



# **Suffolk Family Carers Military Families in Stress project**

A project evaluation by Healthwatch  
Suffolk

# Contents

<b>1.</b>	Foreword by Lt Col Robbie Silk MBE	Page 3
<b>2.</b>	Introduction	Page 6
<b>3.</b>	The project - Facts and figures	Page 12
<b>4.</b>	Methodology	Page 18
<b>5.</b>	Findings	Page 19
<b>6.</b>	Conclusions	Page 34

# 1. Foreword

## Lt Col Robbie Silk MBE (Station Staff Officer, Wattisham Flying Station)

As we emerge from the COVID-19 lockdown, into the so called 'new-normal' way of life, it certainly is time for us all to reflect on how people have coped, particularly those who need help and support - because caring for people matters!

Caring comes in many forms, ranging from simple encouragement to full physical support, and of course this also includes mental health issues, which are often unseen, but equally important. From my own experience of service life with the Armed Forces, our people and their wider families are not immune from needing help, and here Suffolk Family Carers (SFC) have continued to provide significant help to the service community.

Having served in the Army, mostly abroad for many years with the Special Investigation Branch (SIB), and then returned to Suffolk, where I was born, I had not previously encountered the Suffolk Family Carers organisation. However, now that the Armed Services are mainly UK-based and in my present role as Station Staff Officer at Wattisham Flying Station, I soon realised there was a pressing need to support the service community.

Here, SFC quickly stepped into the void at Wattisham, launching their service on 14th February 2019 at our Community Centre. Thereafter on 4th March 2019, SFC held an Awareness Evening to introduce the project to our families, explaining the role of carers.

The need was such that support to families started immediately and has continued since



then. In June 2019, SFC provided funding for Youth and Adult Mental Health First Aid training at Wattisham and Hadleigh; all places were fully booked. On the 22nd August 2019, SFC attended a large Families Day at Wattisham in their Mobile Camper Van, which further informed our families of their services.

It is pleasing to see that SFC have continued to work with our families and since lockdown their support has continued via telephone and internet. I am delighted that the Suffolk Armed Forces Community Covenant has recently approved significant funding for SFC, which will ensure their continued support to the military community in the county.

To date it has been refreshing to witness first-hand the work and support that has been provided by SFC as the 'need' is clear. When I first joined up and for most of my service, there was no such support to our families; it was frowned upon to have 'problems' and even worse to 'share' them!

From my own perspective, I really do appreciate the need for caring support, having been in various situations of late, where I became the carer for my wider family and sadly lost my father-in-law to COVID-19. So, nobody is immune from having to care



...it has been refreshing to witness first-hand the work and support that has been provided by SFC...


**...the 'need' is clear.**

for others, although in my case, I just wished that SFC could have done my ironing!

After some 53 years-service to the MoD, I am due to retire at the end of August 2020 and I do so in a buoyant mood, having met some very able and caring people, which of course, includes Suffolk Family Carers, whose valuable work I will endeavour to continue to support.

I am not leaving the county, but will continue to live in Grundisburgh and am poised to assume the role of Chairman of the Suffolk Committee of the Army Benevolent Fund, The Soldiers' Charity. I wish Suffolk Family Carers and all who support them the very best of fortune and long may their valuable work continue.





The project aims to support serving forces personnel, based in Suffolk, to overcome the stresses a caring role can bring.

## 2. Introduction

The Suffolk Family Carers 'Families in Stress / Military Families Project' (hereafter referred to as the Military Families Project) aims to support serving forces personnel, based in Suffolk, to overcome the stresses a caring role can bring. Specifically, the project offers a designated worker who provides immediate, solution focussed and resolution-based support to families.

Funding for the project was secured through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund (Families in Stress) for two years. Suffolk Family Carers have engaged Healthwatch Suffolk to undertake an independent evaluation of the service.

This report presents the findings of the Healthwatch Suffolk evaluation. Healthwatch Suffolk would like to thank all participants for their contributions, time and openness in discussing their personal situations and caring roles.

### The National Context

#### *Modernisation of Armed Forces*

Recently published figures from the Ministry of Defence (MoD)<sup>1</sup> indicate the total strength of the full-time UK Armed Forces (trained and untrained) at 1 April 2020 was just under 155,000. Most personnel were within the Army (56%) with the remainder being equally split between the Royal Navy/Royal Marines and the Royal Air Force (RAF).

As at 1 April 2020, all branches of the UK Armed Forces were below the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) target for trained personnel in 2020. The full-time trained strength of the UK Armed Forces was 132,451, which is a shortfall of 11,749 (8%) on the SDSR target.

Analysis of data over the last 20 years, shows that both inflow (recruitment) and outflow (retention) of personnel to the Armed Forces has decreased. During this period inflow has only exceeded outflow on five separate occasions. Recruitment and retention within

the Armed Forces is clearly an issue.

The MoD-commissioned review 'Living in our shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces Families' highlights one of the key reasons service personnel give for leaving the Armed forces is the pressures and unique stresses that military life can place on them and their families. Whilst Military families face many of the same challenges that civilian families face, they also have to cope with:

- lengthy periods spent apart as a result of deployments;
- undertaking frequent moves and relocations which entail disruptions in children's education, health care and spousal/partner employment;
- tensions in balancing family life with the demands of service life where 'duty' always comes first, and operational effectiveness is the main priority.

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<sup>1</sup>UK Armed Forces Quarterly Service Personnel Statistics.

In 2016, the MoD published its UK Armed Forces Families Strategy in which it outlined its approach to supporting military families. The underpinning vision of the strategy is:

*'Resilient, empowered, thriving service families, who are treated fairly, have increased choice, and who are valued by the Nation.'*

**- Armed Forces Families Strategy (2016)**

and an understanding that:

*"our personnel can only fully deliver their Defence task if they have the support of their families as well as the confidence that their loved ones will be able to access the right support when required. So doing more to listen, talk to and empower*

*those families is vital if we are to continue attracting and retaining capable and motivated Service personnel.'*

The MoD have therefore made a commitment, through the strategy, to address the issues that lead to military families considering the need to leave service earlier than might have otherwise been the case. Although not specifically mentioned, understanding the needs of serving family carers, and the support they may need, clearly fits within the scope and remit of this strategy.



