

army families federation

families concerns - July–September 2009

introduction

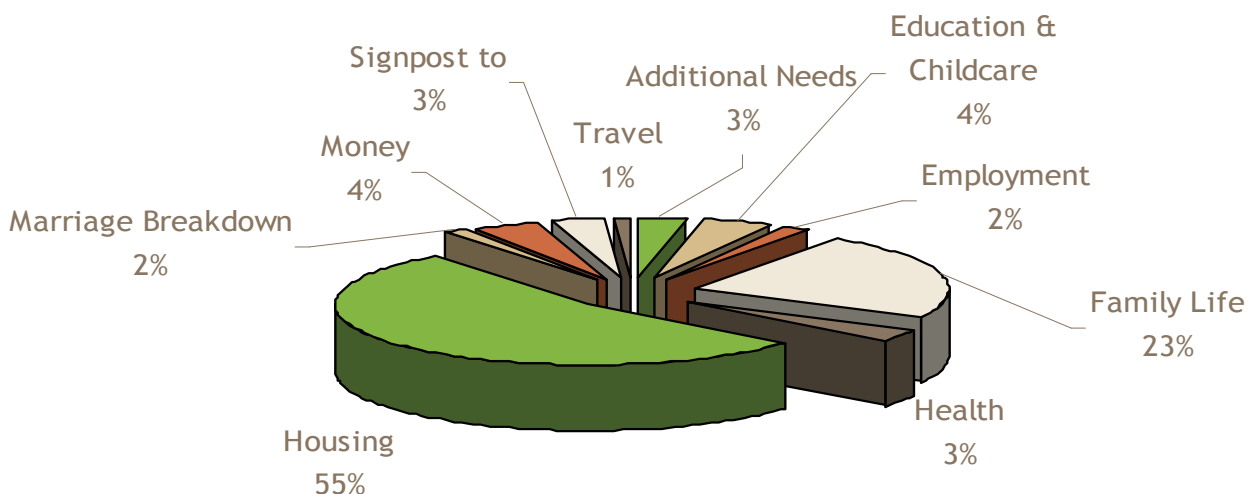
AFF Families' Concerns is produced quarterly to illustrate the issues and concerns that bring Army families to the Army Families Federation. Enquiries are gathered from Army families worldwide, and thus provide an accurate reflection of matters affecting the community. Some families contact AFF to find 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



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worldwide activity

Between July and September 2009 there was an **increase of 7% in enquiries** (up to 1551 from 1449) to AFF staff compared to the same quarter in the previous year.

Enquiries were down compared to the previous quarter, but this follows the trend of previous years when the summer months have traditionally been quieter. This is attributed to the traditional Army summer stand-down of units and the high mobility of Army families during this time.

In comparison with the same period the previous year, several areas saw significant increases in the number of enquiries received; Additional Needs 15%, Family Life 8%, Health 24%, Housing 43% and Marriage Breakdown 39%. Perhaps surprisingly given current economic conditions, enquiries regarding Money and Employment both fell by 33% and 67% respectively. Education enquiries were also down this quarter compared to the previous quarter and year but early indications are that the numbers for the following quarter are indeed increasing again.

