

## **What are the barriers to trying to reach, and evaluate the impact of working with, Forces Families? Assessing the effectiveness of *Reading Force*, a programme to promote shared reading within the Forces community.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper builds on an initial paper in this journal (Baverstock, 2013) which covered the establishment of *Reading Force*, a shared reading initiative to promote improved communication between members of British Armed Forces families, and help mitigate the particular difficulties of Service life. It begins by considering the range of difficulties experienced by Forces families and literature associated with their effective management and support. It then considers the various means of communication with Forces families; associated opportunities and barriers. It examines how project effectiveness was assessed, [why accessing data and hence precise analysis has proven difficult](#), and then considers other methods of estimating outcomes. Finally prospects for future project development are considered.

### **Introduction**

A life in the Forces, either as a member of the Armed Services or a family member, can involve many challenges: long periods away on exercise; sudden postings; unanticipated changes due to national and international developments – and the corresponding requirements of the civil power. While Forces personnel may be required to anticipate the unexpected, and those who have established partnerships with them may be similarly informed, the challenges are also often acutely felt by their wider families. While there is certainly a strong hereditary element in Forces recruitment, not all parents and siblings of Forces personnel understand their life, and children born into this environment have no choice in their home circumstances. Both nuclear and extended family may find adaptation to change problematic and their associated difficulties rarely acknowledged.

While not unique to Forces life, the specific issues faced by Services families perhaps have an increased impact due to their overlap and hence reinforcement. In general they can be described as relating to disruption and movement, isolation, separation, difficulties in communication, and corollary stress. In combination, they can lead to potential dissonance within a family and a barrier to wider understanding of Forces life, hence potential difficulties of integration between Services personnel and their local civilian community.

### **Disruption**

A life in the Armed Forces involves regular disruption. Postings may be for individuals, or whole units, but disruption is an inevitable consequence: moving house or rebasing has the potential to interrupt education, spousal career and friendships; this can be particularly problematic for children who have to move mid school-year, leave established friendship groups, and then integrate with a new class that is already well established. The process also disrupts access to specific support services. These can range from access to medical treatment (e.g. specialist treatments which require long-term access to sustained services such as infertility or diabetes); social services (e.g. the long process that leads to adoption); special needs for children in education (e.g. specific classroom support or specialist schooling); career progression (e.g. employment opportunities for other family members); particular housing requirements (e.g. accommodation for extended family members or a dependent with individual physical needs). All these factors can disrupt community relationships; an awareness of imminent postings can lead to reduced motivation to integrate.

### **Isolation**

Service accommodation is available to personnel who have established a committed relationship, and while members of the Forces have often embarked on partnerships, and become parents, earlier in life than their civilian counterparts (Rowe et al, 2014), the disruption of moving can result in isolation from a family network and support otherwise available. For example, due to distance, a young mother may not be able to access the support she would most likely draw on in civilian society; that of her own mother and other relatives. Regular postings can create significant geographical distances from the wider family, meaning that Forces children may have relatively little direct contact with their grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. Journalist Lesley Garner had an enormous response to an article in *The Daily Telegraph* about parents of Service people who felt isolated by the deployment of their children, particularly when they were no longer the next of kin.<sup>1</sup>

Unit re-basings can see whole communities transported from one location to another, the mass move making it difficult to integrate with the local population, who may view arrivals as an undifferentiated group rather than a range of individuals. Services accommodation does not (for security reasons) feature on local street plans, and this can again promote the tendency of Armed Forces to remain relatively unintegrated within the wider community. The regular sight of removal vans can reinforce an impression that it is not worth getting to know individual members of the Armed Forces as they will soon be on the move again. Community organisations with long waiting lists (e.g. The Scout Movement; swimming lessons; popular schools) may have few Forces participants as they are not resident long enough to qualify to join.

### **Separation**

A career in the Armed Forces involves a lot of separation within the family. The structure and frequency of deployments may be familiar from the press in the context of world events and associated media coverage; what is generally less well known is the surrounding commitment to training and post-deployment activities, so that a 'standard' Army six month tour of duty will routinely involve at least ten months' separation.

*What is rarely mentioned is that before they leave for a tour of duty the soldiers have an extremely charged six-month training schedule, so the impact on families is felt well before they leave for combat. Some may spend as little as 30% of their time with their families during the training period and as a tour lasts six months, this, in effect, means a year of separation and disruption. Inevitably, that takes a toll on everyone. (Winston, 2011)*

The Navy and Marines are usually away longer (9 or 10 months) and in the RAF deployments can range from a few weeks to 9-10 months.

In between postings there will be additional periods of separation due to the requirement to attend career-based courses and training. These long periods of separation, and in particular issues of pre-departure anxiety and subsequent difficulties around reintegration, can promote feelings of 'separateness' within the family.

### **Difficulties in communication**

There are associated difficulties of communication within Forces families. It can be hard to keep a partner, or the wider family, involved, particularly given some conditions of service (e.g. submariners being particularly hard to reach, for obvious reasons). The instability of perpetual change can put a strain on relationships; both divorce and separation are higher within Forces families in comparison

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<sup>1</sup> 'I am proud of what my son is achieving in Afghanistan but fearful for him too' 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2009  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthadvice/lesleygarnerlifeclass/6214924/I-am-proud-of-what-my-son-is-achieving-in-Afghanistan-but-fearful-for-him-too.html>

with the general population. (Rowe et al, 2014). Discussing the issue most on everyone's mind can be difficult because it is often so closely allied to the professional role of the Forces' member, and issues of security and the lack of secure networks for communication may mean relevant conversation is impossible once the departure has taken place. A need for common ground around which families can connect is helpful.

In addition to these issues, consideration should be paid to the particular Armed Forces culture and ethos. Forces families tend to be proud, independent and disinclined to make a fuss; the instinctive 'privacy settings' can make it hard to reach them. This culture also includes discouragement of wives commenting or 'rocking the boat' which spreads to the children, who for example may bottle up their fears about deployment because they feel they have to be 'strong for their mum', who is using her energy to keep things going at home.

### **Corollary stress**

All these factors can result in stress; particularly when experienced in combination.

### **Key influences and relevant literature**

Research into the impact of separation on Forces families has been reported variously. There is a requirement within the Armed Forces that military personnel do not comment in the media, and this culture broadly extends to families of Services personnel; first-hand accounts of the pressures on families are rare (Baverstock, 2007) and more often anonymous (e.g. Winston, 2011; Jones, 1990).

Previous research has suggested that the most important predictor of marriage dissolution in the Forces is experience of combat and conflict (Call & Teachman, 1991; Ruger et al., 2002; Goff et al, 2007). More recently *however*, work undertaken by the King's Centre for Military Health Research has suggested that *rather than arising from the experience of deployment to Iraq, risk of negative relationship change is influenced more by other factors, and vulnerabilities include: 'those who display symptoms of PTSD, are binge drinkers or misuse alcohol, have difficulty adjusting post-deployment, have argumentative relationships, and are more likely to be younger personnel with no children in the lower ranks of the military.'* (Rowe et al, 2013). More recently, Keeling et al (2016) have undertaken research with UK Army personnel to identify the practical, emotional and cultural dilemmas soldiers had to balance to maintain successful marriages and Army careers; researchers hoping in the process to identify how such factors could be used to shape the content of interventions designed to increase resiliency in military marriages.