“When my wife first became ill, the level of understanding or, I'll be honest with you, the level of tolerance of mental health while in the military was nowhere near what it is today. People didn't like that sort of bother. It was very much frowned upon. And even more so for partners, they weren't particularly supportive.” - Carer

“The military was always very opposed to ever changing or bending towards society, but now it has to, otherwise people don't stay or they don't join - now they've got a whole generation that was brought up completely different than what we were, and now there

are a lot of things that didn't even exist are now completely accessible. I think society is what it is through the marvels of whatever, but that doesn't necessarily sit that well in the old, established military mindset sometimes, but those mindsets have to change. They do. And they are changing, certainly.” - Carer

“We do have a very, very small minority of people that have been in the forces here 40 years, for example, and are very much the old-school..... and unfortunately, those people are now in high positions within the military. .... It is a fact that there is still that small stigma about mental health.” - Professional

## Family Carers

Running in tandem with the modernisation of the Armed Forces, within the national context there has also been significant work to raise the profile of family carers in general. In 2008, the National Carers Strategy set out a vision for:

*'recognising, valuing and supporting carers'* - **National Carers Strategy 2008**

The accompanying 'Carers Action Plan' contains two specific actions relating to Armed Forces personnel.

- Action 1.3 - NHS England and the Ministry of Defence will work to improve support for Armed Forces carers, in keeping with the intent of the Armed Forces Covenant, whereby service personnel and their families are not disadvantaged as a consequence of service in the Armed Forces.

NHS England will jointly raise awareness of the health-related aspects of support for carers in the Armed Forces and will make sure this work reaches relevant stakeholders at their annual Armed Forces carers conferences.

The Ministry of Defence and NHS England will continue to work together to support Armed Forces carers, particularly through the work of the Ministry of Defence on the UK Armed Forces Families Strategy and work regarding safeguarding.

The commitment to the Covenant considers adult, young adult and young carers, and acknowledges the need to best support a community that often does not have access to broader familial support. A holistic approach to

Armed Forces carers recognises the need for timely access to care and services.

- Action 2.5 - A Ministry of Defence "Defence People with a Significant Illness" project is in the process of creating policy to support both carers in the armed forces and the management overseeing them.

To understand the demographic for this, the Ministry of Defence launched an Armed Forces Carer's Survey in May 2018 and will form from this, an Armed Forces Carers working group. The results of the Carers Survey are yet to be made publicly available.



*“To be honest with you, in over 17 years [of caring for my wife with mental health conditions], I was never ever offered help..... I was a little bit gobsmacked that nobody from sort of the NHS side of things who had been dealing with my wife's treatment had ever turned around and said, “Hey, how are you getting on?” sort of thing. It was just an assumption.”* - **Carer**

The Suffolk Family Carers Military Families Project clearly contributes to both national agendas on raising the profile of family carers and improving and modernising the support made available to serving military families.



## The Local Context

### UK Armed Forces in Suffolk

It is estimated that there are around 3,600 serving members of the UK Armed Forces currently based in Suffolk. A further 220 UK Naval personnel have a registered home in Suffolk, although their working base is out of county.

In addition to the regular serving Armed Forces population there are also:

- circa 250 reservists, and
- an estimated 35,000 veterans/ex forces personnel living in the County.

There are three main UK Armed Forces bases in Suffolk.

#### Wattisham Flying Station (Mid Suffolk)

The home to the British Army's Attack Helicopter Force. There are three main Units located here: 3 and 4 Regiments Army Air Corps and 7 Aviation Support Battalion Royal



Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME).

Military families are accommodated on the housing estate just outside the main base with circa 200 families living in Hadleigh some seven miles away with serving soldiers commuting.

#### RAF Honington

This Station is the home of RAF Force Protection who are responsible for protecting the RAF at home and abroad. The Station hosts initial and further training

**Wattisham Flying Station in Mid Suffolk is home to the British Army's Apache attack helicopter force.**



for the RAF Regiment and specialist training for the RAF's entire Force Protection capability.

RAF Honington is home to three front-line RAF Regiment field squadrons and several operational and specialist units, including a specialist RAF Police Wing, and an RAF Regiment unit with responsibility for countering threats from chemical, biological and radiological hazards.

Over 1,500 Service personnel, civil servants and contractors work at RAF Honington. Military families are accommodated on the housing estate with some 40 families located in Stanton village a few miles away.

### MoD Woodbridge (Rock Barracks)

Defined by the Ministry of Defence as 'Rurally Isolated status', Rock Barracks at Sutton Heath is home to two Royal Engineer Regiments - 23 Parachute Engineers and elements of 28 Engineer Regiment – troops and families from Germany. More are due to arrive over the next 12 months. As such, support and community integration is an important aspect for these new families.

### *Carers in Suffolk and Suffolk Family*

### *Carers*

In Suffolk, there are estimated to be over 88,000 adult carers and a further 4,700 young carers (aged under 25). For many, the role of family carer is 'just something you do'.

While caring for a family member can be immensely rewarding, it can also be complicated – navigating the maze of carers rights and entitlements, filling in paperwork, organising breaks and coping with feelings about caring.

Suffolk Family Carers is a registered Suffolk based charity that has a focus on helping family carers of all ages to get the support they need to live fuller lives.

The charity has been established for over 30 years during which time they have provided information, advice and support to thousands of family carers. The support they offer includes:

- Identifying family carers and undertaking an assessment of need
- Providing information, advice and guidance (IAG) to better inform family carers



Suffolk Family Carers is a registered charity that has a focus on helping family carers to find support and to live fuller lives.



1 in 10

An estimated **88,000** people are thought to be adult family carers in Suffolk; roughly **10%** of the population.

- Providing emotional support for family carers
- Training and education in caring, wellbeing and resilience for family carers
- Training and education to professionals about mental health, wellbeing and family carers' issues
- Providing the necessary environment for family carers to access or form peer support networks
- Providing access to respite for family carers

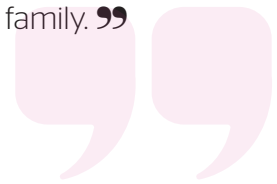
A full breakdown of the services offered by the charity can be found on its website and within its Annual Report:

**[www.suffolkfamilycarers.org](http://www.suffolkfamilycarers.org)**



“ So the main thing, I guess, was just that I needed somewhere that I could turn to, that I could at least have somebody else help me, because when you're in the thick of it, it's really difficult to know where to turn or the right places to look for help. ” - **Carer**

“ Actually I'm a carer as well but I didn't realise. It's just what we do because they're family. ”  
- **Professional**



### 3. The project - Facts & Figures

Funded through the Armed Forces Covenant fund, the Military Families Project was launched in February 2019 to support serving forces personnel, based in Suffolk, to overcome the stresses of their caring role.

