

Warwickshire Armed Forces Spouses Development Programme: Final Report



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Executive Summary

“(What surprised me was) the speed of change in everyone’s thinking and actions. Everyone on the course spoke of fundamental change to their lives in just 10 weeks.”

Rebecca, AF Spouse

The Armed Forces Spouse Development Programme was originally conceived to support Armed Forces spouses to improve their employment opportunities and/or develop businesses/micro-businesses. The programme was designed with 3 key components, which make it different to other similar programmes:

- Provision of 1:1 Coaching sessions at the beginning and end of the programme
- The programme lasting approximately 3 months, which gives participants the time and space for reflection, discussion with family and friends and exploration of different avenues
- The inclusion of ‘stepping stone’ sessions to enable participants to meet and hear from a variety of organisations who might be able to support them through the next stage of their individual journey

There were several serious setbacks to the programme. Firstly, the loss of two key staff who were involved in the consultation, design and development of the programme who left their posts. Secondly, the multiple and ongoing problems caused by the Covid pandemic.

Whilst every effort was made to have a physical face to face element of the programme, it was ultimately decided to take the course fully online. This, however, did open the opportunity of spouses from outside of Warwickshire to take part in the programme. Support was provided by the Families Federations and others to do this.

There were 20 expressions of interests of which 13 participants enrolled on the programme. Two dropped out within the first few weeks as a result of securing jobs, while two chose not to continue due to personal reasons.

Funding of £17077 was secured from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust plus an added £1500 from the Armed Forces Covenant Team at Warwickshire County Council (WCC) as a contribution to childcare costs. The total cost was £18540 with £5278 taken from the Trust’s grant contribution. The principal grant-funded cost was that of the Coach with all other costs for staff time from WCC and Families Federation contributions being met by their respective organisations.

The design and implementation of the programme were a success. All 9 participants experienced a positive outcome with regards to work/employment or business because of the programme. Four out of 9 got their job of choice within 10 weeks of the programme, 3 gained clarity in how they could move forward with their own business, 1 changed their job hunt focus in a positive way and 1 made the decision not to pursue getting a job.

Introduction

“(What surprised me was) the speed of change in everyone’s thinking and actions. Everyone on the course spoke of fundamental change to their lives in just 10 weeks.”

Rebecca, AF Spouse

Background

There is considerable evidence that spouses of serving Armed Forces personnel are disadvantaged in entering, developing and maintaining their careers or developing or progressing business opportunities. There are perceived and actual barriers to their development and progression (See Lyonette C et al (2018), Military Spousal/partner employment: identifying the barriers and support required, AFF/University of Warwick and N.Caddick et al (2018), Evaluation of MOD Spouse Employment Support Trial, FiMT/Anglia Ruskin University).

The Armed Forces Spouse Development Programme was originally conceived to support Armed Forces spouses to improve their employment opportunities and/or develop businesses/micro-businesses. The ethos of the project was to provide an opportunity for them to explore their own passions, skills, needs and goals and to facilitate their journey in finding their own ways forward, appropriate to their life stage, commitments and situation.

One of the solutions was to enable spouses to understand and make use of their transferable skills to move between different types of careers and/or develop a micro-business that can work around their lives as spouses. The expectation was that any micro-business would be portable whether physical or electronic in nature. As well as the potential economic benefit to AF families there would be a lasting positive impact on the wellbeing and self-esteem of spouses taking part in the programme.

Design

The original programme was developed by the following:

- Armed Forces Covenant Project Worker, Communities and Partnerships, Warwickshire County Council
- Development Worker, Adult and Community Learning Services, Warwickshire County Council
- Community Development Worker, Army Welfare Service

The programme was designed with 3 key components, which make it different to other similar programmes:

- Provision of 1:1 coaching sessions at the beginning and end of the programme
- The programme lasting approximately 3 months, which gives participants the time and space for reflection, discussion with family and friends and exploration of different avenues

- The inclusion of 'stepping stone' sessions to enable participants to meet and hear from a variety of organisations who might be able to support them through the next stage of their individual journey.

The programme was planned to run with 2 cohorts of 10 participants using a mix of face to face 1:1 and groupwork sessions delivered within the two Army Stations in Warwickshire: 30 Signal Regiment at Gamecock Barracks and Defence Munitions Services at Kineton Station). The programme would identify key skills and barriers that AF spouses experience as a group and individually and seek ways to support them in overcoming those barriers. The programme would be tailored to the individual needs of the spouses and use personal development processes as a means of overcoming perceived and actual barriers.

