



Forces families deserve the Best Start

How we can strengthen Best Start Family Hubs to meet the needs of our military community

A report by Alex Baker MP



Executive summary

Drawing on detailed responses from service charities, welfare professionals, and over 80 military families, this report identifies practical steps that would ensure Best Start Family Hubs make a tangible difference in meeting the needs of military families.

Key recommendations

- Standardise the question 'Are you from a military family?' across all Family Hubs.
- Introduce universal training for Family Hub staff on the emotional cycle of deployment, transitions, trauma, and SEND.
- Establish a military champion in every Hub.
- Ensure flexible and hybrid services that account for relocation, unpredictable schedules, and dispersed families (where the serving person lives apart from other family members and returns only at weekends or during leave).
- Embed trusted military charities and peer-led support within Hubs.
- Support continuity of care for children with additional needs through portable EHCPs.
- Co-produce culturally sensitive services with Commonwealth military families.
- Plan for surge demand during deployments, with resourcing to match.

Foreword

As the Member of Parliament for the home of the British Army and a member of the Defence Select Committee, I have long championed the principle that those who serve our country deserve not just respect and recognition, but practical support that meets the needs of modern military life.

I was therefore delighted when the Secretary of State confirmed in November 2024 that the Government plans to enshrine the Armed Forces Covenant into law in the Armed Forces Bill. It promises that fair treatment for the military community, including veterans, cadets and reservists as well as serving personnel, will be legally enforceable and embedded into the planning of public services.

One of the first tests for this will be in the delivery of the Best Start Family Hubs, which will be established in every area from 2026. These Hubs will build on the legacy of Sure Start Centres, which have radically improved the lives of thousands of children by providing family support in the earliest years of life.

This is incredibly exciting, and the challenge, in a community like mine, is to ensure that public services like this are equipped to meet the unique needs of military families. The best way to understand these needs, and how to respond, is to listen to the families themselves.

In this report, I have brought together the voices of military families and some national organisations that work with them, following a two-month-long engagement exercise. It provides insight into the requirements of the service community, along with clear proposals on how Best Start Family Hubs can effectively meet them and uphold our Covenant commitment.

I have prepared these findings on behalf of my constituents and of the wider military community as the detail of the Best Start Hubs is being developed. My aim is to broaden understanding of the issues and to ensure that the Hubs offer consistent support across the country so that Forces children genuinely do get the very best start in life.



Alex Baker, MP for Aldershot and Farnborough

'The Armed Forces Community should not face disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of services; and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most.'

Armed Forces Covenant.



Introduction

The pressures and extraordinary stresses faced by military families within the UK have long been recognised.

The most recent Armed Forces Families Strategy described them as follows:

'While many armed forces families enjoy healthy lives, the pressures of deployment, periods of separation, and social isolation from family and friends can have a negative impact on the health and well-being of the family. Should a serviceperson be injured on duty, this can lead to additional caring responsibilities, including coping with changes to someone's physical and/or mental health. For those who make the ultimate sacrifice for their country, it is our duty to ensure their families are supported.'

In June 2025, the Prime Minister announced that, in response to this, military personnel, their families, and veterans will have their unique circumstances legally protected by the central Government for the first time.

The next Armed Forces Bill will bring the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) fully into law to make sure all parts of government across the UK are working together and focused on providing the best possible support for those who are serving, have served, their families, and the bereaved. Under the new legislation, Government departments will have to have 'due regard' for the AFC when policy and

decision making, taking into account the unique circumstances and position of the Armed Forces community to prevent disadvantage.

One of the first challenges for this policy will be the Government's decision to introduce Best Start Family Centre in every neighbourhood by 2028. These Hubs will act as 'one-stop shops' for families with children through early years and beyond, hosting activities ranging from free classes and events to pre-school support for children, or finance and housing advice for families. Research shows that early support makes a real difference. Children who have access to the Sure Start Centres, the forerunners to the Best Start Hubs, are more likely to achieve better GCSE results and have improved health.