The two-year funding through the Covenant Fund has enabled Suffolk Family Carers to employ a dedicated Military Families Lead whose role it has been to:

- Provide general awareness raising of family carer issues within the military community.
- Provide targeted awareness raising of family carer issues to welfare and other unit staff through the provision of specialist training.
- Provide specialist family carer Intervention work on a boundaried, time limited and solution focussed basis. Families are provided with a resolution-based plan.
- Develop and facilitate a Military Families steering group to support cross-agency working and identify collaborative working opportunities.

- Undertake carers assessments.
- Encouraging interaction with other initiatives and supporting those in armed forces families to engage/ integrate with the wider community.

The service has been developed to support the following groups of individuals:

- Single unaccompanied soldiers living in Suffolk who may be supporting a family member elsewhere in the country.
- Couples and couples with children.
- Unaccompanied soldiers, based in Suffolk, with their family living elsewhere.
- Families living in Suffolk, where a serving member of their family is living away or on deployment.

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At least **81** people were directly supported. The service included:



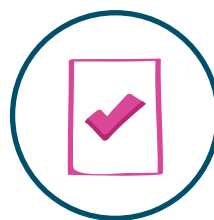
Raising awareness of carers issues within the military



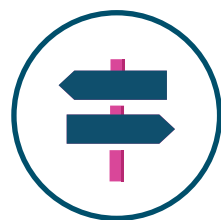
Providing support and intervention to help families cope



To create a steering group that can support cross-agency working



Carers assessments & informing people about their rights



Signposting to other support and supporting community integration





*Attendees at the project launch (14/02/2019) at Wattisham Flying Station.*

As at the end of June 2020, the work of the Military Families Project has directly benefited 81 people.

There will be many more people that may have been indirectly supported through their work. For example, one attendee at an awareness raising event may use what they learnt to support others. This figure includes:

- Eight attendees at the Mental Health First Aid training (Hadleigh HIVE, June 2019).
- Twelve attendees at the Youth Mental Health First Aid Training (Wattisham, June/July 2019).
- Twenty families supported through direct intervention work provided by the Military Families Lead.

To date the families supported through the project have fallen into three main groupings:

- Serving males supporting a spouse or partner with a mental health condition (anxiety, depression, Borderline Personality Disorder, self-

harm and suicidal tendencies, alcohol dependency).

- Parent carers (serving and spouse/partner) with children who have neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g Autism and ADHD) or physical conditions such as epilepsy or diabetes.
- Young carers (aged 5-13) supporting parents with a mental health condition. Some of these young carers may have additional needs themselves as may other siblings within the household.

In addition to the intervention work with families, a significant amount of time and effort has been given to general awareness raising of carers issues within military communities. Examples of the engagement work undertaken to date include:

- Attendance at the Military Families Project Launch event at Wattisham Community Centre (February 2019).
- Regular attendance at a coffee morning held at Hadleigh HIVE. It was following a conversation at a coffee

morning that highlighted the need for some Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Training.

- A visit to the Wattisham Childcare Centre (February 2019).
- Leaflet drop to the Wattisham Service Family Accommodation to advertise an information evening and project.
- The Visitors Day held at Wattisham base (May 2019).
- Guest Speaker at the SSAFA East Team Meeting. Suffolk Family Carers gave an overview of the project and the referral process for support (June 2019).
- Attendance at the Ipswich Armed Forces Day Event. Suffolk Family Carers had an information Stand at the event, which took place (June 2019).
- Adults Mental Health First Aid Training at the Hadleigh HIVE (June 2019).
- Youth Mental health First Aid

Training in June and July 2019 at the Wattisham Flying Station.

- Attendance at the Wattisham Flying Station Cocktail Party and Beating Retreat Ceremony. This was an opportunity to talk with current serving personnel, to learn more about their role and to inform them of the project (July 2019).
- The Families Day at Wattisham (August 2019).
- Attendance at the RAF Honington Health and Wellbeing Day (September 2019).
- Guest speaker at the Suffolk Armed Forces Covenant Board Meeting, where it was possible to share an overview of the project and its aims (October 2019).
- Attendance at the RAF Honington Station Coffee Morning and Networking held monthly prior to the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown.



*Members of the project development group come together at the Suffolk Family Carers office.*







*Suffolk Family Carers attended the Ipswich Armed Forces Day in June 2019 with an information stand.*

- Attendance at the Wellbeing Fair at Rock Barracks, Woodbridge (December 2019).
- Visited the Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds in January 2020 to discuss the potential of working together and to provide workshops to young people, and also adults, from the local Armed Forces Community. This work is currently on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic as the staff who had been engaged were furloughed. It is hoped that this work will resume as soon as possible within 2020/21.
- Attendance at the Hadleigh Armed Forces Day Steering Group. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the event was cancelled but it is hoped that it will be possible to support the planning of future events.
- Facilitation of a Mental Health and Wellbeing Workshop for Reservists and regular soldiers as part of a weekend training exercise at Wattisham Flying Station (February 2020). The workshop was very well received and all attendees engaged in the discussion and a 'Stress Container' exercise.

### **Youth Mental Health First Aid (June /July 2019)**

In June/July, the Military Families Project ran a Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) at Wattisham Flying Station and trained 12 new Youth Mental Health First Aiders. This was a direct response to a need which was identified by the Welfare Staff at Wattisham.

The course usually takes two days to complete. However, to accommodate parents who work and/or have children, on this occasion it was run over five consecutive weeks in the evening.

The course was facilitated by Suffolk Family Carers staff who are Mental Health First Aid England' approved YMHFA facilitators. Those attending included welfare staff, Wattisham Flying Station's Padre, Serving Soldiers and Wives of those serving. Feedback from the attendees of the course can be found on page 26.

### **Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) (Adults - 2 Day) June 2019**

In June, the Military Families Project ran Mental Health First Aid Training at Hadleigh Hive and trained eight new Mental Health First Aiders. This was a direct response to a need that was identified by the Army

Families Federation (AFF) worker for Suffolk, Hive staff and wives of Serving personnel during a visit to a Wednesday Morning Hive Coffee Morning.