The programme was designed specifically with Army Spouses in mind. The tutor/coach delivering the programme from Adult and Community Learning is an experienced life coach who holds accreditation from the International Coach Academy and is certified with the International Coach Federation. She also has lots of experience in empowering mothers to construct career action plans.

The 'stepping stones' element was to include both civilian and military charitable or public sector organisations which could support the employability or business potential of the AF spouses.

Childcare provision was fully budgeted for to remove any potential barrier from accessing the opportunity offered. Arrangements were made with Peter Pan Nursery at Gamecock Barracks and Temple Herdewyke Primary School and Nursery.

Pre and Post Programme Surveys

To measure the impact of the programme, participants were asked to complete a survey at the beginning and the end of the programme. Questions included indications of confidence levels, degree of support and Individuals' general happiness / contentment levels.

Happiness/ contentment levels were measured using similar methodology to the United Nations' World Happiness Report (2014) asking participants to think of a ladder, with the best possible life for them being a 10, and the worst possible life being a 0. They were then asked to rate their own current lives on that 0 to 10 scale in the following 12 areas; Work/Career, Personal Growth & Learning, Money, Health, Fitness, Physical Environment, Spirituality, Fun-Leisure-Recreation, Children, Significant Other, Extended Family and Friends (unfortunately the measure for Friends was not able to be included due to a typing error in the final survey).

Setbacks and Complications

There were several serious setbacks to the programme.

Firstly, the loss of two key staff who were involved in the consultation, design and development of the programme who left their posts. These were the Development Worker from Adult and Community Learning (WCC) and the Community Development Worker

(CDW) from the Army Welfare Service. Additionally, the CDW post was left vacant for over a year.

Secondly, the Covid pandemic. The impact of the pandemic was felt in several ways:

- The start of the programme was delayed for a long time. As a result, some of the spouses who were originally consulted and interested in the programme had moved because of their Service person’s career move.
- A ‘Meet & Greet’ session to introduce the tutor/coach and the programme in more detail was arranged as a face-to-face meeting at both sites but was cancelled at the last moment due to a Covid outbreak at Gamecock Barracks. The necessary implementation of MOD ‘Force Protection Measures’ meant no external personnel were allowed on camp.
- Reluctance of spouses to engage with and sign up for the programme despite marketing through Welfare Teams, Nurseries, Facebook and ‘Coffee and Chat’ sessions. The impact of more than 12 months of ‘lockdown’ type restrictions meant people were reluctant to engage in opportunities both on and off camp. This is comparable to civilian communities who have seen a drop off in take up of community initiatives.

Modifications

Whilst every effort was made to have a physical face to face element of the programme, it was ultimately decided to take the course fully online. This, however, did open the opportunity of spouses from outside of Warwickshire to take part in the programme.

Utilising support from the Naval, Army and RAF Families Federations a flyer was produced and distributed through the Families Federations, Service Welfare Teams, Armed Forces Covenant Officers network and HIVE. Although this happened over a matter of days there was interest from across the UK and AF spouses based on the East and West Coast of the US.

Funding

Funding of £17077 was secured from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust plus an added £1500 from the Armed Forces Covenant Team at WCC as a contribution to childcare costs.

The breakdown of costs is:

	Original budget	Actual spend AFCFT	Actual spend ACL	Actual Spend AFC
Tuition costs	3920	4844		
Travel expenses	1000			
Childcare	12180	261		
Social enterprise tutor (coach)	277	86		
Venue costs	3720			
Learning platform licence	0	87		

Organisation, management and review (In kind contribution)	4260		10837	2425
Evaluation	1200			
TOTAL	26557	5278	10837	2425

The substantial redesign of the programme meant that project costs were very different from those originally anticipated. As the course was completely online and Childcare was only offered to Warwickshire participants there was a £12k underspend in this budget. Similarly, both the venue budget and travel expenses were unused. The planned evaluation through a local University was a victim of Covid with the loss of key contacts between WCC and the University. Conversely, the extended timescales and major revisions to the project scope and delivery model meant that management and administration costs were greatly increased.

The total planned project budget was underspent by £9,238, although as a result of the expenditure patterns described above the budget lines identified against the AFCT grant were underspent by £11,799.

Programme Uptake and Completion

We had 20 expressions of interests for the programme, of which 13 participants enrolled on the course. Nine participants completed the programme: six British Army Spouses and three Royal Air Force Spouses. Four of these were from Warwickshire, the prime target audience, but others were drawn nationally from Surrey, Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Derby, Southampton, Wiltshire, Lincoln and Staffordshire .

Programme Impact

Programme Impact

The impact of the Armed Forces Spouse Development Programme was substantial.

