



# Negotiating civilian and military lives: Families, relationships, and Reserve service

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## Background

The Future Reserves (FR2020) programme of reforms has transformed the nature of Reserve service by engendering a new professionalised ethos and purpose for Reservists. Yet this renewed professionalism requires Reservists to achieve higher standards by continually dedicating a minimum commitment to the military; around 27 days per year, with many achieving more than this minimum. This commitment is said to come from Reservists' 'spare time'. Yet around 80% of Reservists are in civilian employment<sup>1</sup>, so in practice this 'spare time' largely comes from 'family time'. 64% of Reservists are married or in an established relationship, and 40% have financially-dependent children<sup>2</sup>. This means that many Reservists are negotiating the competing demands of Reserve service, civilian employment, and family life. This paper describes how Reservists and their families negotiate the demands of contemporary family life and military service. Understanding such dynamics is crucial so that the Armed Forces can better understand and support their Reserves; maximising their defence capacity.

## The study

The analysis presented in this briefing primarily draws on data from the *'Negotiating civilian and military lives: Reserves, families and work'* research project. It is supported by contributions from other projects within the *Future Reserves Research Programme*. The FRRP was funded by the UK Ministry of Defence and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

This briefing focuses on qualitative interview findings. Thirty-five Reservists were interviewed in 2015/16, and then for a second time in 2017. The interview sample sought diversity in terms of rank, length of service, ethnicity and gender, and

## Key findings

- Reservists are embedded within family networks. Reservists rely on their families for emotional and practical support to enable them to fulfil their Reservist commitment by freeing them from their family responsibilities. The nature of the emotional and practical support that the Reservist requires changes over time.
- Reservist families with younger children or ageing parents often develop complex care regimes to manage the Reservist's presence/absence from the home. The responsibility for organising and/or providing care primarily remains with female partners, regardless of whether they are the Reservist or not.
- Reserve service requires sacrifice and compromise from Reservists' partners and children. Partners often organise their work and/or leisure around the absence of their Reservist.
- Many Reservists refer to their Reserve service as employment. Doing so legitimises their absence from the home because they frame their service as 'working to provide for the family.' Reservist income is often used as a bargaining tool, where they use their military pay to buy family holidays, fund hobbies, or other luxuries for the family.

<sup>1</sup>RESCAS, 2017. 79% of Reservists are in civilian employment. 61% of all Reservists are in full-time civilian employment, 11% are self-employed, and 7% are in part-time civilian employment.

<sup>2</sup>RESCAS, 2017.

the different paths taken to become a Reservist. Reservist participants were recruited from all three service branches, but with the greatest number from the army (n=26), reflecting its larger share of the Armed Forces. 64% of our sample were married or in an established relationship, reflecting the whole Reservist population. 48% of our sample had children of financially-dependent age.

These interviews were supported – where possible – with evidence from the Reservist’s partner. Between 2016/17, seventeen family members were interviewed across the ‘Negotiating civilian and military lives’ and ‘Sustaining Future Reserves 2020’ projects. This lower figure derives from an unwillingness of many Reservists to include their family members in research relating to their Reserve service<sup>3</sup>.

### Findings: negotiating family and military life

#### ***The Reservist is exposed to diverse views of Reserve service by family members which can change over time***

Each Reservist is embedded within family networks which may include spouses/partners<sup>4</sup>, children, parents, siblings, and other family members or close friends. It is they who the Reservist must rely on for emotional and practical support which frees them from their family responsibilities which in turn enables them to sustain their Reservist commitment. Within those networks, Reservists may experience a mixture of support, ambivalence, indifference, and opposition to their Reserve service for different reasons and to different degrees.

Many Reservists felt that their family was proud of their Reserve service. The passing out parade and Remembrance Day commemorations were often identified as points in the Reservists’ lives where they felt their family, particularly their parents, were most proud of them.

“My mum and dad have went on about it being the proudest movement of their life: seeing me on that parade square passing out” Roxanne, Royal Navy Reserves.

“I played football for 15 years [and] I captained the cricket team, and my old man never came to see me play. And then during the Bravo passing out parade he drove two hours in the rain, sat in the rain, and watched the parade; so I know that he’s incredibly proud.” Ben, Army Reserves.

Reservists’ parents often held the military in high regard and so were proud of their child’s association with the institution.