The course (usually two days) was run across four weekdays, during school hours, to accommodate those parents who have children in school.

The course was facilitated by the Military Families Project Lead who is a 'Mental Health First Aid England'-approved facilitator. Those attending included AFF staff, Wattisham Flying Station's Padre, serving soldiers and wives of those serving.

All who attended had their own experiences of supporting a family member or colleague with a mental health condition. Feedback from the attendees of the course can be found on page 26.

### **Barriers to seeking support**

Continuous awareness raising is vital in breaking down barriers to people seeking support.

The recent review (Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the Needs of UK Armed Forces Families) commissioned by the Ministry of Defence into concerns raised by armed forces families and recommendations for change, highlighted the reticence of both Serving personnel and their partners to seek support for personal issues. This was particularly evident if access to support meant going through the Chain of Command.

Issues and concerns expressed by participants in the MoD review included:

- Fears that disclosing a problem might result in social services getting involved if there are children in the household.

- Worries that the consequences of asking for help may be worse than simply putting up with the problem.
- Service families believing that they should cope on their own and be self-sufficient.
- Scepticism that seeking help will do any good.
- Difficulties of confiding personal issues to welfare staff who may be personally known.
- Scepticism about whether welfare staff could be trusted with very personal information because of being part of the chain of command.
- Fear that disclosing personal issues will reflect negatively on the serving person and may negatively influence decisions about promotion.
- Reluctance to be seen as a 'welfare case'. The very term 'welfare' conjures up connotations of being a failure, being unable to fend for oneself, or being 'needy'.

Some of these concerns and attitudes were expressed by some of the participants in the evaluation (see examples on page 17).





“ The other thing is we do join the military, and you're very much moulded into presenting a front of who you are, which is a bit stronger than other people, resilient and all the rest of it, without not necessarily actually understanding what resilience is. ” - **Carer**

“ I think from a military perspective is military families like to just get on. Asking for help is quite a big deal to them, and I think part of this is to make this normal and to say it's not an issue. It's the same with mental health. Big work that's going on there at the moment in the military, is to say it should just be part of the conversation. You shouldn't be

embarrassed or defensive or worried that it's going to have an impact if you need help, and this is how to get it. ” - **Professional**

“ It's really difficult because sometimes, they almost become-- I don't really make much assumptions, but they almost become suspicious of help, as if it's social services, or, “Why do you want to know? Are you checking up on me?” And so it takes quite a lot to build trust. ” - **Professional**

“ Some of them, they don't want to come to welfare, because they see that as a negative. ” - **Professional**

## 4. Methodology

Information leaflets about the evaluation were distributed by the Military Families Project Lead to all families who had received direct intervention and support from the project. The leaflets requested anyone interested in taking part in the evaluation to contact the Research team at Healthwatch Suffolk.

All interviews were conducted over the telephone by a Healthwatch Suffolk researcher.

In total, four military family carers came forward for interview:

- a single unaccompanied soldier based in Suffolk but supporting family members living elsewhere in the UK
- a serving male supporting a spouse with mental health issues
- a serving male, where both he and his wife had mental health issues
- a spouse caring for her serving military husband, who also had mental health issues herself

In addition, five other individuals (referred to as 'professionals' in this analysis) involved in the provision of welfare support to military personnel, were interviewed. These included:

- A representative of the Naval Families Federation
- A serving RSM
- A member of the welfare team working at Wattisham Flying station
- A former welfare officer who helped in the initial development of the Military Families Project
- A representative of SAAFA – The Armed Forces Charity



**Participants took part in telephone interviews with a Healthwatch Suffolk Research Officer.**

A further interview was conducted with a representative from Suffolk County Council who has a specific lead for the Suffolk Armed Forces Covenant.

In order to maintain the anonymity of participants, the following terms have been used as 'shorthand' when reporting the key findings of the evaluation:

- Carer – Military family carer
- Professional - Relates to the five individuals involved in welfare support plus the representative from the County Council.

## 5.

## Findings

The primary outcomes for the Military Families project, as outlined by Suffolk Family Carers were to:

- Reduce stress for families experiencing an episode of stress or crisis
- Enhance health, wellbeing and social support to families in stress
- Improve awareness of health, wellbeing and welfare services
- Improve awareness of the needs of military families

Evidence from the interviews undertaken with military carers and welfare professionals indicates that the project has gone a considerable way to achieving these outcomes. Breaking down the barriers that prevent people from seeking support remains a challenge, however, there is still further work to do to reach out and engage with individuals in need of support.

### 5.1 - Reducing stress and enhancing wellbeing for families.

#### *Impact of caring*

The burden and stresses that caring places

on individuals was expressed by all of the military carers interviewed.

Carers highlighted the emotional stress they had experienced, the impact this had on their own mental health, their abilities to concentrate at work, and the impact caring had on being able to pursue their own interests.

*“To be honest, it was just completely draining me, and it was affecting me quite a lot because at the time as well, I was struggling with my mental health, with depression quite a bit at the time, so, yeah, because I had to work full-time and then I had to come home and care [for my wife] from as soon as I got home. It was just very draining for me for a lot of it.” - Carer*

*“It wasn't good for [name removed] really because of the fact that she had a physical disability which I had to care for. She also had some mental health issues at the time as well, so both being depressed, it kind of was-- it kind of just ended up going into a downward spiral for us.” - Carer*



**I've actually been downgraded with mental health and referred to something called DCMH, which is the mental health hospital for the military...** Just trying to support my family remotely, not just emotionally, financially. I get phone calls at three or four o'clock in the morning from my family about what's happening back at home and feeling like I'm so isolated here and that I can't support them.



Participants and professionals highlighted the negative impact of having caring responsibilities on people's mental health and wellbeing. Carers highlighted the emotional stress they had experienced and the impact this had on their performance at work and other aspects of their daily lives.





“It is really nice to kind of get my head back into a better space than it was before.”