Overall participants experienced a large boost in both confidence (39% increase) and a feeling of being supported (24% increase). Participants also reported an overall increase in their happiness /contentment with their lives, particularly around Personal Growth and Learning (46% increase), Work/Career (30% increase), Spirituality (33% increase) and Money (23% increase).

In the final group session, participants reported feeling much more positive about their situations and the future. Participants shared feelings of being more able to support their spouse because of the shift they had experienced in their own wellbeing and were now feeling more hopeful and excited about the future.

The biggest difference overall was that being given permission to work on and rediscover what as important to them as individuals allowed them the clarity of what they wanted for the future. In having this clarity, they felt more in control and sure of the direction they wanted to take for their own career and the life they want to lead.

The key factor element in their extraordinary forward movement in such a short amount of time (10 weeks) was participants feeling seen, heard and respected as individuals. This was due to both the personal care and attention given to them by the coach, and the support and camaraderie experienced in the group sessions bearing witness to and supporting others in similar situations in a safe, non-judgemental and supportive environment.

“I am feeling so much more confident with personal growth and work/career. The course has really helped me get a focus on which direction I want to take. Before the course I felt stuck. Sharing a common ground with the other learners and having one to ones with Tina has been fantastic. Tina gave me real grounding and clarity. I felt so much more confident to move forward with my career choices and belief in myself. This course is a must for anyone like me. I am very grateful for being given the chance to join. I am feeling more positive about my future and what I can achieve.”

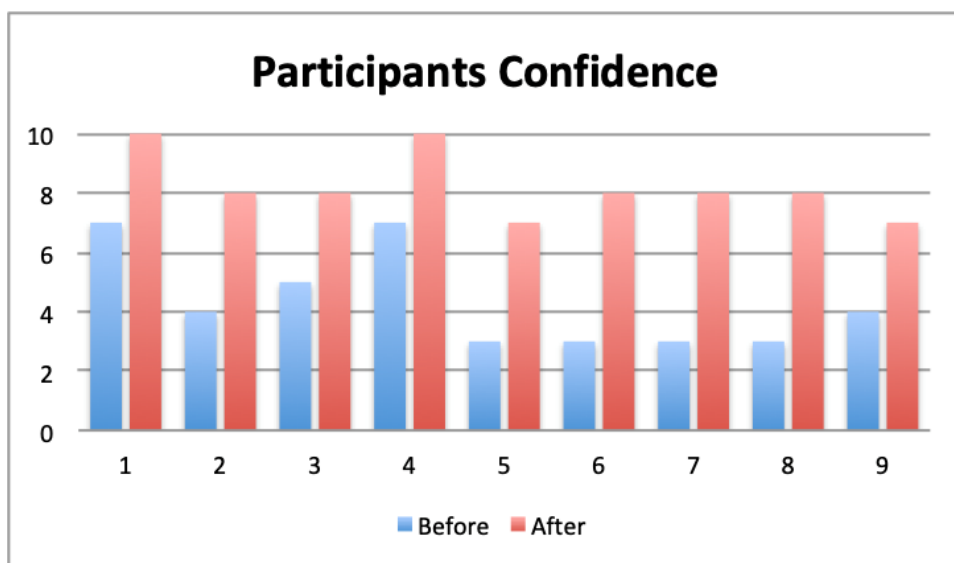
Nina

“The area that stands out to me is my personal growth, I feel, has been an unexpected improvement. I understand that my frustration stems from conflicting values as well as the detrimental effect on my career that comes with the journey that is being a forces spouse.

Laura A

Improvement in Personal Confidence

Participants were asked ‘How confident do you feel about yourself being able to do whatever you decide you want to?’. Participants reported a large boost in confidence from participating in the programme, with a mean increase of 39% over the 10-week programme. Every participant reported an increase in confidence. While this confidence may have been contributed to by other factors, participants attributed it primarily to their experience within the programme.