This paper reports on such a potential intervention. *Reading Force* suggests shared reading to ameliorate the difficulties experienced by Forces families. The project's origins lie in the author of this paper's formative experience of the role books can play in connecting people. An Army wife herself, during a range of separations (Northern Ireland 1982-1998; Kosovo 2002; Iraq 2006-7; Afghanistan 2008) and through many house moves, she developed various strategies for maintaining communication between the family; one of which was shared reading. During times apart the family would regularly read books and then send them to each other (there were initiatives enabling parcels up to a certain weight to be sent to deployed Forces for nothing), in the process discovering common ground through sharing content. The knowledge that a book that had been read could be posted out to the field, and be there within days, brought comfort to all the family.

The author of this paper's previous involvement in reader development schemes such as *Well Worth Reading* (McKearney and Baverstock, 1990), often funded by local government and bodies, led to an appreciation of the role reading can play in building a community of shared experience. Work with The British Agency for Adoption and Fostering on resources for 'looked after' children enabled exploration of the role played by scrapbooks in storing memories for those with disrupted lives,

concluding that, for children in care, with relatively few transportable belongings and limited access to information on their personal history, it was important to produce resources that had high standards of production and conveyed a care benefit. Finally work with educator Gill Hines on parenting, and two resulting practical manuals (Hines & Baverstock, 2006, 2010), isolated the positive role scrapbooks can play in helping young people reflect upon, and hence navigate, difficult times.

A wider body of literature relates to the value of reading in general; for example from Book Trust, the National Literacy Trust, and The Reading Agency. In particular, Hicks (2003) explored the link between reading and health and well being, and in 2015 an extensive review of the relevant literature by The Reading Agency in consultancy with BOP Consulting assembled a wealth of evidence that reading for pleasure correlates with a number of positive long and short-term outcomes to the individual's life chances in education and careers and psychological and physical health. There is a further stream of literature that reflects how communications about books within families can promote strong relationships, projecting ideas and difficulties onto third party situations in books can make them easier to discuss (Clark, 2009; Clark & Hawkins, 2010).

The project also drew on a range of Forces-related research at Kingston University: notably the impact of British Army operations on Forces families and host communities (Dixon, 2000) and more recent work exploring the role of parents as gatekeepers to recruitment (Dixon, 2012); work on the regimental and national loyalties that were the basis of group cohesion within the Black Watch regiment, and the impact separation and casualties have on both soldiers and their families (Reid, 2009); how creative writing can impact on community building, maintenance of relationships, social interaction and skills development among ex-Forces personnel (Campbell, 2012). Finally, there has been work by a developmental psychologist on post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) amongst children, adolescents and ex-British soldiers (Phippard & Samara, 2012) as well as work done in supporting care leavers through university.<sup>2</sup>

There is also relevant literature relating to the use of shared reading as building cohesion within universities, notably the pre-arrival shared reading in US universities. Ferguson (2006), Golden (2012) and Twiton (2006) discuss the role such schemes can play in widening participation and promoting engagement; equally relevant within Forces communities; indeed disengagement from school by Service children anticipating another move has been regularly remarked on by teachers when undertaking *Reading Force* presentations. Literature relating to pre-arrival shared reading in universities is generally included within marketing information rather than subject to academic scrutiny, and while data can be hard to capture there are indications of the wider relevance of such initiatives. For example, while Twiton's project drew just 130 responses from a student intake of around 2,500 (.05%), success may be gleaned from the qualitative comments of those who did provide feedback; numbers attending related events and anecdotal responses from those involved. Baverstock et al (2016, in press) offer more detailed analysis through surveying participants and show how the implementation of a shared reading initiative across an entire university correlated with improved student and staff engagement and a significant decline in the student drop-out rate for the academic year in which the scheme was introduced.

### **Methodology**

*Reading Force* had its immediate origins in a specific opportunity – the beginning of a three-year posting to Aldershot in December 2009. Aldershot is officially the home of the British Army, and base to a local population of 10,500 troops and their families. The new location offered potential access to a specific population and an ideal geographical area within which to site an initiative. While

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kingston.ac.uk/news/article/55/08-dec-2009-charity-applauds-kingstons-help-for-care-leavers>

Baverstock's status as a Services partner and member of the Forces community provided knowledge of, and access to, the supporting information dissemination systems, it should be noted that from the outset the project sought to build an ongoing infrastructure based on personal and professional experience rather than being reliant on an individual's temporary role within the military chain of command.

The project was to have a sustained emphasis on shared reading and associated discussion, to promote improved communication through participation, to reflect on responses to change through a physical record, and to foster an understanding of Forces-life. It was suggested that families choose a title that all wanted to read or have read to them, together aloud or individually, and then to pool their thoughts and responses – via text messages, emails, drawings, photographs and e-blueys<sup>3</sup> – in a bespoke scrapbook. This could either be kept as a special memento of a particular time, or (temporarily) returned to the organisers for feedback and submission into a competition for a range of prizes (with all scrapbooks returned by secure delivery).

Given the relatively short and non-extendable period of time in Aldershot, and the opportunity this afforded to be part of, and hence reach, the local military population and temporary access to community funding, it was decided to proceed with a pilot project based on previous non-Service initiatives and to run this as action research (or practice as research), monitoring outcomes and making associated changes as the project progressed. It was important to implement quickly and analyse project development, through delivery, through involvement of collaborators and through the responsiveness of the target audience.

Thus through feedback from those involved, both participants and those delivering materials to the market, the scrapbook has now been through three iterations. An initial, consciously 'old looking' scrapbook was replaced by one that looked more fun, more colourful, and less like coursework. As it emerged that many of those submitting scrapbooks were families with young children, the spaces for writing were made bigger to further enable those with developing motor skills, leading to the piloting of *Reading Force, Little Ones*, a related initiative in nursery schools sponsored by The Soldier's Charity. Initial resources were printed, but as the area over which the scheme was operating became larger more was made available online, including downloadable PDFs of printed Reading Force materials, a more sophisticated website and an e-newsletter. Initially the resources were tied in to a series of localised submission dates and associated competitions, but as the area over which materials were made available extended, resources were made available year-round.

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<sup>3</sup> Email version of a standard Forces method of communication – the 'bluey'. Sent digitally by the Forces person from the place of deployment; then printed out and sent in the conventional post to the family at home.