“I joined when, I think, I was about 20.....I, knew exactly what I wanted to do. And so I volunteered for every possible opportunity to go overseas, and I spent a long time in Northern Ireland. For me, that was the main sort of operational theatre at the time that I was involved in, and I absolutely adored it and didn't want do anything else. And I was always very much sort of totally obsessed with my job. So yeah, it was-- to then not to be able to deploy especially when things like Afghanistan came along and Iraq and do all the things I joined up to do, yeah, I'd say I struggled. I did struggle for a while because you kind of lose your way, I lost my own identity for a little while.” -

**Carer**

“It is hard, when you got somebody suffering from mental health condition because they struggle over those phases [being left during deployments]. And so it is, from my perspective, quite difficult for me to concentrate on a lot of the stuff I was doing because I'll be quite often worrying about how my wife was and how my daughter was.” - **Carer**

“How can I explain it, so the person is very contentious in work and very good at what they do. You haven't actually impacted that too much. It was more of a-- the work was more of a coping mechanism. The work was a hide away things, so it hadn't impacted that, but it's certainly impacted their overall mental health. Not to the point of actually needing anything, any dramatic intervention, but it just affected their

whole, kind of, spirit and being, really. And they were very heavy, very weighed down in a hopeless situation.” - **Professional**

## Reducing stress for individuals

All of the carers, without exception, described how the interventions from the Military Families Project Lead had helped improve their own mental health and wellbeing and their ability to cope with their caring role. While some professionals were also able to provide anecdotal evidence of the impact the project had had on individuals, most highlighted that once they had referred a case to Suffolk Family Carers they had little ongoing involvement with the family and therefore were unable to comment.

In the few cases where professionals did have some personal insight into the impact the service had made on carers, they reported this to have been a positive experience.

“Oh, yes, definitely. Me especially, I would say my mental health's in a lot better place than it was. Just having a person to talk to has really helped. And then, as well for my wife, I think having [the Military Families Project Lead] around every now and again just to have someone to be able to set a chapter as well has helped her. And as well as just things like, she'll give us friendly advice. Let's say we're trying to do something at home and she'll go, "I want you to try this." And it's just something that's always helped us. A lot of time just made things a little bit easier, rather than us struggling.” - **Carer**

“In terms of for me, it's helped massively just as I say, to be able to offload on somebody impartial. She's really great. She's really understanding. And yeah, in terms of my mental health, it definitely



**A lot of the other things I'm involved in are talking about my wife and our situation together but this is about some time for me.**

As much as the conversation does talk about marriage it does talk a lot about me as well and how I'm feeling and stuff like that and that's nice to hear because like I said I've been going to appointments for 20 years now. Of course, I was always trying to sort of get as much treatment for my wife as possible. It's in everybody's best interest. But it is nice to sort of sit back and tell somebody how you are feeling.

*helps. Even right from the first point of when we weren't too sure there was going to be anything that they could do. Just the fact that I felt like we were doing something. And the fact that we were meeting up meant that- even that in itself was doing something, the fact that I was speaking to somebody about it. It is really nice to kind of get my head back into a better space than it was before. ” - Carer*

*“ The family I know who [the project] has supported, they feel very well supported and feel like [the Project Lead] has always been there for them. And even through this situation, she's been on the end of the phone, and they can't praise her enough. ” - Professional*

*“ I can't say it from when they've gone to the team what's happened afterwards because we don't have like a welfare facility really in the reserves. But when I've spoken to one or two that do come up to me - we're more friends than we are sort of like work colleagues - they have felt better but don't really talk about it that much. They have felt better. ” - Professional*

One professional reported that they had received some negative feedback about the service from one family. They did, however, recognise that a number of factors may lead to a family being disappointed in the response received from the project. This included there being a mismatch between the expectations of the individual carer and the service being offered by the project, or if the family felt they were being continually handed off between agencies without anyone addressing their issues.

*“ I've had families who felt well supported. I've also spoken to a family who felt it was a total waste of time, and that nothing was followed up, and they didn't receive the help and support they thought they would. ” - Professional*

*“ Some people have very high expectations, and some people expect you to solve all their problems, where sometimes you've got to engage and help to solve your own problems with the support of others. ” - Professional*

*“So if I signpost to Suffolk Family Carers. If Suffolk Family Carers then signpost to somewhere else, families get fed up with that. ‘Oh you’ve pushed me to that person, to that person. They’re going to send me to there. I’m not getting anywhere. I’ll give up’. Sometimes people feel they’re being pushed from pillar to post and nothing changes.”* - **Professional**

Feedback from Suffolk Family Carers highlighted similar issues:

*“Sometimes people expect us to wave a magic wand to sort everything and the project is about supporting family carers, whilst empowering them to make decisions to help themselves and also build resilience and confidence. The project is very much about signposting to different agencies and there is some expectation that the family carer needs to take some responsibility in contacting other avenues of support, rather than us doing everything for them.”* - **Military Families Lead**

*“I’ve had family carers referred where a major stress that was impacting their caring role is ‘debt’. I recommended that they contact the CAB Debt Advice Team etc. gave them the numbers for various debt advice and offered to support then with the initial phone call and their response is ‘no its fine, I will do it’ and when you check in with them again, they haven’t done it.”* - **Military Families Lead**

Effective communication is crucial to managing people’s expectations of the service. To this end, the project lead has been engaged in regular communication with the Unit Welfare Officers and also the wider military community to help people understand the scope of the project and the type of support they could access.

## **Improving operational effectiveness**

While many of the professionals interviewed were unable to comment on the direct impact of the service on individual families, they were able to outline the positive impact they felt the Military Families Project had on improving overall operational effectiveness. This included by reducing stress related sickness levels and helping military carers to be confident in their work without the worries of homelife distracting them.

*“Obviously, you’ve got somebody who is supported with something which can be quite a heavy sort of burden to bear as such. You’ve got, I would say, reduced kind of sickness, reduced mental health, reduced stress. All of those things. So basically being able to function in service better and more adequately.”* - **Professional**

*“So someone to come into their home that can provide some reassurance, some advice and guidance and support is greatly beneficial. Because it makes the home life a lot easier. It means that the soldiers can hopefully go to work with confidence that their home is being looked after, their family members are being looked after if they need it. So it means that overall that our operational effectiveness is maintained because we’re not having to lose people, because their children need looking after because either their mother can’t look after them or vice versa. So the benefits are great, and it just comes down to operational effectiveness.”* - **Professional**

*“I can think of one example, actually, whose wife was suffering from depression, which meant that the father was the carer for the children, and also for the mother, which means, then, that his worked had to change because of his own family circumstances. But he’s*

*also in a role, where, he is expected to deploy. He's in a unit which is held at high readiness, which means that sometimes there isn't the flexibility of being able to be there all the time. So having that support from the Project Lead and the Military Families Project means that he can be more confident. And he was certainly one who was-- I think once the family started receiving the support, he was a lot more happier because he felt like that he wasn't the only one trying to help with it. ” - Professional*

## 5.2 - Awareness raising

Raising awareness of the needs of carers within the military has been a key objective of the project. As such, a considerable amount of the Project Lead's time over the last two years has been focussed on engagement events.