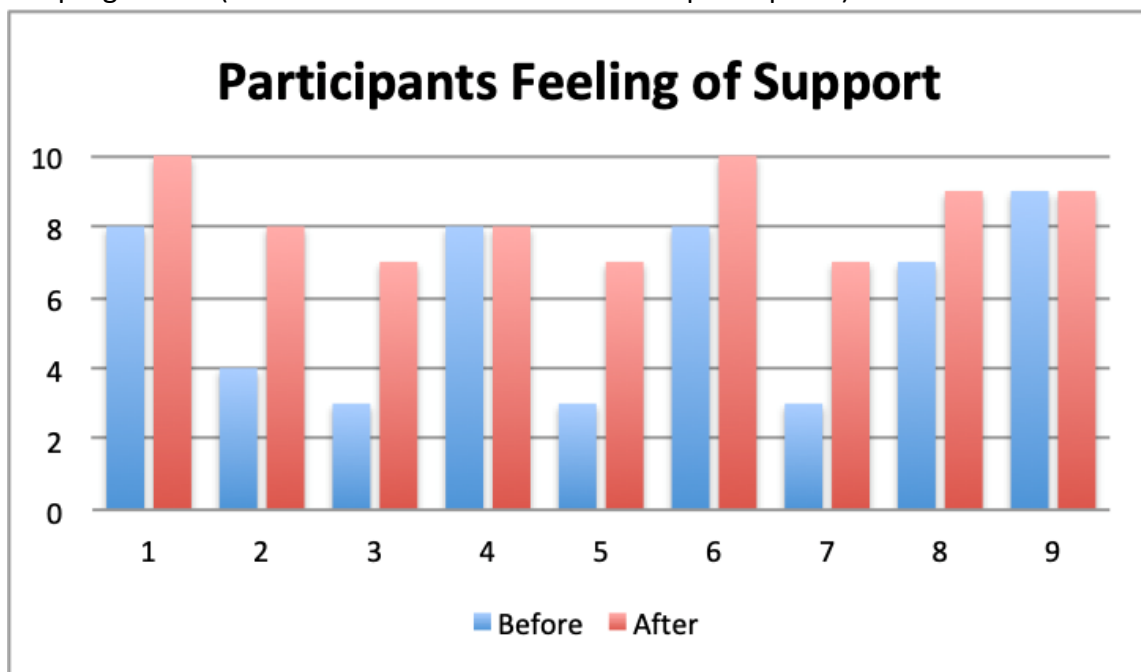


“I feel like I have grown confidence within myself. I have learnt tools to keep focused and calm and learnt that I don't need to justify myself to others all the time. I have learnt to trust and believe in myself and my visions for the future and that I am worthy.”

Karen

Improvement in Feelings of Support

Participants were asked ‘How much support do you have (for e.g. from family, friends, spouse) to assist you with any new changes, endeavours in your life?’ Participants’ responses showed a 24 percent increase in ‘perceived support’. This could be attributed to other factors, but evidence from the end of programme survey suggests that the increase in positivity experienced by participants occurred because of the support they received within the programme (both from the coach and the other participants).



“I have also been able to connect with people who understand the difficulties that spouses face and it has been interesting to follow their journeys and help to support them too.”

Nina

“Realising that other people felt the same way I did was very powerful. Helped me to realise that I wasn't on my own.”