As the MP for the Home of the British Army, Alex Baker has been working closely with families based in the Aldershot Garrison and around the country to ensure that the special needs that the Armed Forces community often has, especially due to multiple postings or camp life, are recognised in the design of public services.

This report sets out the findings from her conversations with military families and their representatives about the Best Start Family Hubs, and makes recommendations for how they can best respond to the needs of the service community.

Our methodology

This report is based on questionnaire responses from over 80 military families and interviews with a selection of key organisations, including the Army Welfare Service, SSAFA, Home-Start, and Forces in Mind, as well as other smaller military charities.

We grouped the resulting information into themes and drew out specific recommendations on those themes. We have sought to provide direct quotes from participants wherever possible to allow their voices to be heard directly. We have also linked our recommendations to existing policy where this is particularly relevant.

1.

Build stronger links between Family Hubs and military life

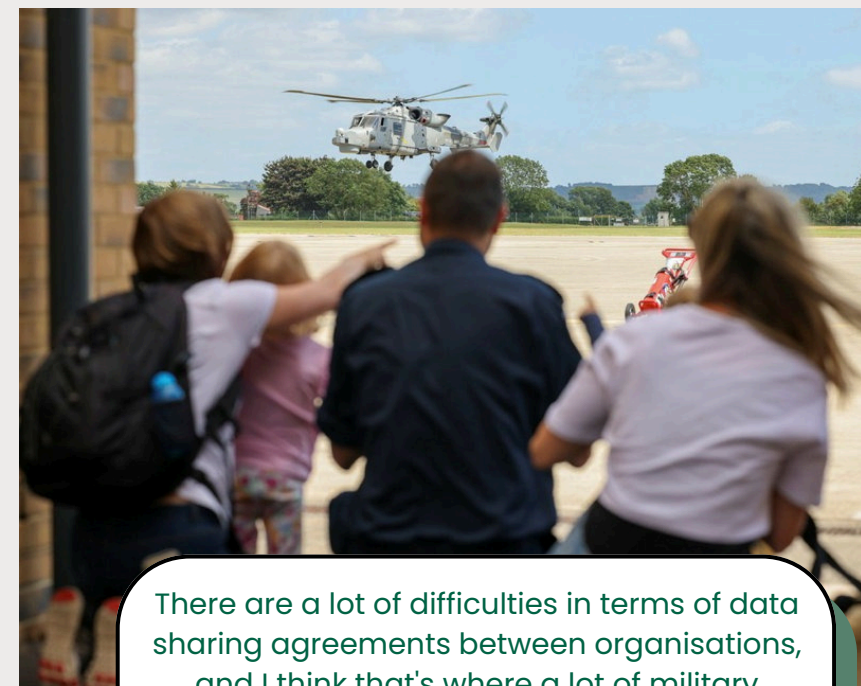
What we heard

Communication between military structures and civilian services is inconsistent and often puts the onus on families to coordinate care themselves.

Military families say they often feel that their specific needs are not well understood when engaging with local services. Many are geographically separated from units and are therefore not even immediately identified as military.

Policy recommendations

- Add the question: 'Are you a military family?' to the initial assessment for all families across all Best Start Hubs.
- In line with the commitment in the Armed Forces Families Strategy to support organisations to '*work in partnership across boundaries, sharing best practice, information and data on families to integrate and coordinate care*', Best Start Hubs must develop consent-based data sharing protocols with local military bases and welfare teams.
- Have a named contact in each Hub for military family engagement, regardless of local troop numbers.



There are a lot of difficulties in terms of data sharing agreements between organisations, and I think that's where a lot of military families come unstuck. Agencies can't or won't talk to each other, and often families have to be the ones that are having to advocate for themselves. In amongst all of the other challenges of military life, it's absolutely exhausting.

Not all military families live on base; some live apart juggling single parenting and routine changes when partner's home.