A small number of Reservists said that their children thought they were a ‘cool parent’ because they get to ‘shoot guns’, go on tanks, ships, and adventure training.

While parents and children were proud, they were generally less exposed to the day-to-day realities and sacrifices that Reserve service entails for Reservists’ partners. This can include caring for dependent children and ageing parents. Even without care responsibilities, the absence from the home can be difficult for some. Many partners see themselves in competition with the Armed Forces for their Reservist’s time and energy. Absence from the home can sometimes be viewed as an active rejection of wanting to spend time with them. However, partners supported their Reserve service in order to keep their Reservist happy and not to stand between them and their ambitions.

“It was something that I really felt I wanted to do and my wife supported me very much through that. She wouldn’t want to hold me back from something I wanted to do.” Henry, Army Reserves.

“It keeps me busy so it can be quite stressful. She likes me all to herself all the time, however she knows I wouldn’t be happy.” Hamish, Royal Marine Reserves.

This view was confirmed in many of the interviews with the partners.

“If he’s not happy, the whole house would be unhappy and that’s kind of how men are... he loves it, and if you can support that then your marriage is going to work” Emily, married to an Army Reservist.

As a counterpoint to this, in the circumstances when children were older and independent, some of the partners told us they enjoyed having time to themselves, free from both their children and Reservist partner.

“The kids are much more independent, it’s different [now from when they were younger]. So there’s less pressure on me when he’s away [for] the weekend. It’s quite nice to get rid of him” Sophie, married to an Army Reservist.

There are widespread feelings among partners that Reserve service is ‘their thing’ which they have little to do with. There is no sense of being a ‘military family’<sup>5</sup>. Those who did have this sense were the partners of ex-Regulars.

<sup>3</sup>This conclusion is also supported by other research. See Connelly, V, Morrison, Z., Fear, N., Hennelly, S. & Smith, J. (2017). *Support to the Families of Reservists: An Investigation of Needs, Current Provision and Gaps*. Final Report DHCSTC.

<sup>4</sup>This briefing uses the term ‘partners’ to refer to those who are married to, or in an established relationship with, Reservists.

<sup>5</sup>This conclusion is also supported by other research. See Connelly, V, Morrison, Z., Fear, N., Hennelly, S. & Smith, J. (2017). *Support to the Families of Reservists: An Investigation of Needs, Current Provision and Gaps*. Final Report DHCSTC.

## Care for dependents is a challenge, gendered, and changes over time

One of the biggest challenges for Reservist families is the provision of care for dependents. In 2017, 40% of Reservists had financially-dependent children<sup>6</sup>. There is no official data on how many Reservists have care responsibilities for adult-dependents, but our survey<sup>7</sup> suggests this figure may be around 18%. The younger cohort of Reservists may eventually become parents, while the older ones may assume care responsibilities for their ageing parents. Thus, the burdens of care responsibilities may increase and decrease over the Reservists' lifecourse, which has implications for their capacity to commit to the Reserves at different stages of their lives.

"When I joined I had more commitment to the squadron ... then as your civilian life changes you're able to put less time into the Reserves because you've got other commitments. And as your kids grow up my commitment has just gone through the roof recently, I mean, I'm doing more time [with the Reserves] than I've done in a long, long, time. But during that period somewhere between it was definitely a juggling act."  
Robert, Army Reservist.

"My mother has muscular disease ... and when something goes wrong, I'm the one that has to go and sort things out ... or if father needs to be taken to another hospital appointment, then I'm the one that does that... If anything happened to either of them ... they would need a lot of help. All that lies ahead."  
Catherine, Royal Navy Reserve.

One of the most common strategies for managing care provision is to shift responsibility to the Reservist's partner. Yet the partners often had their own careers, and in some cases were the primary earner. Many households rely on a dual income<sup>8</sup>. This restricts the ability of Reservists to rely solely on their partners to provide care.

There are differences between male and female Reservists when asked how care responsibilities were managed. Female Reservists describe complex care regimes which often extended beyond the nuclear family to include siblings, parents, grandparents, ex-partners (biological fathers), friends, and others.

While female Reservists talked at length about care provision, male Reservists, by contrast, did not. Male Reservists would most often say that their partner would provide the care, and if they could not then they would arrange the alternatives themselves. There was a tacit assumption that care was the domain of their (female) partner.

