts, then they are able to make their own decisions about their family's security and what precautions they need to take to ensure they can live as close to a normal life as possible whilst in NI.

'Soldiers are given one message and the families are given a different message. My husband will not go into Crumlin and says that I shouldn't. It's the mixed messages between husband and wife that can cause problems'

'I was here in 2000 and the security situation is no different'

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family life continued

'I don't feel safe looking for employment within the local community due to the security situation and having to stick to a cover story about why I am living within Northern Ireland'

'It's not safe to go out to some local areas for the day as my English accent draws attention to the fact we are a Forces family'

'I am not sure where I can and can't go as the out of bounds restrictions are always changing'