Many of us do not live on a married patch. As an unaccompanied family, we often feel totally invisible.



We are essentially alone. Asking things like: “Can your family not come to help?” or “Why don’t you pop into your friend’s” are useless and a stab in the heart, reminding us that our “village” is hundreds of miles away.

Military children are extremely vulnerable... understanding that vulnerability is crucial.

Invest in military awareness training for Family Hub staff

What we heard

Parents consistently called for professionals to have a deeper understanding of the emotional toll of deployment, frequent relocation, and parenting through solo periods.

Policy recommendations

- Co-produce mandatory military awareness training for hub staff with military families and experts, covering the emotional cycles of deployment, SEND support for military families, cultural competence (including Commonwealth needs), and non-traditional family structures in military families.
- Make this training universal—not just for garrison towns.

3.

Make services visible and accessible to all military families



What we heard

Many families reported practical barriers to accessing support – rigid timings, inaccessible locations, or the assumption that support is only available for those physically present on military bases.

Several said they were turned away from local provision because they weren't 'officially' part of the local unit, for example, if their serving partners were based elsewhere in the country.

Policy recommendations

- Allow all military families to access specialist support in Hubs flexibly, regardless of their unit affiliation.
- Ensure hubs offer hybrid appointments, family-friendly appointments, or a creche for military parents needing support. Weekend services are also highly valued to accommodate shift work and deployments.

'As an out-of-area adoptive parent, we never had access to a local health visitor when our child came home – we tried to access some, but because we were not registered, we only received minimal support.

Support could be hybrid, and that would fit around some of the issues that military life might throw up, like unexpected deployment. You know, you've booked in to get some support, but my husband has been given 48 hours' notice to deploy.

Support continuity of care for military children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)



One key thing is the amount of service children coming into the system too late for an EHCP or diagnosis, and it's impacted their education massively. They've not been in an area perhaps long enough, I mean, we've some young people that will move within a year, so they get missed.

You can put some of the behaviour patterns down to the transition as opposed to unpicking it and saying, "actually, what can we do here, what do we need?"

What we heard

Relocations continue to disrupt support for children with SEND despite the existence of the Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS) for military children and work such as that undertaken by the MOD Local Authority Partnership (MODLAP) to ensure optimum transition support for military children with SEND in participating authorities.

The UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-32 recognises that:

'For those with special educational needs and/or disability, loss of or changes to provision can have a profound effect.'

Several parents described being asked to restart the Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) process for their children after each move, sometimes losing years of progress. This was particularly true for families who moved between UK nations, for example, between England and Scotland. The experience was described as '*demoralising*' and '*to the detriment of the child.*'

Policy recommendations

- Train Hub staff on military-specific support for children with SEND, such as the use of pupil premium funding, recommendations for managing SEND, and Education Health Care Plans through moves between local authorities, and the role of existing specialist services such as the Children's Education Advisory Service for Forces children and the Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum.
- Require Hub staff to liaise with education settings and the local authority to help co-ordinate support for military children with SEND, particularly during times of relocation.

5.

Establish a military champion in every Hub



What we heard

While some local authorities have Armed Forces champions, others do not, and the role often disappears when short-term funding ends. The 'Our Community, Our Covenant' report from the Forces In Mind Trust noted that those authorities with champions were significantly better at implementing the covenant in their services.

Families strongly supported the idea of having a designated military champion in each Best Start Family Hub who 'understands how things work' for military families and has a clear remit to help coordinate support for military families across services and with the Local Authority.

One Armed Forces charity noted that having a local authority military champion:

'does raise the serving community literacy in that area.'

Another noted that champions are:

'Good to help professionals understand the unique needs of the military community.'

Policy recommendations

- Require every local authority to appoint Armed Forces champions, including in non-garrison areas.
- Champion roles should include providing staff training, cross-agency coordination, and oversight of support planning for military families during deployments or transitions.
- Secure stable funding for this role and integrate the role requirement with Family Hub governance.