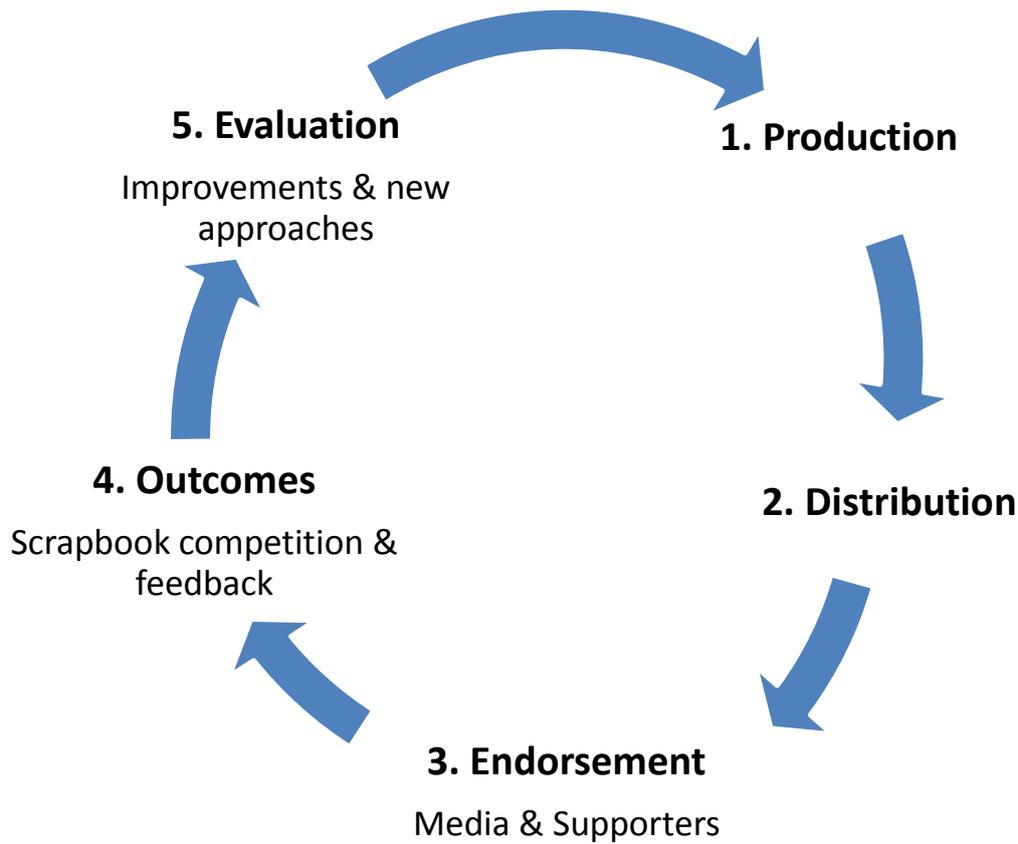


Figure 1: This diagram shows how the project developed as action research; feedback from the market to whom the scrapbooks were circulated, and evaluation of completed scrapbooks offered important information for the further development of materials.

2011 Pilot	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>Aldershot</b> Feb – July	<b>Four counties</b> Apr– Sept	<b>Four counties</b> Continuous	<b>National+Overseas</b> Continuous	<b>National+Overseas</b> Continuous
Army Serving	Army, Navy, RAF Serving	Army, Navy, RAF Serving	Army, Navy, RAF Serving + Reservists + Veterans	Army, Navy, RAF Serving + Reservists + Veterans
 RF ran for a few months from an official launch to a competition closing date. But this restricted availability for troops being deployed at other times of the year		RF runs continuously throughout the year with competitions closing in April and October		

Figure 2: The availability of *Reading Force* in its first four years. Throughout the period it has been available to all British Forces in the UK, including serving, injured, retired personnel and Reservists – and their families.

Given project constraints, a multi-agency approach was adopted; distributing information through as many channels as possible and monitoring feedback. All these methods of reaching the market proved effective to some extent, and this paper now continues to examine the associated opportunities and barriers of each route in more detail, as well as their cumulative impact. The following will be considered:

- Forces infrastructure
- Forces support mechanisms within the Services community
- Regional and local government
- Schools
- The media
- Other agencies targeting the Forces

### **Forces infrastructure**

Given that the project began in Aldershot, home of the British Army, and to 3,000 Forces families, this was an ideal opportunity to contact the potential audience directly, and at anticipated low cost, and early methods to disseminate materials and reach local families were pursued. Information was sent to the commanding and families officers of local units and leaflets were circulated through the pigeonholes of Service personnel within units.

Various barriers to communication were however quickly evident. Firstly there was a marked resistance from Service personnel to taking materials home, something that had been observed during Baverstock's role as Garrison Coordinator for the Federation of Army Wives in Osnabruck in 1991. The experience for *Reading Force* was similar, and trialling the circulation of leaflets through unit pigeonholes, it was found that information circulated in this way was often not accessed, or was disposed of, before it could be taken home and shared with the families. Security considerations meant that access to shared postal facilities was difficult, but it emerged that every shared distribution facility has a waste bin and many materials sent for families seemingly got no further. There was a reluctance to damage the project's reputation by encouraging a perception of the material as waste and so reliance on distribution through units was reduced.

Insertion in shared communication vehicles (e.g. the Aldershot garrison magazine) risked making the scheme seem 'official'. Forces personnel are extensively monitored, and this can have the impact of making families switch off from official schemes during their leisure time. In any case, lead times for such mechanisms were long and outside the anticipated operational time of the scheme. House-to-house delivery was possible but expensive and the pilot was running on a small budget. For security reasons, Forces accommodation is not featured on standard local road mapping and regular postings can mean consumer mailing lists are consistently unreliable – with a corresponding assumption that all information delivered is for someone else.

Unit welfare officers were identified as a useful means for getting the scheme better known, particularly given their key role in supporting families when spouses are away, for example by running coffee morning and days out. But over-identification of the scheme within the welfare systems also risked having the project perceived as one of use to families experiencing difficulties; and hence potentially a source of stigma. Unit welfare officers from various units within garrisons do get together at regular intervals, and so while it was technically possible to talk to several at the same time, finding out about the scheduling of such meetings was difficult and often such meetings

had a regular agenda which made it problematic for additional items to be added. As with all Forces contact, building relationships took a long time and frequently once contact was made with a relevant member of personnel they would then move on because of a posting, generally at least every two years.

### **Pre-tour briefings**

One of the most effective ways of reaching families likely to participate in *Reading Force* was to contact them before a family member departed on a period of time away, and preferably as part of the official pre-tour briefing. However there were several associated barriers to this relatively straightforward path towards engagement. Such briefings are generally organised by Unit Welfare Officers, who can be hard to reach, and as a new initiative, finding out about such opportunities took considerable effort; it was necessary to ask about units deploying and then find out about pre-tour briefings, rather than being routinely informed. In any case, a pre-established list of participants for such events was often already established and gaining a spot on the programme was difficult. Finally with limited staff resources attending all such events was simply not possible. A resource pack was developed including a guide booklet on how to run the scheme for welfare staff, and examples of scrapbook submissions. This could be despatched to those organising pre-tour briefings but while this meant information on RF was technically available, it did not replace the impact of a personal communication within the context of what you might do while your partners are away.

Regular contact with families offices post departure was again a successful route to recruiting participants in the scheme. Based on experience of observing the cycle of deployment, and anecdotal feedback from families and welfare staff, there was some evidence that mothers could be more open to hearing about activities and potential help a few weeks after a deployment has started; once the departure was over and a new stage in the cycle of deployment paradigm had begun.

Other specific communities were particularly hard to reach. Some families have opted to have a permanent base, with the Service person commuting to – in some cases utilising accommodation normally available to unmarried Forces personnel during the week, if vacancies exist. For such families, support during a tour would likely be local to where they are living, and often wider family-orientated rather than unit-based. Reservists and veterans (also entitled to *Reading Force*) were similarly hard to reach and monitor within existing support mechanisms. Reservists, increasingly relied upon within the Armed Forces, are based in their usual communities and can be very hard to reach; their children may be particularly isolated.