The project has sought to engage as many people as possible from all ranks (including partners and spouses) at numerous events and meetings such as regular coffee mornings at Hadleigh HIVE and large scale events like the Family Fun day at Wattisham Flying Station.

The aim has been to share information about the project and to help people recognise, identify and address the needs of carers (see the full list of engagement activity on page eight).

### *Enhancing Welfare Officers knowledge*

Through their association with Suffolk Family Carers and the Military Families Project Lead, professionals recognised that the project had enhanced their own understanding of carers issues, and their ability to identify carers in need of support.

*“ I think actually, by knowing about this project, that I'm aware of, kind of obviously what a family carer is. It's also helped in my identification of carers. So it's enhanced my practice as well and made me quicker to identifying what that looks like. ” - Professional*

*“ The thing I think we all thought was we didn't realise how far Suffolk Family Carers go. So for all of us, we sort of thought it really was if you looked after someone disabled or someone with a really long-term illness. And obviously they go on a much wider path than that. I'm ashamed to say I literally did think that it was just about people with really big caring roles. I didn't know any different. So I have learned a huge amount. ” - Professional*

*“ I had a warrant officers and senior NCOs study date, for a weekend actually for all of the reserves. And I asked for the Suffolk Family Carers to come present, for a good couple of hours it was, and it was talking about mental health and how the little things sort of build-up and etc., and also what they can offer etc. And I was just looking from afar from it and there was about six of my soldiers. And soldiers actually that are very old in their views about mental health. And they went and chatted to the project lead afterwards. And it really did not only change their mind but sort of-- I really do feel that it brought an awareness to mental health and also what services are available. ” - Professional*

### *Enhancing wider community knowledge*

Professionals also recognised the benefits that the project offered to the wider military community. The Adult and Youth Mental Health First Aid Training delivered by the Military Families Project Lead was mentioned by several of the participants



in the evaluation. They commented on the preventative benefits this training had offered the military community as a whole.

“ I've dealt with a lot of families who have-- they have a number of challenges whether that was while they're at [inaudible] or whether they're at home. Troublesome children perhaps, just the normal daily challenges of bringing up children. If they have those tools that they could either-- they could look out for those signs symptoms that either their partner, their children, friends, etc.- - at least it would give them the tools to try and look after themselves better and their friends. And, also, it would give the partner, the serving person, whilst deployed, that peace of mind really that back home is kind of looked after a bit better. ” - **Professional**

“ You can't count how many people they've supported because just by delivering the mental health awareness, it makes people think of strategies as to how to cope at home, which means that they then don't go on to ask for further support, so, yeah, it's a difficult one. But yes, I have heard very good reports about both of those mental health awareness sessions. ” - **Professional**

“ I wanted the spouses to have the opportunity to do the mental health first aid training because they could also be affected by the time being in an isolated location. They have their own sort of challenges that the service personnel have to deal with. But they don't necessarily have the opportunity to receive any sort of awareness training. And so by part, it's being able to be qualified as mental health first-aiders. They could also perhaps look out for symptoms in either their partners or friends or where they work, etc. So I thought that that would be beneficial to them and the community. ” -

**Professional**

“ One of the questions was what is our top three risks within sort of health. And the top one is still mental health. So even though we've done a lot of training, it's maintaining that level of understanding of encouraging people to talk about mental health, etc. So I think from the level of support that I've certainly got from the families project is certainly-- the largest proportion is that mental health support and the training that we can give to our service people. ” - **Professional**



Feedback about the Adult and Youth Mental Health First Aid Training delivered by the project lead was positive. Several people commented on the preventative benefits this training had offered the military community as a whole.



### **Feedback from the Youth Mental Health First Aid training**

*“ I came on the course because I needed advice for my daughter, this has helped me to understand her better .”*

*“ Very good course, instructors are excellent and this course has been helpful to me as I have learned a lot, thank you .”*

*“ Very well presented from all the instructors, I really enjoyed the course. My knowledge has definitely increased about the subject, thank you .”*

*“ A fantastic course really came away feeling so much more confident, Gained lots of new knowledge but most importantly feel like I would give any situation a go. ”*

### **Feedback from the Adult Mental Health First Aid training**

*“ Greater understanding of mental health, including my own. ”*

*“ Really interesting and has improved my knowledge of mental health. ”*

*“ Very insightful and a very in-depth and detailed course. ”*

*“ Has helped with my understanding as well as improving my patience when giving help to others. ”*

*“ Inspiring!!! ”*

*“ Eye-opening in a positive way. Increased belief in recovery. ”*



## Engagement events as a means to reaching carers

In addition to raising awareness, the Mental Health First Aid Training has been a significant means of reaching out to carers in need. This is evidenced within the feedback from three of the four carers interviewed, who had used this opportunity to make themselves and their situation known to the Military Families lead and to ask for help.

*“I found a course about Mental Health and I spoke to the project lead after the session.... I've gone to quite a few meetings since. I have really enjoyed it and it has helped to get our confidence back.” - Carer*

*“She helped us get onto the Youth Mental Health First Aid course. And as much as that was a youth one, it still helped both of us sort of understand more about our mental health. The sort of the signs and symptoms and how we can deal with it and how we can help each other sort of with it as well.” - Carer*

*“When we have those face-to-face, either the coffee morning or during the training sessions, the project lead has been able to identify the individuals who may or want the support from her.” - Professional*

*“I know there were a couple of soldiers after that [the training] that actually stayed behind who want to work with her.” - Professional*

## 5.3 - Other benefits of the project

In addition to the primary outcomes outlined in the grant application for the project, there are several additional benefits that interviewees identified.

## Offers something unique

There was general agreement amongst both carers and professionals that the Suffolk Family Carer offer is unique and provides something different to the mix of support already on offer to military families.