6.

Embed trusted charities within the Hub model



'Groups supported by our existing charities would be hugely beneficial.'

'AFF and other service family federation, nervous diverse support, citizens advice (with military knowledge!).'

'Things like Andy's Man Club and Silent Storms. I think that we need to be linking with those as well and making sure that hubs are diverse with both male and female staff.'

What we heard

The value of the third sector is recognised in the Armed Forces Families Strategy:

'To make best use of available resources and coordinate coherent provision, it is essential to understand the support offered by the charitable sector, such as the Families Federations and key service charities.'

Although families described sometimes navigating a 'confusing landscape' of support organisations with no single point of coordination, they have great trust in charities like SSAFA, the Royal British Legion, and Home-Start, especially when staff from these charities often have lived experience of Forces life.

Other respondents noted the value of links with charities such as RELATE, Young Carers, and mental health support, who are not focused purely on military families but have a lot to offer this community.

Policy recommendations

- Embed third-sector partners in Hubs, with space to operate and funding to deliver vital services for military families.
- Develop a joint directory of local and national support for military families that is accessible through each Hub.
- Involve local military spouses and veterans in peer-led delivery where possible. There is great value in services working with volunteers who have a personal understanding of military life.

7.

Co-produce support with non-UK and Commonwealth military families

What we heard

Non-UK and Commonwealth personnel families called for more practical support with visas, employment, and community connections.

Families also stressed the importance of cultural awareness and being included in service design rather than being treated as an afterthought.

This is in line with the aim in the Armed Forces Families Strategy to ensure that:

‘Non-UK families are valued and accommodated in supportive UK government and Defence policies cognisant of their experiences. This helps to mitigate potential disadvantage conferred by their immigration status wherever possible and provides wider support that is sensitive to cultural backgrounds.’

Policy recommendations

- Co-design services with non-UK and Commonwealth parents to ensure trust, take-up, and relevance.
- Ensure outreach to non-UK and Commonwealth families is proactive and peer-led.
- Provide immigration, housing, and employment navigation advice for non-UK and Commonwealth military families within Family Hubs – linking with the appropriate services from the three forces Families Federations where these already exist.



‘My husband is British Military where I am Canadian. The culture shock is real as well as trying to understand the long-standing systems like the NHS and schools and how to access the help we need. We had to figure it all out and it's been exhausting and isolating.’
‘Employing people from various backgrounds and cultures, have commonwealth families sit on development programmes for services before they are launched’.

(We need):
Help with visas/settling in to UK
Signpost to local services information
Ways to socialise and make friends...

8.



Anticipate and resource periods of surge

'There needs to be an awareness that when making resources available, you need to have a system that can surge and then kind of draw back as and when necessary, dependent on what is going on in the family, because there are specific pinch points like deployment or relocation.'

'There are lots of high-readiness units, and I think they should be considered differently. If you've got a Hub in one of those areas, anticipate that you're going to need a lot more resources because the military pace of life is that bit faster there.'