### **Forces support mechanisms within the Services community**

In addition to unit families offices, the Armed Forces seek to look after their families through a range of services that are based within the community, most notable of these are the HIVEs.<sup>4</sup> Each Forces unit has access to a HIVE, usually sited within a community centre or close to the local base shop from where they offer support to Services families. HIVEs are an ideal way to highlight initiatives likely to be of benefit to the community, and following the arrangement of specific briefings, HIVEs offered early enthusiasm and support for *Reading Force*. There were repeat requests for materials and reports from those manning the HIVEs on how they were being used within families.

The population using HIVEs was however self-selecting, and those making visits were perhaps the most proactive members of the community. Once installed, *Reading Force* material was competing for the attention of HIVE visitors; everything from local tourist attractions offering discounts to

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<sup>4</sup> This originally stood for Help, Information, Volunteer, Exchange, an advice bureau for Services families. HIVEs now operate in the RAF and Army; in 2015 the Navy and Marines renamed theirs 'Welfare and Information Support Centres'.

Forces families to transport information, generally within a small and over-crowded space. Enthusiasm from HIVE managers was a powerful means of support, but as the majority of those working in HIVEs are Services spouses, the inevitable changes in personnel and structure meant that links needed to be renewed on an ongoing basis. Due to restructuring of the Armed Forces, many HIVEs were subsequently closed, others forced to reduce their hours of opening and this impacted on the accessibility of *Reading Force*.

### **Regional and local government**

Wider local community support for the project was an early ambition, and both the regional governmental authority (Hampshire County Council) and the local authority (Rushmoor Borough Council) were approached. Both expressed their support and in particular desire to collaborate in connecting with a community that was of particular importance to them, but one they had consistently found hard to reach.

Timing was opportune. The process of engaging support for the specific needs of the Forces community received a boost with Department for Education's introduction of the Service Pupil Premium (SPP)<sup>5</sup> in 2011, for maintained schools in England as part of the commitment to delivering the Armed Forces Covenant.<sup>6</sup> The SPP offered schools additional funding for every Forces child on their roll. Schools bidding for funding were required to establish how many Forces children they had within their community, and this focussed helpful attention on the size of the Forces community within their school (Forces parents having not always previously identified themselves as such in order to promote the integration of their children and many schools therefore being unaware of the number of Service children on roll). *Reading Force* also fitted particularly well within Rushmoor Council's aims to promote inter-generational relationships, community stability and tolerance through the passing on of community values within the structures of family life and third-party childcare. Rushmoor expressed interest in not only the likely benefits to literacy and the designated community but also the scheme's potential adaption for other 'hard to reach' groups such as children of those in prison, or 'looked after' children within the care system.

While both regional and local councils were interested and supported, and provided early financial support for the project, the barriers that such administrations face in implementing community integration were shared by *Reading Force* administration: notably Service families' general geographical location in estates of bespoke accommodation, which invites their depiction as a faceless and pre-grouped community rather than individuals; pressure on resources and many other options for spending – particularly at a time of severe governmental cutbacks.

Overall, collaboration with regional and local government by *Reading Force* has considerably expanded the project team's understanding of how local government works, and highlighted future areas of potential development. Access to this network offered new opportunities for disseminating the scheme, and so far three invited presentations (e.g. Boorman, 2015) have been made at conferences organised by Public Policy Exchange<sup>7</sup> which provides an 'interface for policy discussion, debate and networking...and the opportunity to feed into future policy development across all areas of public policy.' Appearing on the same programme as MOD policy makers enabled the making of

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<sup>5</sup> SPP is designed to assist the school to provide mainly non-educational support (known as pastoral care) to these children. It is important to differentiate this from the Pupil Premium which is for 'raising the attainment of disadvantaged children'

<sup>6</sup> The Armed Forces Covenant is supported by the community covenant and the corporate covenant. The community covenant encourages local communities to support the armed forces community in their area and promote public understanding and awareness.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.publicpolicyexchange.co.uk> *Fulfilling our Commitment to the Armed Services Community: The Challenge for Local Authorities*

important connections. It should be noted that while such events attract significant audiences (100+ each time) and a shared desire to both understand the Forces community, and make support for their children and families more coherent is generally palpable, there is an acceptance that there are lots of gaps and inadequacies in provision. It was such a presentation that a philanthropic organisation attending made an offer of sponsorship to *Reading Force*. Over the period covered by this paper by local authority sign up for the Armed Forces Covenant improved understanding of the Forces community. Andrew Lloyd, Chief Executive of Rushmoor Borough Council became a trustee of *Reading Force* when it became a Charitable Incorporated Organisation in 2015. The project has also twice provided evidence to governmental enquiries (e.g. *House of Commons enquiry into Adult Literacy and Numeracy, 2014-15*).

### **Schools**

Given the project's emphasis on family communication, and the key role schools play for relocating Forces children, schools were a consistently important route to the market for *Reading Force* – and the early contacts with local schools in Aldershot played a particularly significant role in project development. Of notable importance was the establishment of a steering group drawn from senior management/nominated project support within local schools with a significant number of Forces pupils on their roll (ranging from 10-90%) in a total of 18 schools, that met at regular intervals throughout the initial phase of project development, and which identified several issues that arguably would not have been available without face-to-face contact.

For example, the group discussed the vocabulary that should be used in explaining *Reading Force* to teachers, and that while teachers are unlikely to respond to a 'reading scheme', as it sounds like assessed work, parents may view this term positively, and hence be more inclined to take part in a project that would benefit them, while ostensibly supporting the literacy of their children. How to make the project sound 'fun' rather than 'worthy' was also discussed, as was whether or not the term 'scrapbook' would be universally understood. Several of these schools held assemblies to introduce *Reading Force* and wrote letters to accompany materials sent home to parents. 3,000 scrapbooks were circulated. This group also hosted the project launch, held at The Wavell School (a mixed comprehensive for 11-16 year olds), but also involving children from Marlborough Infants (3-7) Newport Junior School (7-11) in 2010.

As the project expanded over a wider geographical area however, a number of barriers to effective dissemination through schools emerged. The main issue was consistently time. Schools are busy with the ongoing and effective delivery of the established curriculum, much of which requires measurement, and new governmental initiatives are added at regular intervals. *Reading Force* does not require administration within schools – it is essentially an activity to be organised at home – but its effective dissemination through schools is a very important channel to reaching families. Many schools did not reply to mailings and those that did respond – or that were contacted direct – regularly reported being too busy to consider another addition to their list of organisational involvements. Others saw involvement as a one off event, or only wanted to do it once before moving on to another initiative, preferring to change what is on offer annually.

Within schools that were interested, there was also the issue of which role/individual was best positioned to liaise with *Reading Force*. The project was several times highlighted as one likely to be of benefit to Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) and many were enrolled early as Reading Force Ambassadors. Whereas all interest within schools was welcome, there was concern that housing the scheme within the responsibility of the SENCO might arouse resistance from the scheme's wider designated beneficiaries. *Reading Force* staff wanted to see the scheme presented as being of interest to all Forces families within the school's community rather than offered just to a particular group of pupils with specific difficulties or being identified as 'curriculum support', but had

little say in how the school presented it to Service children, and whether it was made clear that it was an activity intended for the whole family. Since the launch of the Services Pupil Premium there are now more schools with dedicated personnel looking after Forces children, which makes it easier for *Reading Force* to access school communities.

There was also the issue of time for *Reading Force* staff. The process of building relationships with schools is resource intensive and with limited staffing resources it was difficult to implement schools liaison fully in person; there had to be reliance on general information dissemination methods such as postal mailings.