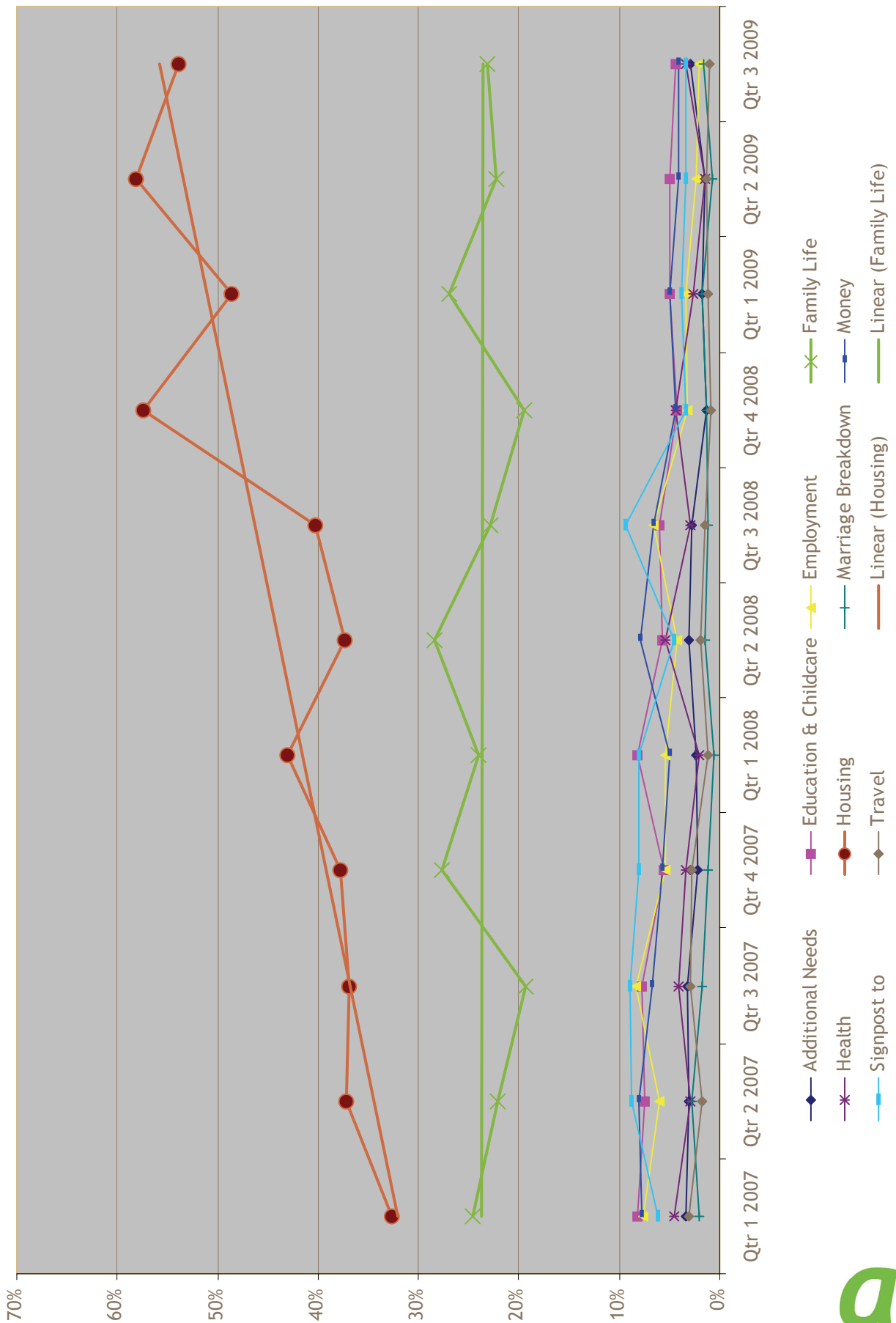
trends

Trends since January 2007 illustrate the fluctuations in the number of contacts to AFF for most issues. Housing enquiries continue to plot a steady increase in their number whilst Family Life and other issues are plotting a steady line in the main.

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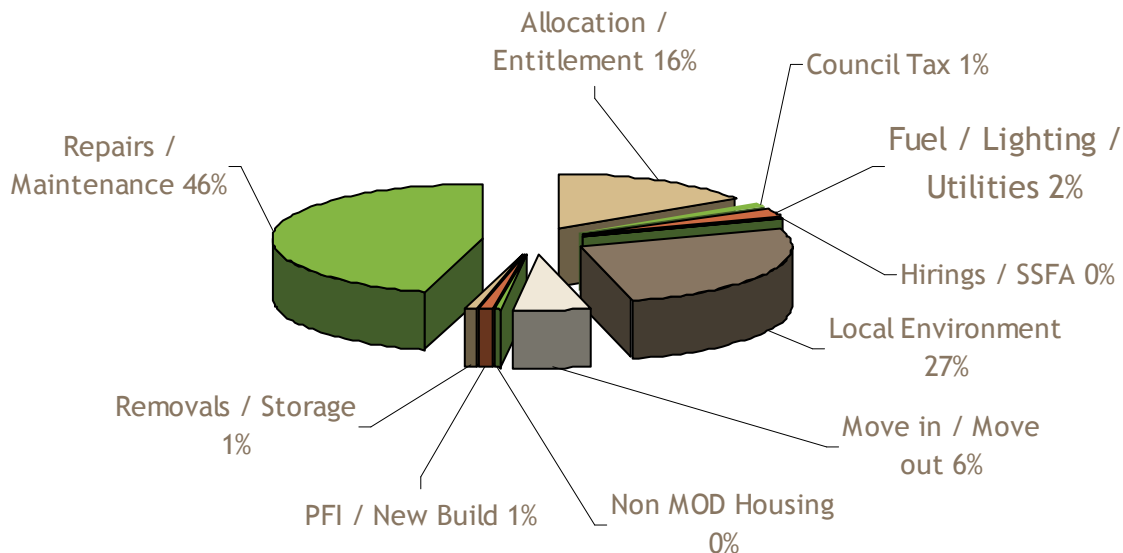
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housing (54% of all enquiries)



