

Exploring Military Widows' Experiences of Social Isolation and Loneliness



FINAL REPORT



The Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research

The Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research was established in 2014 and sits within Northumbria University Newcastle. It is a collective of academics, service providers and service users with an interest in improving the health and social wellbeing of Armed Forces veterans and their families.

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Forces in Mind Trust

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Foreword

Today, much is written and broadcast about social isolation and loneliness in wider society but little has been done to explore its impact within the Armed Forces Community, nor especially the associated impact arising from bereavement as experienced by military widows. Before being bereaved, their lives alongside their serving partners may well have already exposed them to some social dislocation or trauma, resulting in feelings of loneliness and separation from family and loved ones. But nothing is likely to compare to the loss of a partner, nor prepare a military widow for what may be the consequent schism in family and social relationships, to family and household incomes or for the challenge of accepting a new reality in their lives and seeking support. Military widows may be a small, sometimes even invisible cohort in wider UK society, but that cannot excuse a lack of consideration of their circumstances and experience.

This report begins to address this deficit and seeks to focus on the specific, but multi-faceted factors of military widowhood. It reveals the sensitivities surrounding terminology and how bereavement occurred, the unintended but real hurt imparted by officialdom and bureaucracy, the barriers to accessing support and the potential impact on health and well-being. But the report also recognises there is more to understand in terms of longer-term consequences, of the value of peer-support models and the nuances of bereavement within the Armed Forces Community as distinct from more generalisable experience.

Forces in Mind Trust's mission is that all ex-service persons and their families make a successful and sustainable transition to civilian life. For those who experience bereavement, that transition is more immediate, traumatic and sometimes more unprepared for than most. So, this report is to be welcomed in developing understanding of need and informing future mitigation measures that can make a real difference. We recognise the contribution military partners have made to the success of their serving partner's career and acknowledge the role of relationships in supporting the lives that follow service. This aspect is no less important for those forging that new life after bereavement and I commend this report's analysis and findings to all those concerned with supporting this small but significant element of our Armed Forces Community.

Tom McBarnet

Chief Executive of Forces in Mind Trust

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Summary

There is a growing recognition of social isolation and loneliness in the general population and evidence of the impact of this on health is robust. As a result, there is a need for the expansion of effective interventions and policies to reduce social isolation and loneliness and its health consequences (Holt-Lunstad, 2020).

Despite this growing recognition, it is only relatively recently that attention has been drawn to social isolation and loneliness experienced by the Armed Forces Community (Stapleton, 2018; Kiernan et al., 2018). And, although the evidence base remains limited, what is becoming clear is that there are contributing, unique factors that relate to service life. Evidence suggests that military experiences, such as transition, service-related trauma, and the loss of connection with comrades after leaving the Armed Forces, contribute to the risk of social isolation and loneliness among the veteran population (Wilson, Hill & Kiernan, 2018).

Transitional life events are recognised as periods which can increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness. This report considers 'transition' as multi-faceted, particularly the transition from wife to widowhood¹ and how this change in status has shown to increase the likelihood of being socially isolated and consequently lonely (Collins, 2014). The emotional impact of widowhood can be aggravated by the loss of relationships with friends and family, financial hardship, and lack of access to social support (Collins, 2014; 2014; 2017; 2018). In addition, following the death of a loved one, the aftermath of receiving the 'knock on the door' has been shown to result in long-term difficulties leading, for some, to traumatic bereavement and a person-centred approach is required to support these families (McGill et al., 2022; Fadeeva et al, 2022).

Despite this emerging evidence, there remains a lack of research focusing on lived experience of social isolation and loneliness and the impact of this on Military Widow/ers. In response, this research study aimed to explore military widows' personal experiences of social isolation and loneliness. It also looked to identify the services available that aim to provide social participation for this population and determine the accessibility of such services.

The research study consisted of three phases and included a scoping review. The scoping review explored the current evidence-base for service providers aiming to reduce social

¹ Whilst it is possible that this could be applicable to widowers, this report will focus on the transition from wife to widowhood due to the limited evidence-base regarding husbands whose significant other served in the Military.

isolation and loneliness in the Military Widow population, as well as identify UK-based and international services. Phase One utilised an online survey that aimed to assess the levels and experiences of social isolation and loneliness. Survey respondents reported a significant change in reported annual household income post bereavement, which was further reduced by age ($P<0.01$). There was a negative relationship between reports of social isolation and loneliness, and current household income ($P=0.049$). These results suggest, therefore, that the perception of financial instability was related to social isolation and loneliness, which was affected by age. From analysis of the open-question responses ($n=165$) key themes were generated relating to the impact of bereavement, complexity of widowhood, relationships (both informal and formal) with services, and barriers to accessing support.

The initial results from the Phase One survey formed the basis of the interview topic guide for the Phase Two interviews. The Phase Two interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis, integrated with elements of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and three superordinate themes generated. Themes related to the transition from Military Wife to Military Widow, and the associated loss of military community and support networks were generated. In addition, the use of ambiguous language and the resultant stereotypical perceptions associated with key terms, such as 'Military Widow' and 'War Widow' impacted on access to services and challenges arose regarding identity.

Phase Three built upon key findings from the Phase Two interviews and culminated in a collaboration event to further explore the perceived categorisation of widowhood, access to services and future steps to respond to and address issues related to social isolation and loneliness. Delegates from military, bereavement and social isolation/loneliness centric organisations attended and data was collected for analysis.