The interviews with female partners revealed that the burden of care was greater than many (male) Reservists seemed to appreciate. Female partners often shape their work schedules, annual leave and leisure activities so that they are able to provide childcare (and adult care, in some circumstances) while the Reservist is absent through Reserve service.

"Next year, if he's got any longer courses or anything, I'll probably have to take a week out of my work to be here" Elaine, married to an Army Reservist.

"I try not to work [when he's away], I try to base my hours around him." Emily, married to an Army Reservist.

"The only thing I do, which sounds quite sad, is go to the football... it's never [name of Reservist] who doesn't go to the Reserves, it's me who doesn't go to the football if somebody isn't available to look after the kids. If there's not a solution for the kids, of course it's me that doesn't go. But that's what probably happens in most families, it's women who always, or mostly, makes the sacrifices because they're the ones who organise everything."  
Morag, married to an RAF Reservist.

Over time a process of normalisation occurs where the Reservist's presence/absence from the home embeds itself as part of family routines. However, this carefully negotiated settlement can be upset when there are changes of circumstance within the family. This includes the birth of a child, long-term illness developing in the family, ageing parents, change of job, etc.

## Negotiating absence from the family

Many Reservists use annual leave from their civilian work to do the annual camp (ADX) or attend courses. Doing so means that they then forgo time with their families. In order to maintain the support of their partners, many Reservists refer to their Reserve service as employment. Doing so legitimises their absence from the home because they frame their service as 'providing for the family.'

"My family always knew that I would work weekends: I would either go away with the army or I would work weekends ... When my wife and I got married and we had our kids we decided that I was going to be the breadwinner ... the money I get from the army and the money I used to get from working overtime in [civilian company name] provided a reasonable income" Robert, Army Reserves.

<sup>6</sup>RESCAS, 2017.

<sup>7</sup>This is from an ongoing survey. This figure is supported by 22% of our interviewees describing some form of care responsibly for adults-dependents, usually aging parents.

<sup>8</sup>In a very small number of cases the household was also reliant on the third income provided by Reserve service.

The issue of pay emerged as a significant feature of the interviews. The diverse socio-economic constitution of the Reserve forces creates a complex set of views connected to Reservist remuneration. This diversity shapes Reservists' narratives about how they use their Reserve pay in their negotiations with their families. What unites them is how they ease the tensions around their absence from the home by using their Reservist pay to provide tangible recompense for the family. This may be lifting the basic household income, paying for holidays, hobbies, or a deposit for a new house. For Reservists who hold Additional Duties Contracts (ADC) or Full Time Reserve Service (FTRS) contracts, Reservist pay may be their primary source of income.

"we're going to ... Canada in the summer, and it's quite nice to know that he'll get bounty in April and that will go into our spending money, our survival money of when we're there."

Mhari, married to an RAF Reservist.

"So basically he's just doing most of it for us. I mean if he does get to go away for six months yes he's away from us for a long period of time but he's also getting paid and eventually we'll have money to buy a house."

Cynthia, married to an Army Reservist.

"[Leaving the Reserves] would then put financial pressure on us and then my whole life would quickly implode. My civilian wage is not enough for me to live on on its own. It pays the bills and everything, but leaves nothing left over ... so this takes the pressure off everything ... and allows us to do those other things, all the hobbies and things that make life worthwhile."

Callum, Army reserves.

### **Implications for policy and practice, with recommendations**

- Review the Armed Forces Covenant, giving particular attention to how the demands and challenges of Reserve service differs from Regular service. Such a review should recognise and mitigate the sacrifice and potential detriment involved in Reserve service, including the impact on the Reservist, their families and civilian employers.
- Reservists who are meeting minimum attendance standards but who may be attending less than other Reservists may have to prioritise other aspects of their life at that point in time. The chain of command should support these Reservists rather than questioning their loyalty.
- The military need to think of innovative ways to try and engage with families which maintains the carefully negotiated settlements that Reservists maintain between their family and Reservist commitments. For example, rather than only trying to involve the partner in the Unit's social activities, consideration should be given to creating events where the partner does not come (giving them free time), but the children do. Such an event could have 'cool' hardware on display, as well as fun activities. Alternatively, an event could be created for female partners which is not hosted in a military venue.
- The three Armed Forces Families Federations should be encouraged to actively seek out contact with Reservists and their families using social media and other modern methods of communication.

### **Authors and Acknowledgements**

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