Housing continues to be a major source of concern and worry for Army families throughout the world. Although down by 41% from the previous quarter, the number of repair related issues reported to AFF had increased by 106% in comparison to the previous year. Seasonally the drop in the number of enquiries this quarter is reflected in previous year's statistics and is thought to be due to the high number of moves during this period and the summer stand-down.

Despite the optimism surrounding the introduction of handheld PDAs for contractors use, many families are still reporting issues with subsequent appointments, multi trade repairs and missed appointments.

“Our cooker was condemned and cut off as a result of gas safety inspection seven days ago. We’ve heard nothing from MHS about a new cooker being installed and don’t know who to contact”

“Serving female soldier whose SFA was infested with ants is very angry at two missed appointments by Mitie Pest Control. Feels that her integrity has been called into question as Mitie say they did call”

The quality of repairs being completed is also a regular feature in families’ complaints:

“I complained to MHS about the standard of work on our quarter. They were very nice on the phone but have done nothing; you never hear back from them to hear the outcome. What is the point of complaining? We want some action and not just words”

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Thanks to recent publicity, more and more families are now claiming the 50% Council Tax discount on their own property while they are living in SFA. This has been especially positive in Wales where the Welsh Assembly has recently issued guidance to Local Authorities agreeing that this is now available for all military personnel with a property in Wales but who are residing elsewhere in SFA. Sadly, however, not all Local Authorities in England and Wales are aware of this concession and so the number of families seeking assistance from AFF has risen. The AFF Housing specialist has provided guidance to families on how to claim the 50% discount and has been successful in the majority of cases on appeal.

AFF is receiving an increasing number of enquiries about a reduction in Council Tax for a personal residence when the serving soldier is away on deployment. Families are finding it difficult to obtain consistent advice and Regimental Admin Offices are sometimes not aware of the correct procedures for obtaining a rebate.

Disappointingly enquiries regarding allocation and entitlement were frequent during this quarter, but perhaps not surprising given the number of moves that occur during the summer period. The issue of sufficient staff numbers to cope with the volume of work has been raised with DE. AFF was assured that plans are in place for next summer.

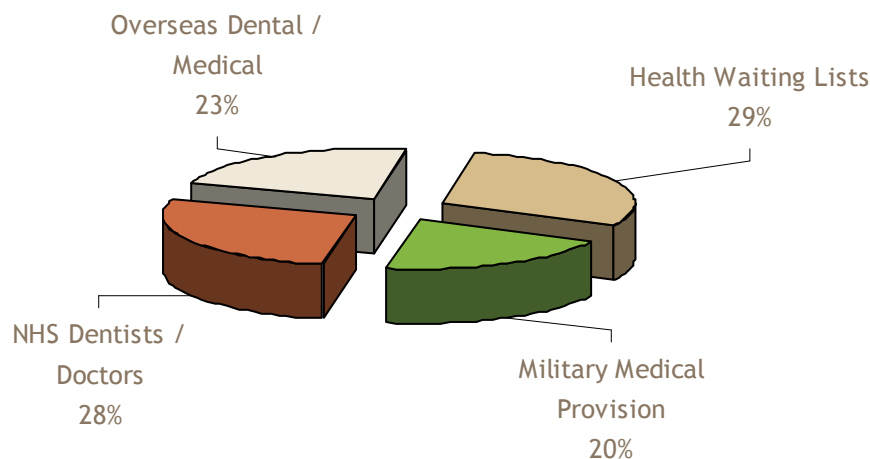
“We were really frustrated with the service provided by Warminster HIC. Our paperwork was faxed but not received. After several conversations and unreturned calls from the HIC, I finally re-faxed our 1132. On advice from AFF, I followed up with a phone call to check they had actually got it”