Physical space within schools was also a potential problem. The scheme delivers printed materials, the physicality of the scrapbook being put together by family reading groups being a key part of the experience, and this creates a requirement for storage within schools before the scrapbooks are distributed. While 25 school librarians are *Reading Force* Ambassadors, storage of the associated materials within their libraries can be difficult, often relating to the number of Forces children on the school roll. School libraries are, in any case, often under pressure as numbers on the school's roll rise, many have either been turned into teaching space (it's not uncommon to find library resources are now in a corridor) or been amalgamated into shared spaces with technology and learning support. Establishing display space consistently proved difficult.



Figure 3. The launch of *Reading Force* at Wavell School in 2012. Forces children at The Wavell School were joined by children from nearby Marlborough Infants School and Newport Junior School. In the front row are Carnegie medal winning author Meg Rosoff and Captain Keith Page, SO3 Ops O&D, the Services Project Liaison Manager appointed from within 145 (South) Brigade, based in Aldershot.

Another issue was how to standardize how the scheme is explained within schools, particularly once *Reading Force* staff had moved beyond the locality and communications relied on telephone calls

and materials sent through the post. It was suggested in the *Reading Force* introductory packs that one person in a school should take on the role of *Reading Force Ambassador*, and this could be a teacher, librarian, literacy coordinator or Service Pupils Champion (which became more common after the availability of the Service Pupil Premium in 2011). They should then be responsible for distributing materials, inviting families to take part. There were however regular reportings of schools who had been sent the scrapbooks but used them in unintended ways; as work books in school class instead of sending them home with families. *Reading Force* staff were concerned that the scheme being presented as coursework would deter family involvement.

There were also various levels of involvement within schools and the difficulty of matching scheme communication to levels of awareness and enthusiasm. *Reading Force* consistently sought to remain flexible; to provide sufficient information about the scheme to explain its use and value, but also to be available for those who wished to expand their involvement through a phone call or visit. There was a wide variety of engagement with the needs of Forces children. Some schools would take every opportunity to give positive activities/experiences to the Forces children, others would play down the specifics of Service life and the children in their care and therefore miss potentially beneficial opportunities. One instance was reported of a Service Pupil Champion who was told her pupils were not allowed to talk about Service life in assembly, as they had suggested they would like to. This was in contrast to the supportive teacher who set up a lunch time group for her Service children to do *Reading Force* together, because she was aware that their families would not take part in the scheme at home.

Formal school groups, organised as a result of the need to identify Forces pupils after the announcement of the Pupil Premium offered new opportunities for the use and recommendation of *Reading Force*. As a result, many schools – previously unaware of every Forces child, appointed someone within the school to monitor all potentially involved and have responsibility for Forces Families, and some used RF materials as the basis of group activities, often with great success:

*We liked reading this book together because all the books we had were really good books and I made lots of new friends. My group has had a lot of fun together and we would really like to do it again.*

*I also made new friends who I did not know they were Service children. I liked sharing my book with everybody and having lunch with them and having pizza with Mrs Rendle and Eleanor.*

Schools with fewer Forces children also emerged as a special category within *Reading Force*, needing particularly sensitive treatment. Families which have opted to be stationary in the family home, or living with extended family and with the Forces person moving between bases, may find their experience as Forces children is not widely understood within their schools. It was also discovered that schools without other Forces children were sometimes deliberately chosen by parents for precisely that reason: they do not wish their children to be 'labelled'. For example, feedback was received from one parent who had received RF material but did not wish to see her children highlighted as being any different, and in particular not identified as being from a Forces background. While this led to consideration of whether the needs for Forces children might be stronger where their numbers are smaller – the corresponding risk of isolation or lack of understanding of their particular situation being potentially greater – not having not registered their Forces background, and the school being consequently unaware, made the path to making RF materials available to them particularly difficult.

*I liked the fact that we could all get together and read a book as a family. Except we were missing one person. It was my Dad. He had moved away because of the army, and we stayed. But it was nice anyway because my mum has a full-time job and I have school and so does my sister, so we barely had time to spend together. So that's what I liked about it!*

In 2013, questionnairing of schools about their use of Reading Force produced a slim response, but provided a general picture of schools hearing about the scheme through the mailings (69%) with referral (13%) being the second most common route. The vast majority of schools who registered were primary (79%) with secondary (13%) and pre-schools (8%). The majority of schools responding positively were junior schools, this relating to the colourful appearance and child-friendly layouts of the materials. Focus groups with secondary-age children confirmed that the materials are not attractive to them, appearing too childish. Although current materials are technically relevant to families with children of all ages, and can be presented as an option for older siblings to develop with younger family members, it will be necessary to pilot older looking materials before seeking more widespread adoption of the scheme in secondary schools.

### **The media**

Media coverage was one of the key means by which *Reading Force* could become better known, and there was early interest in its activities in both local and national press. For example, Aldershot Garrison Radio was very supportive, offering an opportunity to be interviewed with regular reminders being aired by the station presenter, and the station's wider function as Aldershot's local radio station extended the reach. There was also extensive coverage in the national press (Page, *The Guardian*, 2011; *Independent on Sunday*, 2011), in local press (Bardsley, *Oxford Mail*, 2011; *The Witney Gazette*, 2012; Scammel, *The Portsmouth News*, 2012; Nassif, *The Portsmouth News*, 2012; *Royal Borough Observer*, 2013) and in the educational press (*Times Educational Supplement*, 2012; *First News*, 2012) and within supporting higher education outlets (e.g. Gordon, 2013) and the publishing press (Campbell, 2012; Gordon, 2012). There was also extensive coverage on both local radio (e.g. BBC South 2012; Heart FM; Express FM, Baverstock 2012b,c,d) and British Forces Broadcasting Services radio programmes (Baverstock, 2011, 2012a). Several authors who had participated in *Reading Force* events also wrote about both their experience and the wider scheme, either on their own or the *Reading Force* website (e.g. Gibbons, 2012; White, 2014; Moss, 2016). More general coverage about the Forces, for example the television series such as *Military Wives Choir* (Malone, 2011) have led to a broader understanding of the impact that a government's defence policy has on the day-to-day lives of the Forces community – and opportunities for coverage of *Reading Force*. A full list of media coverage can be found on the *Reading Force* website <http://www.readingforce.org.uk/index.php/media-and-press>

Pursuit of media interest was however very time-consuming, and with limited staff resources, in 2012 a relationship was established with a media agency with particular links to the publishing industry, to manage press relations on behalf of the project as a whole. Although both their interest and relevant experience appeared strong, difficulties in establishing a working relationship emerged relatively quickly. As *Reading Force* is most likely to be used when Forces families are experiencing particular pressures, it was being used by potentially vulnerable families. It had been anticipated that the project managers could speak to the media on behalf of the scheme, particularly given their own first-hand experience of Services life.

The media is however motivated by drama and it quickly emerged that rather than speaking on behalf of the project, the agency was being asked for individual interviewees from the Forces community. Such contact was trialled with individual participants but it was quickly found that accessing those involved with the scheme and preparing them for participation, with the strong likelihood that scheduled coverage could be dropped should a bigger news item arrive, was both

inappropriate and overly invasive of the privacy of a vulnerable group, and highly labour intensive from the project management point of view. It was concluded that specific and continually changing needs of programmes, and their ongoing (re)scheduling, were not helpful to the beneficiaries.