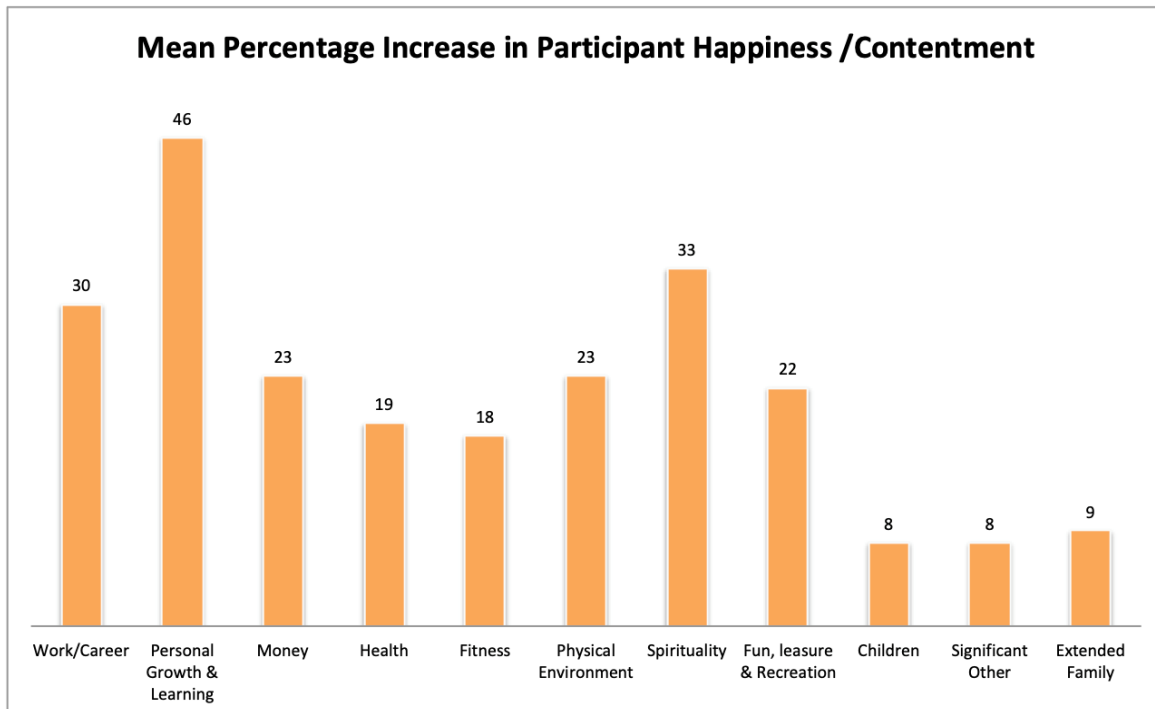
Gillian

“I liked being able to talk with the other participants it really gave me a boost in morale, ideas, and confidence. I also felt like we were a little team championing each other on.”

Emma

Analysis of 'Happiness' Dimensions

Pre- and post measures were used with a range of life dimensions. As shown in the table below, there was an overwhelmingly positive impact from the programme, with increases in participants' happiness/contentment levels across all 11 of the dimensions measured, the highest being a mean 46% increase in happiness/contentment in the area of Personal Growth and Learning.



Personal Growth and Learning was left to the participants to determine in terms of what it meant to them individually. This means they place it in the context of their own lives, circumstances, life stage and their values and meaning in life. All participants experienced a growth in this dimension, with several showing considerable growth.



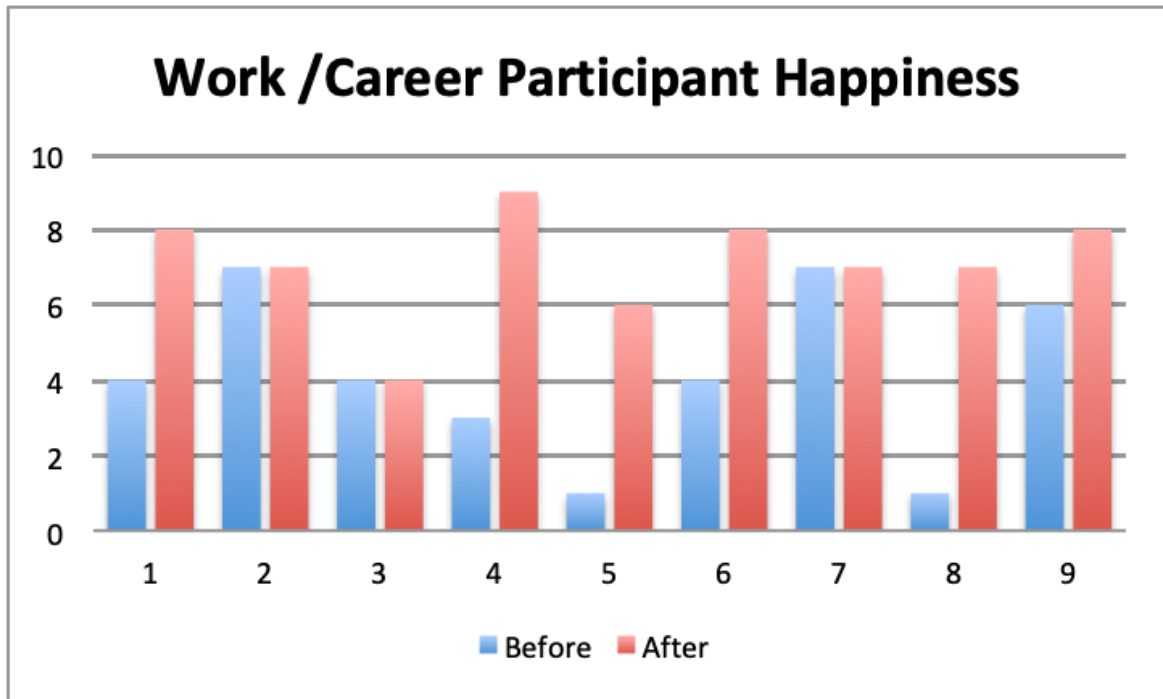
“My home environment and my personal growth have massively improved since the life wheel I did at the beginning of the course. I believe my personal growth would not have improved the way it has if I had not completed this course.”

Jessica

“Before the course I never really focused on myself. I found it hard to identify what was important to me. I felt very torn between getting a job and looking after my family. I feel more in control now, like I am doing things more on my terms and based on what is important to me.”