Moving house was not only an issue for families in the UK. AFF Cyprus was contacted by a spouse who was unhappy with the condition of her goods on arrival in Cyprus. The TV was badly packed in the UK with only one sheet of bubble wrap. She was particularly annoyed with the attitude of White & Co employees when she called to complain as she was told to claim on her insurance. As she rightly pointed out:

“that was not the point. I am indeed insured and I would claim, but it was the fact that they didn't care and it could have been irreplaceable belongings that were damaged; their lack of care was the problem. Moving is stressful enough without the added issues of moving from another country, looking forward to having your personal belongings around you only to find an uncaring company adding to the stress”

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health
(3% of all enquiries)



Health was one of the few categories to see an actual increase in the number of enquiries received in comparison to both the previous quarter and same quarter in the previous year. (44% and 24% respectively).

Perhaps due to the publicity surrounding the Service Personnel Command Paper, Service personnel and their families are reporting difficulties to AFF with NHS waiting lists, in particular for IVF treatment. Enquiries are being collated and will be passed to the SPCP team in MOD for consideration. Many of the issues seem to be down to the ‘postcode lottery’ of different criteria for and delivery of treatment throughout the UK.

“We had to go to the bottom of the queue for IVF treatment on posting and the new PCT does not offer the same care. We have appealed successfully however, we want this issue highlighted to other families so that the same thing does not happen to them.”

Other families have highlighted the difficulties that they have faced when returning from overseas where they may have been undergoing assisted conception treatment, but they cannot continue with that treatment once back in the UK. The guidance to assignment authorities regarding mobility and posting while undergoing assisted conception treatment recently issued by the MOD may help families in these circumstances, but it is vital that all personnel are aware of it.

“We feel penalised because we can’t continue with our IVF treatment on posting back to the UK”

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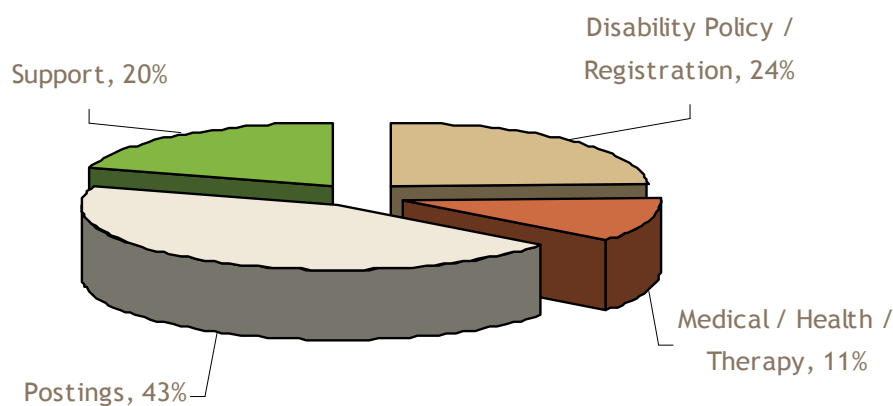
Increasingly families returning to the UK from overseas are reporting to us their frustrations that they are not able to use the military provided medical and dental centres in many garrisons. This is particularly frustrating for those families who live in rural locations and do not drive. Families had hoped that the option for them to use MOD medical and dental centres may come out of the work of the SPCP.

However, it is clear that at a time of high operational tempo, medical and dental facilities staff's priority is to ensure that troops are fit to fight within theatre. This in turn has led to a shortage of personnel to staff medical and dental centres both in the UK and overseas. Without a considerable increase in resources it is not feasible for families to use service medical and dental centres at the present time.