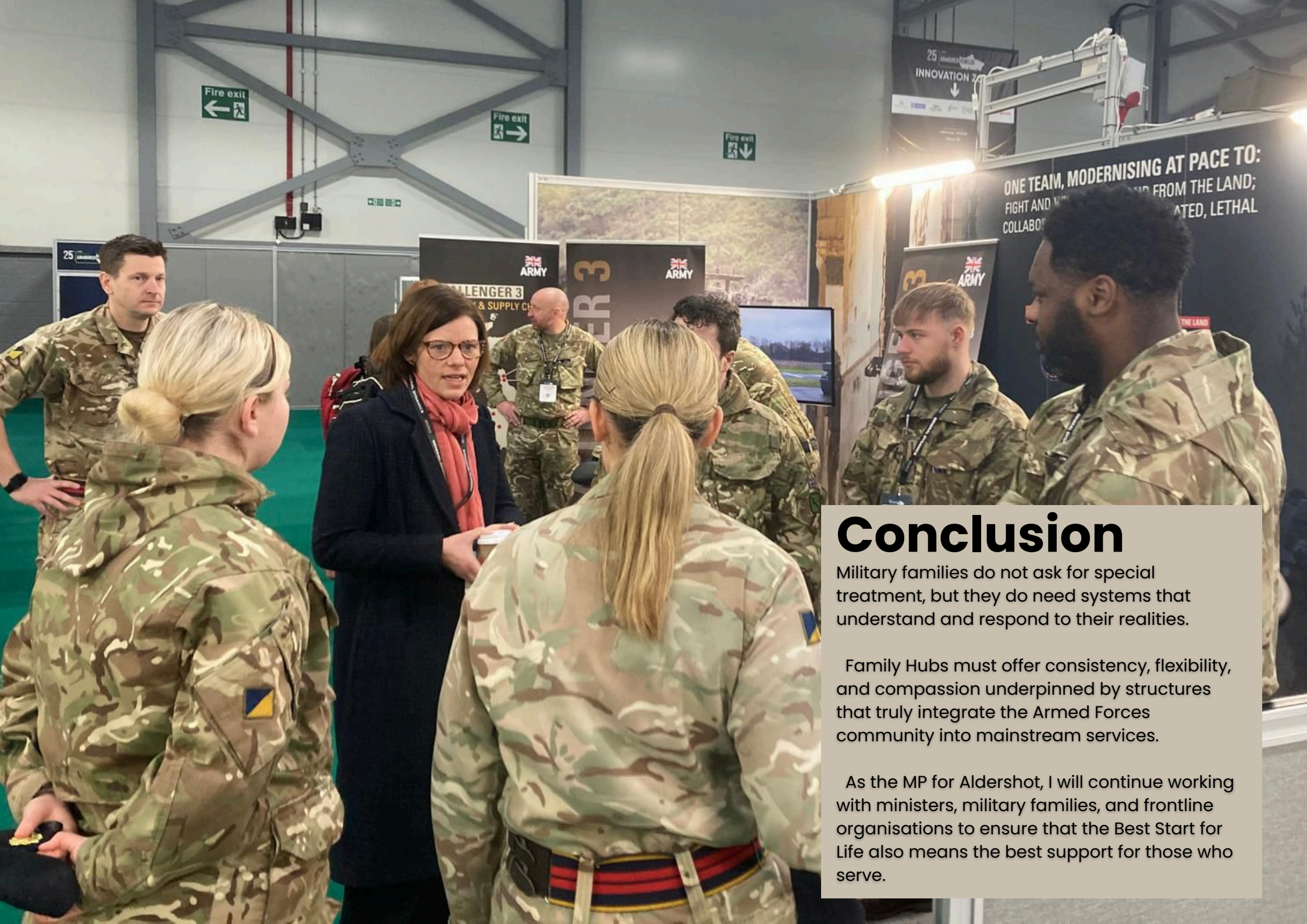
'Check in with us! Especially if things are in the news, we're keeping it all together for everyone else.'

What we heard

Deployments, high-readiness postings, and crises like the Afghanistan evacuations place extreme strain on military families. Several responses described being left to 'cobble together support ourselves' during major deployments or emergencies, with no backup.

Policy recommendations

- Enable surge staffing and flexible delivery models in high-readiness areas.
- Provide wraparound deployment support, including activity packs, safe spaces, and transition sessions.
- Facilitate coordination between civilian and welfare teams to ensure families are not overlooked.



Conclusion

Military families do not ask for special treatment, but they do need systems that understand and respond to their realities.

Family Hubs must offer consistency, flexibility, and compassion underpinned by structures that truly integrate the Armed Forces community into mainstream services.

As the MP for Aldershot, I will continue working with ministers, military families, and frontline organisations to ensure that the Best Start for Life also means the best support for those who serve.