Laura A

There was an average mean increase in happiness of 30% in happiness/contentment for participants’ (individual participant data can be seen below). For three of the participants their happiness around work/career remained the same, whilst others improved significantly with five of the participants more than doubling their scores. This is unsurprising given the outcomes in terms of job success and business development (see Outcomes below)



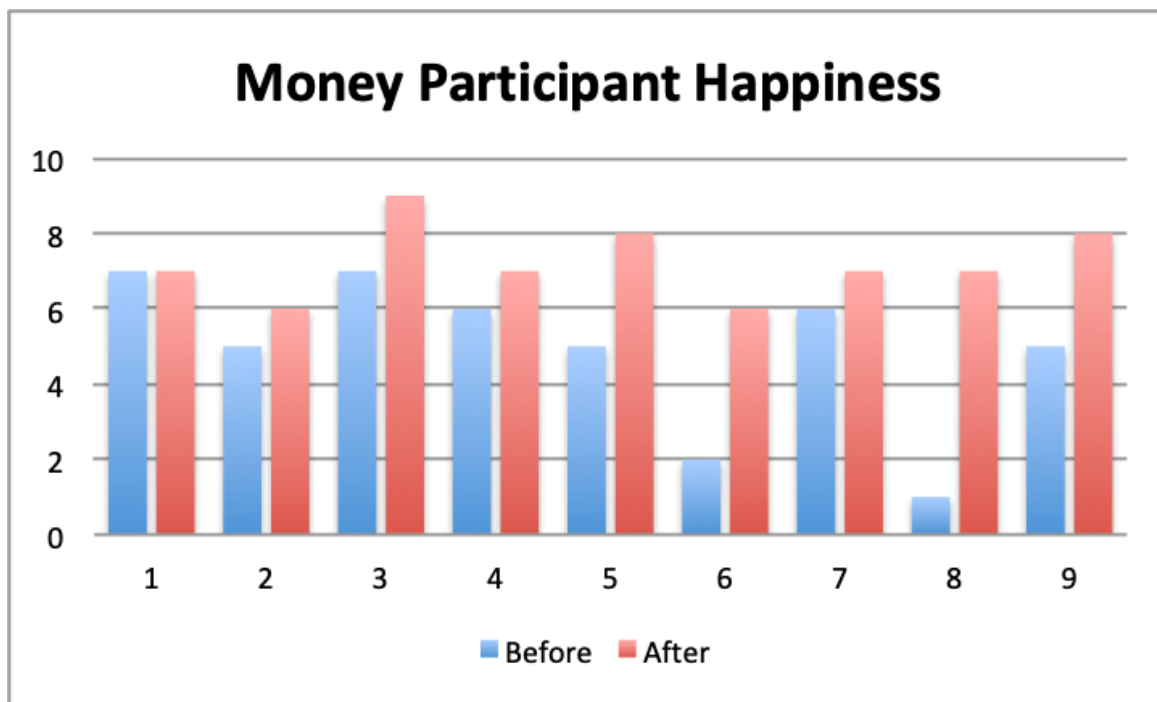
“I was struggling to know which direction to go in for a career. I also lacked the belief in myself after my life changed being a military spouse with a fragmented career history.”

Nina

“There has been a big change in my work and career. This has been a decision I took myself but the support I received on the course has helped me along the journey.”

Gemma

Another dimension which saw a big change was that of ‘money’ and happiness/contentment with money. One participant’s happiness remained the same, while the other eight participants felt happier about money by the end of the programme. Two participants’ positive feelings about money increased dramatically, by at least three times.



Money, and money worries, have a direct impact on an individual's mental health. Improving participants' perceptions of happiness/contentment regarding money contributes to improving their overall mental health and sense of self-esteem. The importance of money is especially so with Armed Forces families as many of them are single income households. Any income a spouse can contribute to the household has a direct impact on quality of life of the family.

“I feel more confident about going to work and I have managed to find a job that fits with our lifestyle at the moment. Getting the job improved my confidence and earning some money makes me feel like I’m contributing financially to the family.”