After expiry of the initial contract, *Reading Force* returned to relying on its own efforts and has secured coverage of individual campaigns, most usually their launch and conclusion, in media local to where the initiative was taking place and through specific Forces publications, that understand the specific requirements and sensitivities of working with the Forces community and which have been keen to support *Reading Force*. There are many potential outlets for the dissemination. To take printed publications (now each with an accompanying website for updates), some are service-specific dependents (e.g. *Army & You*; *Armed Forces Families Journal*, 2011; *Homeport*, 2012; *Navy News*, 2013); others related to function (e.g. *Equipped*); others unit specific (e.g. each garrison has its own magazine). Such publications offer a direct route to the constituency for *Reading Force* and also an ongoing avenue to further coverage, as once informed about the scheme they appreciate being updated on new information, and after features have appeared it has regularly been observed that reader enquiries follow. The routine collection of quotations and project endorsements from *Reading Force* participants, both from the scrapbooks submitted and general correspondence, was systematised, and once the material had been anonymised, and permission gained for its wider circulation, this provided a wealth of information to use in media features and updates. This offered a true flavour of how the scheme works in practice without the need to secure individual interviewees.

2013	2014	2015
Four counties	National+Overseas	National+Overseas
Tri-Services Serving	Tri-Services Serving + Reservists	Tri-Services Serving + Reservists + Veterans
Multi-agency working Email campaign Partnerships Welfare briefings Competition/prize	Building database Multi-agency working Mailing samples Events Incentives Web/social media Newsletters Partnerships Competition/prize	Building database Multi-agency working Mailing samples Events Incentives Web/social media Newsletters Partnerships Competition/prize

Figure 4: A summary of the route taken to reach the designated population and the agencies through which the project operated once it no longer relied on personal links.

#### Collaboration with other agencies targeting the Forces

A multi-agency approach to reaching Forces families emerged early as important; families were more likely to take part in the scheme if they had heard of it before, and a wide variety of routes led

to a decision to participate – as well as supporting additional word of mouth. While personal contact with the market is optimal, as the territory over which *Reading Force* was available increased, more non-personal direct marketing was needed. It became necessary to plan materials for different target approaches and the tone of voice and vocabulary used in each of these was of crucial importance. However, given shortage of funds such information sought both to answer the questions of those who had heard of the scheme before, and introduce it to those unfamiliar, all with the same document, backed up by a website and an email address for further information and enquiries.

Receiving a grant from the Armed Forces Covenant Libor Fund, and in particular attendance at events which demonstrated the diversity of organisations working to support Forces families, such as the Army Families Federation conferences and pre-tour briefings, brought an increased awareness of opportunities for collaboration. The Forces are served by a range of separate charitable organisations, and although their aims are similar – promoting and ensuring the welfare of the Forces and their families – the history of collaboration has not been particularly strong, particularly with the arrival of *Help for Heroes*, which from a standing start (founded 2007) has attracted a very high media profile. There is evident confusion within the public about the differences between these charities, and reported confusion when the marketing activities of one have led to charitable donations for others.

Given that each charity has its own infrastructure, and they are supporting essentially the same group of people, *Reading Force* has sought to build alliances, and benefit from structures that can be shared. Significant links were established with ABF The Soldiers' Charity, (formerly the Army Benevolent Fund) to extend *Reading Force* within nursery schools and playgroups, research having revealed that awareness of their organisation was higher within families with older children and proportionately less within families with very young children, and as *Reading Force* participants were drawn more from families with younger children, they saw this as a significant way of reaching a younger Forces demograph. *Reading Force* has now collaborated since 2014 with the Tri-Service *Red, White and Blue Day*<sup>8</sup> (primary age children offered the chance to dress up in red, white and blue and make a donation to demonstrate their support for the Forces) and their associated story writing competition which *Reading Force* management have helped to judge.

In terms of developing links with these organisations, it has proven important to build contacts at all levels of the organisation, not just between those who established the partnership or were signatories to the initial agreement. For most organisations with potential funds to allocate, it has been proven important to find a specific project over which collaboration can be arranged and success monitored, rather than requesting a donation or grant for general overheads. For example, when working with ABF The Soldiers' Charity a new 'Little Ones' scrapbook was developed, specifically designed for families with younger children (with larger spaces for those with less developed motor skills). Such initiatives can help with the costs by sharing resources, but also give both increased credibility and reach. Similarly, a successful partnership with *Storybook Waves*<sup>9</sup> was developed, whereby children got a copy of the book read by their absent parent, and a *Reading Force* scrapbook.

The project has also made ongoing attempts to share information with others studying the impact of change on the military. Papers have been presented on *Reading Force* at the British Psychology Society Conference, Military subsection, and through the conferences organised by the Service Children's Support Network, based in High Wycombe. A recent link has been built with a researcher

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<sup>8</sup> RWBD is run jointly by 3 charities - ABF The Soldiers' Charity, The RAF Benevolent Fund and The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.aggies.org.uk/storybook-waves-2/>

into PTSD at Surrey University who plans to consider *Reading Force* as part of the support structure available to promote mental wellbeing among Forces families.

### **Establishing direct communications with families**

Since inception the project has relied, as outlined above, on multi-agency access to the community, as a way of both maximising opportunities to reach the market and combating the essential instability of the target population. Increasingly however, opportunities for communicating direct have also been pursued, including within the scrapbook a postcard inviting families to register both for participation in *Reading Force* and a free book.

While the postal addresses of Army and RAF families<sup>10</sup> change constantly, due to postings and rebasings, families seem to maintain their email address as a permanent method of communication. *Reading Force* has a high repeat factor, with families who have taken part in the past keen to do so in future, and it emerged that participants had sufficient trust of the organisation to give their email contact information where sought.

In the process, there has been important learning about additional particular circumstances in which the project can be useful. For example, it was already known that *Reading Force* benefitted families separated by postings and deployments, but the scheme's value emerged in a range of additional specific circumstances such as family breakdown and long term illness; reintegrating at the end of the tour when those who have been separated for a long time need to be able to connect again; coping with long term injury or permanent disablement.

*Reading Force* has had a particular value for children from a Forces background whose parents were divorced or separated. Once the family were no longer living in Service accommodation, and hence dependents no longer included within official communities or counting mechanisms, project involvement has provided a valuable reinforcement of Forces connections. Given the extent to which Forces families see their identity as coming from their Forces role (Ricketts, 2009) this is significant.

*Thank you for taking time to look at our scrapbook. Completing it helped myself and ex husband have a focus with our children. We all very much enjoyed taking part.*

Finally, the gathering of data about the Forces, and its maintenance into a contact database, is likely to be a very useful resource for effective future connection and development of *Reading Force*.

### **Assessing and measuring the outcomes of *Reading Force* activities**

It was always important to assess the outcomes of *Reading Force*, but the gaining of greater public funding increased the imperative to closely monitor success. At project inception, within Aldershot, it was relatively straightforward to rely on local knowledge of the schools; to collect submitted scrapbooks, return them after feedback and allocate prizes. As the scheme grew however, and external funding was received, more formal arrangements for accounting and tracking were needed.

A variety of different methods of assessment were established, from charting the number of scrapbooks distributed, and free books requested, to qualitatively measuring the depth of engagement demonstrated by those taking part. Organisations (e.g. schools, HIVEs) participating in administration were questioned, and feedback sought. While there were ongoing difficulties in obtaining a full picture, some statistics can be offered:

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<sup>10</sup> Naval families are more commonly stable, with the Forces member travelling to their posting on a daily or weekly basis.