*“I'm quietly confident that there isn't anything like that internally to the military. To be clear, I went down the medical route for myself and my mental health, but there's nobody with this level of understanding [of what it is like to be a carer] within that military circle.” - Carer*

*“Yeah, I mean, that's what people need, especially in the military. They need something completely different, from a different sort of angle, to vent through and stuff like that.” - Carer*

*“I think there's still many people out there that would benefit from liaising with Suffolk Family Carers, even if it's just like me, just somebody to offload on, somebody who can signpost you and give you that impartial, unjudgmental ear to listen to. That, in itself, without physically being able to help, anything like that, is huge, and that's what I think, at the moment, is a big gap in the welfare support system that's currently in place to help the military.” - Carer*

*“So we kind of work together to have a kind of holistic approach to helping that person. And that's kind of the bit that was missing before.” - Professional*

*“I started seeing Suffolk Family Carers as well and it was a different sort of thing. It wasn't as intense [as counselling] but it was really sort of beneficial to sort of speak to somebody, and we talk.” - Carer*

*“It's a service that we use, and we're using more and more. So if that got took away, there is nothing out there that gives the same service.” - Professional*

*“So for me personally this has absolutely bridged a gap. There was nothing. We do have a welfare warrant officer, but he's only just been appointed and it's not his first job, it's his secondary job. And he goes off and does a training course, but it's very much been a basic figure what I mean, and it's nothing sort of intense on this subject.” - Professional*

*“And it's quite a kind of niche thing, isn't it? And very few people understand the kind of complexity and the difficulties that kind of role brings.” - Professional*

One of the key elements that people identified as being distinctive to the project is the way it combines both an understanding of carers issues and the unique pressures that military life can place on individuals and families. It was considered that the service does this in a way that no other service presently offers.

*“It's one thing being a carer, but when you've got the kind of military aspects on it, that's another thing altogether, isn't it? .... There isn't another service quite like that.” - Professional*

*“A carer is a carer but the context very much matters. I would say, yeah, it's imperative that somebody, if they're going to make a success of that service, they would need to have that kind of knowledge and understanding of the particular complexities and trials and tribulations faced by military families. I think that's a definite.” - Professional*

*“If you've got a team with a good understanding of how military families work, how military life is, the differences*

*between a normal nine-to-five job, nine-to-five family, compared to the military family, then-- it is more beneficial to have someone with that knowledge than doing a normal referral because sometimes people just don't even know what military families are about.” - Professional*

*“[The Military Family Lead] is really good with that.....in the sense she would sort of talk to me about if I'm going away and then she'll try and arrange to see [name removed] while I'm away. So it just sort of means that [name removed] not going to be sitting at home alone sort of all the time. It means she's got people come and see her.” - Carer*

*“You've got a caring role. But you've got, also, the fact that you're faced with things like deployment, moving around frequently, and that puts a whole new spin on being a carer because that's an added pressure.” - Professional*

For carers, in particular, the opportunity to speak to someone outside of work, but who had some understanding of military life, was crucial. Having some knowledge of military life helped carers form a trusted relationship with the project lead and enabled them to talk openly about their personal circumstances.

Comments made by some of the participants highlighted their concerns about disclosing personal issues at work and underlined the importance that the project remains independent of the military.

*“For me being in the military, she definitely offers something different because she's someone that I can go to and talk about work to, but she's not involved with work at all.” - Carer*

*“She has an understanding and it means that I can talk to her about stuff*

*and I don't have to worry about it getting back at work at all. ” - Carer*

*“ Somebody who's external to work, and also that's external to family, somebody who's just completely impartial and non-judgmental. ” - Carer*

*“ When it comes to this, quite honestly, the last person I would really want to speak to would be somebody from military background. Yes, there is a certain degree of- if you understand that military life can be complicated. ” - Carer*

*“ I've spoken to people before and I've thought, really, I don't think this is going to work. Something doesn't feel right. And it's not the fact that somebody's trying to force their own understanding on the situation. It's just that normal thing between human beings. I think just whether you relate to the individual or not. Have you got the rapport with that individual to extract what might be painful sort of thought processes? Something like that. But yeah, I think- yeah. It is important. And certainly, I think that's why in that case why it's good that she's not from a totally military background. ” - Carer*

*“ It's very difficult to speak to somebody who doesn't, necessarily, understand or nuances of being in the military. ” - Carer*

*“ And I think for families is when we encourage them to open up and then talk to somebody who's got that awareness and understanding and talks the lingo. And that breaks down a lot of barriers. ” - Professional*

## Speed of response

Another benefit identified about the service was the speed of response and the fact that

the project is linked to a local organisation. This means that the service was easily accessible for personnel within the local bases.

*“ If we can talk direct with the supporting agency, then that just means, it cuts out the middle man. And I wouldn't say it makes our Army Welfare Service redundant, but .....I'm not going to sit around and wait for three weeks on the hope that someone will pick up the case. I don't want to wait three weeks. I would still have to inform the Army Welfare Service because they might still be able to support the family but if that support is being provided already by an external agency and they don't need any other sort of assistance from Army Welfare Service, then that's great. ” - Professional*

*“ The fact that there was an organisation that was right on our doorstep that could provide support and training to us, that would be great to have a local organisation involved with the camp. ” - Professional*

*“ We would never just leave a family. We would never just say, "Oh no, we can't help you with that". We would have gone into the civilian side of things and probably found Family Carers and gone to them for advice or support.....but now we can signpost much quicker if someone identified with the criteria that obviously Suffolk Family Carers put out there which is a large amount of issues that they can help with.... So it certainly would speed up that process. ” - Professional*

*“ So if I was able to go direct to a service provider in order to get that support it reduces the time that the service person would have to wait for that support. ” - Professional*



## 5.4 - Further work and future developments

While the project has both provided evidence of the need for carer support within the military and made considerable steps towards achieving its planned outcomes, there is still much work to do to help people overcome barriers to seeking support.

In addition to the wider barriers outlined previously (see page 16), two further issues were identified as preventing people from seeking support:

### 1. People often don't recognise themselves as being a carer and therefore do not see the project as having relevance to them.

To address this, Suffolk Family Carers has undertaken regular engagement and awareness raising activity. Further events and mental health training opportunities, placed on hold during the COVID-19 lockdown, will now take place later in 2020/21.

### 2. The frequent moves and relocations that characterise military life mean that carers are reluctant to become involved with local services, only to find there is nothing similar in their new posting.

To address this, Suffolk Family Carers has

been engaging on a national level to raise the profile of their work, and to share their learning with other organisations who may wish to provide similar services in other counties.