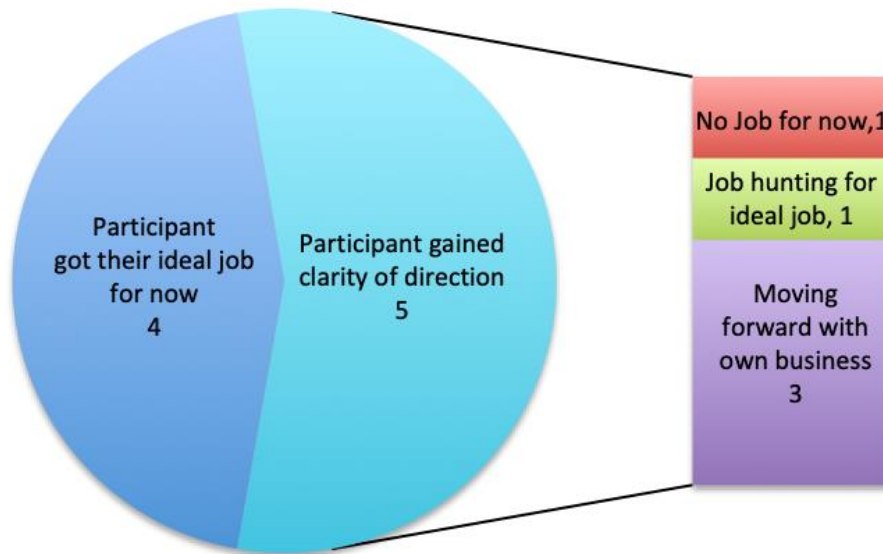
Gillian

Additionally, if spouses can see a clear career path for themselves (and not just a ‘job’ to inject extra money) which aligns with their values and purpose, this contributes enormously to their self-esteem and wellbeing.

Programme Outcomes

All participants experienced a positive outcome with regards to work/employment or business because of the programme. Four out of 9 got their job of choice within 10 weeks of the programme, 3 gained clarity in how they could move forward with their own business, 1 changed their job hunt focus in a positive way and 1 made the decision not to pursue getting a job.

Participant Employment /Business Outcomes



Employment

Four of the participants who secured these jobs reported to have been able to do so due to the programme. They reported that the programme enabled them to increase their confidence, achieve clarity of purpose and then to identify, consider and address the barriers that had kept them 'stuck'.

Another participant entirely changed the focus of her job hunt due to her experience of the programme. She reported that due to her experience, particularly in the 1:1 coaching, that she is no longer 'dreading' the process of finding the 'necessary job' but after reconnecting with her previous (pre-Armed Forces, pre-children) work identity, she is now searching for her newly identified ideal job.

Another participant has been relieved to discover that she 'doesn't need a job right now'. After serving 25 years in the Royal Air Force, she has retired from the RAF and is caring for her young son. Prior to joining the programme, she was expecting herself to get a job. Now she realises that she doesn't need a job right now but is content to take time to discover her next steps.

Further, it is important to note that two participants who were originally enrolled in the programme needed to discontinue due to taking up employment.

Clarity around their Small Business goals

Three participants reported that the programme allowed them to discover clarity around what they wanted from and for their small businesses. They each have grown more

confident about being able to fit this around other life demands, and the programme has allowed them to confirm that this is the right direction for them.

“I started off feeling like my idea was rubbish and just a hobby but now I actually feel like it's a worthwhile idea with lots off potential (potential for income and for fun/enjoyment). Rather than juggling ideas and seeing them as dreams, they actually feel like possibilities. I feel like it's going to happen.”

Emma

Critical Success Factors

There are several critical success factors for the programme. These include:

- The design of the programme
- The skills and experience of the coach
- The commitment to the programme of the spouses themselves

Design

The programme was designed with 3 key components:

1. Provision of 1:1 coaching session at the beginning and end of the programme. This gave participants a personalised approach to the programme and a strong message that they, as individuals, were valued. This, in turn, led them to give themselves permission to take the time and space from their hectic lives to focus on themselves as individuals.
2. The programme lasting approximately 3 months. This gave participants the time and space for reflection, completion of exercises between sessions, regular discussion and clarification with the coach as well as discussion with family and friends and consideration of options and ways forward. Additionally, the weekly group work programme provided self-determined tasks and motivation to maintain progress week to week as a result of self and peer accountability.
3. The inclusion of 'stepping stone' sessions These sessions were provided by:
 - a. ACL (WCC) regarding 'Start your own Business'
 - b. Social Media Spouses (SSVC) regarding their training programme for AF spouses
 - c. AFC (WCC) regarding the AF Covenant
 - d. Army Families Federation regarding Forces Families Jobs and other support from all 3 Families Federations
 - e. RFEA Families Programme regarding the support they provide
 - f. University of Warwick regarding accessing Higher Education and sources of funding to support Higher Education
 - g. Devenishgirl CIC regarding running a social enterprise
 - h. Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce regarding their Start Up Programme and the type of support available by Chambers across the UK

All 3 elements of the design were recognised as contributing to the success of the programme.

The skills and experience of the coach

The coach chosen to deliver the programme had a number of key attributes, which supported the style of delivery of the coaching element.