### Key statistics

From 2011-2015 *Reading Force* has given out over 70,000 scrapbooks to Forces families; gifted over 6,300 free books to Service children, from birth to young adult, and worked with over 500 schools and preschools to distribute project materials. The scheme has also been offered through welfare organisations, HIVEs, community groups and at Service family events, presented at military related conferences, seminars and forums and through scrapbook competitions, prizes and certificates have been awarded to over 500 Service children. Arrangements were also set up with children’s advocacy groups such as HMS Heroes<sup>11</sup> and working through SCE<sup>12</sup> overseas schools.

In general, the further the project moved from personal contact, the lower the number of scrapbooks returned. The figures break down as follows:

	2011 Pilot	2012	2013	2014	2015
	<b>Aldershot</b> Feb – July	<b>Four counties</b> Apr– Sept	<b>Four counties</b> Continuous	<b>National+ Overseas</b> Continuous	<b>National+ Overseas</b> Continuous
Scrapbooks distributed	2,000	8,000	5,000	19,300	14,100
Organisations and schools distributing materials		122	90	366	300
Books gifted (postcards or website request)	n/a as not offered	n/a as not offered		2,000	796 (postcards/w ebsite) + 2,000 at Roadshow
<b>Scrapbooks returned for submission to competition</b>	<b>23 (1.1%)</b>	<b>16 (0.2%)</b>	<b>9 (0.2%)</b>	<b>86 (0.5%)</b>	<b>79 (0.5%)</b>

Figure5: Scrapbook distribution and return, 2010-2015

In addition to monitoring scrapbooks returned, other methods of gaining market feedback on the value and benefits of *Reading Force* have been pursued. For example, in 2012 a telephone survey of

<sup>11</sup> A tri-service and national support group and network of after-school clubs for the children of Service men and women and their relatives <http://www.plymouthcurriculum.swgfl.org.uk/hmsheroes>

<sup>12</sup> Service Children’s Education. SCE provides schools and educational support for children of the UK armed forces, Ministry of Defence personnel and MOD sponsored organisations stationed overseas <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/service-childrens-education>

participating schools was undertaken with a random selection of headteachers, all of whom stressed that they wished to remain involved with the scheme. The Headteacher of Harestock Primary School in Winchester commented:

*Reading Force had a very positive impact on the Service Families who took part, encouraging the sharing of books with family members. Our Service Families Support Worker supported the children through this venture and we are as a school really excited about launching Reading Force again this year.*

In December 2014 a survey of participants drew 91 responses from a total mailing of 500 (18.2%), again with very positive responses. 88% of responders had shared the book or talked about it and 56% had used a *Reading Force* scrapbook. The book had been shared with parents (74%), siblings (37%), grandparents (32%) and friends/other family members (19%), confirming anecdotal feedback that the project impacts across both nuclear and wider family. In sharing the book, 29% of respondents had shared the book with someone living else away from your home, 21% with someone on deployment and methods of sharing included Skype/FaceTime (33%), phone (23%), with only 6% by mail or e-bluey. 93% of respondents rated *Reading Force* either 4 or 5 out of 5. Respondents were split roughly half for the Army, and a quarter each from the Navy/Marines and RAF. Reasons for not taking part were largely to do with insufficient time and the competing demands of younger children.

A survey emailed to schools participating in the 2015 Road Show to ten schools with a high density of Forces families, produced similarly positive responses. All reported that the project had brought about increased enthusiasm for reading, and in one school it was reported that subsequent SATS results for literacy were higher than anticipated.

Schools additionally commented:

*Our primary aim was to promote engagement with the community with so much mobility and to engage parents further. It did this as we had our highest turn out of parents to any reading event we have held. Esther Brown, Carnagill Community Primary School, North Yorkshire*

*We particularly struggle to engage Service families, so it was really encouraging to see so many families attending after school fete with their children. Many service children do not have strong (male) role models for reading, so it was great to have both Tom & Jim speaking to the pupils. Chris Baker, Bulford St Leonard's Primary School, Wiltshire*

*It enabled a highly effective focus on the value of reading, and the 'after shocks' are still being felt, with children regularly requesting copies of the books. Ian Denison, Downlands Community Primary School, Dorset*

A survey was emailed to 120 parents/carers who attended the after-school fete with their children. 30 parents/carers responded. Unfortunately many did not answer all the questions in the survey, so while the following data is useful, it reflects the responses of a minority.

- **10.7% of parents/carers** who attended the fete were male
- When asked 'Did you enjoy the family fete?' on a scale of 1 –**38.1%** chose 10 and **28.6%** chose 8
- **90.5%** of parents/carers said they thought their children enjoyed the Roadshow
- When asked 'Has the Roadshow inspired you to read more, or encouraged your family to read more?' **76.2%** of parents/carers answered 'yes'

- **70%** of parents/carers said they had not heard of *Reading Force* before the Roadshow
- **60%** of parents/carers answered that the Roadshow made them more interested in reading with their children
- **95%** of parents/carers picked up a *Reading Force* scrapbook at the fete; **63.2%** said they have used it or will use it, a further **31.6%** were not sure
- **38.9%** think using the scrapbook is a good way to keep in touch, a further **38.9%** think the scrapbook is a good way to have a shared experience while they or their partner is deployed or away on training or exercise, and **100%** think it is a fun activity for children

Children were also surveyed and 150 pre-Roadshow surveys and 225 post-Roadshow surveys were completed. A 32% majority of eight year olds answered the pre-Roadshow survey, in comparison to a 48% majority of ten year olds answering the post-Roadshow survey and any comparisons must be mindful of this inconsistency. The percentage of boys and girls answering both surveys was balanced equally.

The children who did complete the surveys answered only one of the three, so it has not been possible to build a developmental picture of 'before', 'after' and 'later'. But overall we can identify:

- **3% increase** in number of children reading with family after the Roadshow
- **8% increase** in number of children reading every day/almost everyday/few times a week after the Roadshow
- **8% decrease** in number of children rarely/never reading after the Roadshow
- **18% increase** in number of children reading for information outside of class after the Roadshow
- **19.6% increase** in children reading fiction and an **11% increase** in children reading magazines, a **13.8 % increase** in children reading comics or graphic novels, a **27.6 increase** in reading non-fiction books after the Roadshow (the higher proportion of 10 year olds answering should be taken into account when considering the type of reading matter children were reading)
- A combined **14% increase** in children reading with brothers, sisters and grandparents after the Roadshow, as opposed to only reading with parents/carers

Feedback was also continually gained from those involved with the scheme; this was mostly spontaneously offered when scrapbooks were returned or given via the *Reading Force* website:

*It felt really good to share a favourite book and I know that sharing is a good thing to do. Thanks for your help Mrs Bird you made me think that reading is fun from all the words you said.' 2012 Participant (Mrs Bird was Headteacher of Marlborough Infants School and a member of the original Aldershot project steering group).*

While more direct responses from participants would help evaluate the scheme more effectively, it is helpful to consider wider practice within the creative economy for seeking to establish the benefits of projects that have a broader potential impact than is immediately countable. Thus media organisations running advertising campaigns (arguably a form of practice as research) have regularly thought laterally about how to put a numerical value on the potential effectiveness of propositions through metrics such as 'opportunities to see' or 'potential eye traffic'. Museums and galleries count 'footfall' without necessarily how long visitors stay or how much they engage. Similarly, magazine publishers regularly make claims for the impact of a publication, based on their understanding of how their individual readers manage the publication they buy, and thus often concentrate on 'readership' (the estimated number of people accessing each copy based on a noted tendency to pass copies on) rather than its circulation (the number sold). 'Circulation' in any case needs further

interrogation as it may include copies circulated to newsagents and newsstands but not sold. It's becoming commonplace for media to count their influence according to their followers on social media rather than their paid membership/circulation. The Society of Authors for example has a membership of around 10,000 but a Twitter following of over 29,000.