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aff

additional needs
(3% of all enquiries)

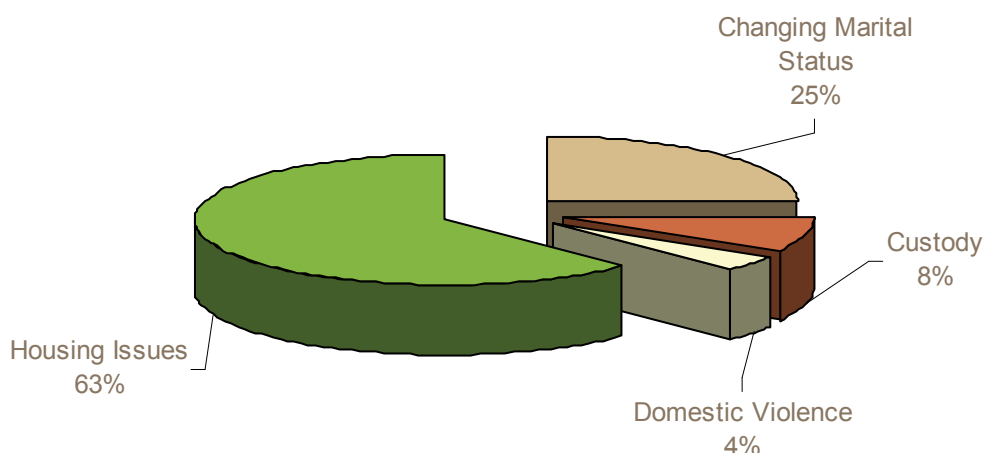


The Additional Needs category saw an increase of 31% in enquiries on the previous quarter and 15% on the same quarter in the previous year. AFF has worked hard, along with the MOD to highlight a number of policy changes in this area and also the importance of registering a family member with additional needs, dispelling some of the concerns that registration may adversely affect the serving soldier's career.

However, AFF is still receiving a number of enquiries from families who are unsure about how to register a family member with additional needs - whether that is a spouse or a child. Families are given as much information as possible and are advised to contact their Unit Welfare Officer or local Army Welfare Service to discuss in detail.

Families are also approaching us on posting having been offered unsuitable housing or where, having found a suitable SFA, they are having difficulties getting adaptations completed. It is critical that families are made aware by their HIC of the additional needs contact within the HIC and that families are honest with the HIC as to their requirements when making applications. Where there is good communication, families report to us that their moves go well, they have a suitable property allocated and they are able to arrange adaptations quickly.

marriage breakdown (2% of all enquiries)



Worryingly this category saw an increase in enquiries of 32% compared to the previous quarter and a 39% increase compared to the same quarter in the previous year. Although the actual number of enquiries may be deemed small, AFF does not consider itself the primary agency to be dealing with issues relating to separation and divorce and frequently signpost spouses to other, better qualified agencies for support so any increase in enquiries is important.

Spouses who are separating are frequently confused as to their rights regarding subsequent housing (ie where they are entitled to move to and what assistance they will receive on moving). Families living overseas also report concerns as to the effect on their children who are not only dealing with the breakdown of their parent's marriage but also with a change in home and school.

Spouses also report issues with the 'cooling-off' period and the 93 day rule for vacating SFA. Many spouses are unaware of when their 93 days has started as the soldier does not always inform their estranged spouse when they change their status on JPA, even though unit welfare offices should be involved in this process.

“Client concerned as her serving spouse posted away from SFA earlier in the year but he has now decided that the marriage is over. Client is struggling to come to terms with this and understanding the ‘93 days rule’ once marital status is changed”

“Wife recently separated feels that she is being pushed to sign over and then leave the quarter before her 93 days are up. She feels panicked as the separation was not her choice and there are two children involved”

AFF feels that the soldier should not be absolved of all financial responsibility for accommodation as is currently the case with SFA. Each case should be looked at individually and where possible the soldier and the estranged spouse should be helped to come to an arrangement for SFA rent and bills. By making the spouse an irregular occupant and invoicing for rent (which is above that paid by the service person), an unfair weight is placed on the spouse in an already difficult period.