The coach is an International Coaching Federation (ICF) Professional Certified Coach and operates to their code of ethics, which includes working in a person-centred non-judgemental way. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. “

The coach also has 10 years of experience in delivering coaching and designed and delivered ‘The Revitalise Programme for Mums’– a 12-Week Personal Development Programme to support mothers returning to work following maternity leave. This formed a framework for what was delivered through the AF Spouse development programme.

The coach was also able to draw on her own previous experience of four international moves between communities and cultures. This experience of navigating her own career transition into coaching alongside juggling family and relocation needs, brought a unique depth of experience and empathy to the coaching programme for the AF Spouses.

A key element of what the coach provided was a ‘safe space’ for participants both inside and outside the 1:1 and group coaching sessions. This experience of consideration and care added to the overall ‘being seen as important and valued individuals’ experience by the participants.

“I want to say a huge thank you to Tina for her support throughout the course. She has been so kind, friendly and supportive to all in the session. I have felt valued and respected and safe to share my own experiences. The women on the course have also been fantastic and have helped me feel welcome and valued. I have been excited to hear about their journeys each week and watch them grow in confidence. The 1:1 coaching session was invaluable as it helped me take the time and space to gather my thoughts and decide what was most important to me. The course has given me the confidence to go after the job role I want rather than the role I feel I should have, which I believe will ensure that I am happier in the longer term.”

Gemma

“I surprised myself in been able to talk to "strangers" so openly about my career and my life. It has felt like a very safe space and has been great to listen to other people's stories and to offer advice and support to their ideas.”

Jessica

The commitment to the programme of the spouses themselves

‘Curiosity, hope and desperation. There are many obstacles to reaching our full potential living within the military community.’

This is one participant’s reason for signing up to the course and provides a rare glimpse into the life experience of Armed Forces spouses.

Most of the AF spouses who took part in the programme only saw the publicity for the programme only days before the it was due to begin. This was due to Covid and after strenuous efforts to keep some form of face-to-face delivery. These spouses leapt at this opportunity and whilst they are, obviously, a self-selecting group, it does not lessen the fact it takes a lot of courage to ‘put your hand up’ for a programme such as this.

At the beginning of the programme, it was clear that many were feeling isolated, frustrated, ‘lost’ and often desperate. What is equally clear through their contributions to the programme are their commitment, compassion and integrity as well as their resourcefulness, resilience and independence.

The results this cohort achieved in only 10 weeks is testament to the calibre of them and what they, themselves, put into it. The nine participants who completed the programme found enormous value in what they learnt, not only about themselves - about personal development, and employment / business development, but also that they were not alone in their struggle to find balance in their lives as Armed Forces Spouses.

How they valued it is summed up as:

“This course is the most helpful thing that has been provided by the military for me”

Laura A

Conclusions

The design and implementation of this programme was successful. For what is relatively a small amount of money significant impacts and outcomes can be delivered.

The design of this programme can be replicated elsewhere, although the selection of the coach for the delivery will be key to the success if other organisations choose to use this in their own locality.

The contribution of a programme such as this clearly fits with the new ‘UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-23’. This strategy recognises the important role that spouses and partners play in supporting the Service person and enabling them to do his or her job. The strategy has 3 principles for how Armed Forces families are treated:

- Recognised and respected for the critical role they play in supporting the serviceperson
- Informed with timely information about their situation and provided with opportunities that empower them to adapt and thrive

- Listened to and understood, so that their individual experiences are reflected in the support provided to them

The Spouse Development Programme was conceived in 2019 and delivered in 2021. It has delivered on the principles before they were put forward.

Spouses know the importance of their role in supporting the Service person:

“The underlying thing is that we are there to support our husbands. I feel so much more able to do that now. When I feel better about myself, he doesn’t have to worry about me or the kids, it lets him focus fully on his job.”

Anonymous participant

Recommendations

The recommendations are:

1. Provide a follow up with participants at 6- and 12-month intervals to assess ongoing impacts and outcomes of the programme and build learning from these into 2022/3 programme.
2. Run the programme again in 2022/3 as a completely online offering to enable AF spouses across the UK, not just Warwickshire, to participate.
3. Broaden the ‘stepping stones’ element to include the Open University and other remote learning opportunities.
4. Promote the success of the programme to the MOD, Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, Armed Forces Covenant partnerships (Civilian/Military Liaison Boards) and others to enable funding to be provided for initiatives that provide spouses with individualised person-centred support.
5. Investigate the potential of establishing an annual programme delivered through Warwickshire or elsewhere.

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Acknowledgements

All the spouses who took part and demonstrated the courage, resilience and potential of Armed Forces spouses wherever they may be.

Armed Forces Covenant and Families Federation colleagues who supported getting this opportunity out far and wide.