### **Other metrics for establishing project effectiveness**

- 1. Analysis of the scrapbooks returned.** These were an effective testament to the value of the project within its target audience, often revealing significant engagement and contributions by several members of the same family. In considering the scrapbooks, for the awarding of prizes, several criteria were used including: the number of individuals involved; the depth of engagement and range of communication media involved (skype, pictures, email, letters, handwritten contributions). Many of the submissions scored high on all criteria.
- 2. Wider use of the materials.** Several of the schools involved in Aldershot asked if any scrapbooks not circulated to Forces children could be used more generally in promoting literacy within the school population, thus validating the usefulness of the material in encouraging reading for pleasure.
- 3. Commendation by policy makers.** Formal contribution to policy. Information about the project was passed to the organisation Service Children in State Schools (SCISS). *Reading Force* was isolated as an example of good practice and nominated by Amanda Rowley, Headteacher of the Wavell School for special attention of the Department for Education, who noted the project as an example of good practice and sent representation to two meetings of the Aldershot steering group. The project twice had letters of commendation from the Prime Minister and members of the management team were invited to present the scheme to the Duchess of Cornwall at a special reception for Forces families.
- 4. Formal contributions to policy-making groups.** Reading Force was twice invited to give evidence to parliamentary enquiries relating to educational performance and literacy.
- 5. Direct involvement with Forces families.** Families registered directly with *Reading Force*, and often took part in sequential years.
- 6. Project feedback.** Qualitative feedback received by participants in the project has consistently been engaged and detailed, with a high value placed on taking part.

### **Why accessing data and hence precise analysis has proven difficult**

Practice as research projects raise difficulties for those more accustomed to traditional academic research. There is no complete research process, pre-planned and then delivered, to analyse and consider in retrospect – and on which to base consequent action. More often, observations are being made in real time, and recorded as the project develops, in order to assess and analyse what is taking place – and decide what should happen next. The particular issues of seeking to work through various channels have been explored; additional barriers to project effectiveness came from the nature of the project itself, and included:

- 1. The project was not necessarily containable within the time-frame specified.** The project relied on a number of stages: a group of family and friends hearing about the project; understanding what was involved and deciding to participate; choosing a book all would read; agreeing to discuss it as a shared activity; implementing what had been decided upon and motivating participation. This was a complicated and coordinated series of involvements and relied on significant associated administration and the allocation of time e.g. reading being completed within a particular period of time; circulation of the book (if multiple copies were not bought); completion of the scrapbook; its despatch to *Reading Force*.
- 2. The number of participants exceeded the number of scrapbooks returned.** There were regular reports from those distributing *Reading Force* materials (notably HIVEs and schools)

that families were participating and finding the process useful, but this did not equate to the number of scrapbooks submitted. Various reasons may be suggested from families starting the project and planning to complete it at some point, to families using the project to emphasize reading as a family activity but not completing a scrapbook. It is also known that some families 'saved' the project for their next separation, and its operation thus it fell outside the period of monitoring. Once *Reading Force* was operating over a larger geographical area, many more prizes were needed and free books and certificates were offered rather than the more glamorous incentives of the first year of operation. This may have impacted on participation levels.

3. **The project was not necessarily best contained within the format provided.** The project sought to promote shared reading and improve communication, but this could take place without completing a scrapbook, and thus for families to be project participants without offering any measurable outcome. As an example of this in practice, a playgroup in Camberley developed their own scrapbooks which were seen by *Reading Force* management only because a local health visitor who represented Book Start spotted them and asked if she could show and take personal responsibility for returning to the families involved. Without this *Reading Force* management would have been unaware of the impact of their scheme within this group. There may have been other similar related developments.
4. **The number of scrapbooks returned for feedback and analysis decreased as the project moved away from its first geographical base.** Located in Aldershot, based on personal contact with local schools from whom scrapbooks could be collected and returned in person, the project necessarily moved to a model which although promising careful treatment of the scrapbook, and its return by recorded post, required participants to post the scrapbook to an unknown third party.
5. **Effective engagement with the project promoted personal thoughts and responses.** But those involved did not necessarily want to share them; either with their immediate family or project administration. Anecdotally, teenagers reported that they would rather share thoughts on their reading with each other than with their parents, and this has led to related initiatives for *Reading Force* such as *Reading Force Buddies*, trialled in Risedale Sports and Community College in 2014, to be reported on at a later date.
6. **Restricted access to the Forces population**  
In order to protect them, and the work that they do, particularly at times of heightened security, information about their whereabouts, and access to them, is necessarily restricted.
7. **The natural reticence of the target population to be observed and recorded**  
Service families are used to being monitored and recorded, through many official channels, and there may be reticence from the community towards from wives and partners receiving information directly and creating new obligations. This is a market whose privacy settings are instinctively high.

## Conclusion

While barriers to reaching and working with Forces families remain, and will continue as part of the structure that organizes and protects their operation, they are in some cases breaking down. Government initiatives have highlighted the specific needs of the Forces community, and both a higher profile of charitable organizations supporting their specific needs and more media coverage of the Forces have brought about a widened empathy for Forces families; a broader understanding of their lifestyle and the specific challenges they face. At the same time, social media and the

potential for life online have offered new ways for Forces families to remain in touch, and provided them with a network that potentially outlasts each physical move. *Reading Force* has benefitted, and drawn on, these various trends.

Looking ahead, at the core of *Reading Force* will remain a range of partnerships which seek to maintain and expand delivery of the key operational elements. The organisation will continue to rely on a range of intermediaries – Service welfare units, schools, libraries and community groups – and these relationships will be marked by an ongoing determination to capture data and related information in order to develop a direct relationship with those involved, and more effectively research and analyse the impact the scheme is having on the Forces community, their wider friends and families. This will work towards ensuring that those running the scheme know how it is being received; opportunities for service development and improvement being identified – and the messages of most relevance to the target beneficiaries communicated.

But in addition to formalized partnerships, *Reading Force* will seek to maintain the strong local and community involvement on which project expansion has relied and which has promoted the scheme's highly personal feel. New methods of reporting associated activity online, in addition to asking that scrapbooks are returned to *Reading Force* management, are being explored.

In summary, while barriers to the Forces community necessarily remain in place, in order to protect them and the work that they do, it is an expectation that delivery through both formal structures and word of mouth will lead to *Reading Force* continuing to offer a valuable resource to the Services community, leading to its embedding as a core resource for the Forces with a sustainable future, with income secure from government, private and corporate funding. In the process, in addition to promoting effective communication through shared reading within Forces families, it will continue to encourage a wider appreciation of the special conditions of the Services life, and their role within society – not least by the Forces community, and their wider families, themselves.

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