*“For one person in particular, that was a really hard-to-reach kind of person. And getting them to, sort of acknowledge that they were actually in a caring role because it becomes sort of everyday life, doesn't it?” - Professional*

*“I think a lot of people don't see themselves as the carer. I think a lot of people think how I did, initially, that you're not really a carer unless there's something major. I think a lot of times, people just get on with things, and they just take it that's their life. And what we say in the army is, "Just crack on with it", and get on..” - Professional*


*“For one person in particular, that was a really hard-to-reach kind of person. And getting them to, sort of acknowledge that they were actually in a caring role because it become sort of everyday life, doesn't it?” - Professional*

*“Very often find that people sometimes keep those things well*



I never really saw my family situation as something that was sort of needing of this kind of support.

**You see the word carer, and you think of physical disabilities, that kind of thing, when in actual fact there are many, many things that fall under that carer umbrella.**



Frequent relocation can lead carers to become reluctant to engage with services. Participants noted the risk that support would be discontinued because it would not be available in their new posting.



I don't know if there's any way you can change the name or the "families" bit. Over here at the unit welfare team, it's all to do with families.

**So straight away, you've got great posters and stuff out there, but it says families. and you tend to find a lot of singles don't even pick them up, don't even look at it, because they'll just think it's for the married people.**

*hidden, so it might mean that- you might see them two or three times before you actually get a flavour of the fact that they are a carer. ”*

**Professional**

*“ I think sometimes military people feel with a lot of services that, well, they're going to be posted on in two years, and then the next council county area they live in, they'll have to start all over again. So they don't engage, particularly. ”*

*“ So, for example, if you're caring for someone who has high-level physical needs or mental health needs, what happens to that person? What happens to them when you have to go out of area, or when you have to move again. So they've got to get linked up with all the services again, and so it goes on. Do you know what I mean? It's another sort of dimension, really. ”*

**Professional**

further work needed to be done to help single unaccompanied soldiers recognise themselves as carers and therefore see the relevance of the support provided by the project for them.

*“ Something like this, and the projects that you guys are doing, it would really hit for a lot of young soldiers, because of course they still have family. Even though they might be 50, 60 miles away, but they've got still a mum and dad, or nan and granddad, or their young sister or young brother has issues. ”*

**Professional**

*“ Suffolk Family Carers, tend to work with the unit welfare teams of all the regiments. And of course a lot of soldiers, young soldiers, they are single. So sometimes my view [inaudible] are always talking about family, and you can always get it from the welfare centre. Well, I remember as I was a soldier, I never went to the welfare centre. ”*

**Professional**

Participants were asked what further services the Military Families Project could offer.

While most felt that more of the same was required, a couple of individuals felt that

Other improvements that were suggested included:

- Having an additional family support worker, so that carers can have more

regular contact time with someone from the project.

- More mental health first aid training.
- More promotional activity about the service to raise awareness of the support on offer.

“Just the fact that there was only the Project Lead doing it. So her having to support everyone means that she's quite busy and she can't always fit us in so we don't actually get to see her regularly.” - **Carer**

“The only thing I could say is maybe that the frequency of visits-- because I think there's sometimes quite a long gap, you obviously realise that it's a kind of a sticky place to be in, where you haven't got enough kind of referrals to have more than one person, but then you've got to spread yourself thinly.” - **Professional**

“I've done the youth mental health first aid course and just more things like that. Similar to that. I know they're supposed to be doing an adult one at some point, but I don't know when that's supposed to be. So just more bits like that where people can go to and we can meet maybe other couples that are doing it or we can meet and talk to people that are in a similar situation to us. Maybe something in the evenings as well would be good.” - **Carer**

“I think it would be nice if we could get a bit more advertising help. .... I'm confident to think there's probably quite a few families here that could do with help. It would be nice, I think, if there could be advertised a little bit more. I don't know whether that's a station thing, but certainly, it's something that I think could put the name out a little bit more, definitely, definitely.” - **Carer**

“If there's more funding and it grows,

*I think looking at some other sort of possibilities or support would be good as well. What, I don't know.” - Professional*



## 6. Conclusions

The Military Families Project has a significant role to play in meeting both national agendas that focus on modernising support to UK Armed Forces personnel and 'recognising, valuing and supporting' family carers.

Overall, the feedback received about the Military Families Project during this evaluation has been overwhelmingly positive.

While it must be recognised that the sample size for the evaluation was quite small (four carers and five professionals), these in-depth, qualitative and semi-structured interviews have provided some useful insights into the support military carers need and value. In addition, the self-selecting methodology employed (i.e. respondents had to make an active choice to come forward for interview) may have favoured responses from carers with positive experiences.

- There is general agreement amongst both carers and professionals that the Suffolk Family Carers offer is unique, and provides support that is different to that already on offer to military families.
- One of the key elements that people identified as being distinctive to the Military Families Project is the way it combines both an understanding of carers issues and the unique pressures that military life can place on individuals and families.
- Carers described how the support they have received from the Military Families Lead had helped to reduce their levels of stress and improved their mental health. This in turn had enabled them to undertake their work more effectively.

- Professionals felt their association with the project had enhanced their own knowledge and understanding of carers issues, enabling them to more easily identify carers in need and to signpost them to appropriate support.
- Professionals outlined the impact that the Military Families Project had on improving overall operational effectiveness.
- The Mental Health Awareness training was recognised as offering significant preventative benefits for the wider military community. This included that it had provided people with the awareness to identify issues, and the tools and techniques to support themselves and others through moments of stress.
- The importance of the Mental Health First Aid training as a means of reaching out to carers was evidenced in feedback from three of the four carers interviewed. They considered that they had used this opportunity to make themselves and their situation known to the Military Families Lead and to ask for help.
- Other benefits identified about the service included the speed of response and the convenience of a locally based service. Interviewees felt that the service was easily accessible for personnel within local bases.

Barriers to people seeking support continue to persist, either because people do not recognise themselves as a carer or because they do not want their personal issues known to others at work.

Loss of continuity of support is also important, with interviewees expressing that it is not worth engaging with a local organisation because of the possibility that they will be posted to a location where ongoing support may not be available. There is an ongoing need to engage and educate the military community about carers issues.

Significantly this project has started to provide evidence that there is a need for support for carers within the military community. The strength of this service is the way in which it combines knowledge and skills around supporting carers with an understanding of the pressures of military life. The service has achieved this in a way that other generic support offers have not, and this is recognised by those who have engaged with it.

For information about how Healthwatch Suffolk could support your service development,  
please contact **01449 703949** or email **[info@healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk)**.