In Phase Three, delegates discussed the complexity of defining Military Widowhood and the need to 'fit' to a certain definition to access available services. For some delegates, adopting the term Military Widow was seen as undesirable as it highlighted a shift in identity and the loss of connection with the military community. For others, having an inclusive and consistent definition of what constitutes a Military Widow was seen as of paramount importance. For all those who attended the collaboration event, the need to further consult on this issue and liaise with those who have lived experience was recommended as a next step.

Phase Three also included consideration of available services and support options for Military Widows. Several barriers to accessing support networks were raised by delegates, and included stigma relating to the nature of death, in particular suicide, and the existence of varied and inconsistent access to support due to geographical issues. From the organisational side,

there was a reliance on self-referrals due to the inability to contact perspective members resulting from the Data Protection Act (2018).

Delegates also discussed the 'Purple Pack', which is provided by The Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC), the lead organisation for managing the practical requirement following bereavement. The 'Purple Pack' (Ministry of Defence, 2021) provides information and contact details of recommended organisations that may be able to help bereaved families and was highlighted as an effective means of providing information. However, for some, this was seen as 'too much, too soon' when it was offered to the bereaved families during an emotionally raw and difficult time. Additionally, the Purple Pack was only made available to those whose significant other died whilst in service. The Phase Two interviews highlighted the possible value of having access to something like a Purple Pack² to those widowed outside of service, along with further information for those who are bereaved by suicide. In response to the barriers found in accessing the support available, delegates recommended the following improvements:

- Improved collaboration between peer-support groups (particularly respective associations) and building a knowledge network based on a peer-led model of care.
- Greater awareness of the services available and support offered to Military Widows and a peer-led outreach approach.
- The development of a 'bereavement hub' for advice and information.

Overview of Key Findings

- 40.61% of Military Widows reported being both lonely and/or socially isolated.
- Results suggest that financial instability was related to social isolation and loneliness, and this was further increased by age.
- There was confusion relating to the definition of the term 'War Widow', particularly relating to eligibility accessing service provisions.
- For some participants, the War Widows' Association and single service associations provided valuable access to formal peer networks and support. However, there were

² It is acknowledged the Purple Pack is specifically for those bereaved during service as the responsibility of the MoD.

reported barriers to access, such as stereotypical assumptions, and perceived hierarchies relating to significant other's rank and their nature of death.

- There were reports of lack of support, and more difficulty identifying support, for widows whose significant other died post service. Participants who remarried also reported loss of formal peer networks or financial support.
- There was a perceived unequal access to services due to variations in availability and type of support provided across the UK. This was related to lack of resources in some areas compared to others.
- Episodes of grief fluctuated across the life course, indicating the need to ensure continued access to support.

Recommendations

All recommendations outlined in the report are aimed at tackling social isolation and loneliness as well as informing potential future research and identifying solutions to the challenges raised. The recommendations are summarised below and are discussed in detail in the full report:

- Consult and collaborate further to agree on the use of a consistent and widely identified term to avoid confusion regarding what constitutes a War Widow and who is defined as a Military Widow.
- Ensure access to bereavement support is person-centred and based on a needs-led approach.
- Recognise the importance of peer-led support services and acknowledge the need to respond to the stages of grief and the challenges that arise over time for individuals and families alike.
- Provide timely access to financial support, advice and information that is relevant not only at the 'knock on the door' stage, or immediately following loss, but for the months and years that follow.

It is acknowledged that the research has predominantly been conducted with female participants which limits the transferability of findings and recommendations to widowers. As with previous research, there is also an over-reliance on recruitment from respective War Widows' and/or single service Military Widows' associations that may well lead to research fatigue as well as constraints resulting in a lack of evidence of lived experience from within the military bereaved population more broadly. It is recommended that future strategies for participant recruitment for this population include consideration of those whose voices are seldom heard and who do not currently benefit from association membership.

Introduction

Background

Loneliness is a subjective social and emotional experience, often considered as the inconsistency between the social relationships we have and those we wish to have (Walton et al., 1991). Conversely, social isolation is an objective state which considers the integration of the individual in a social environment, such as the frequency of social relations and social networks (Cacioppo et al., 2006). Loneliness, along with social isolation, is now recognised as being linked to poor physical health and well-being, such as an increased risk of high blood pressure, cognitive decline, depression, and mortality (Hawkley et al., 2006; Holt-Lundstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; James et al. 2011; Valtorta & Hanratty, 2012).

In 2018, the UK Government issued the world's first governmental plan focusing on loneliness, that has since recognised the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant social distancing measures (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2018; 2022). Three main objectives have been identified including the development of a national conversation about loneliness aimed at reducing stigma, encouraging consideration of loneliness in policymaking and service delivery, and building the existing evidence base.

The issues of social isolation and loneliness have also recently been a significant focus within the Armed Forces Community. The 'uniqueness' of this cohort, with intrinsic and extrinsic factors related to military experiences, such as increased number of transitions, military-related trauma, physical health, and losing touch with comrades, being associated with the levels and experiences of social isolation and loneliness of veterans (Wilson, Hill, & Kiernan, 2018). Specific factors can increase vulnerability to, or impact experiences of, social isolation and loneliness, including social and geographical mobility issues (Valtorta & Hanratty, 2012), military service (Wilson, *et al.*, 2018), and life transitions such as widowhood (Collins, 2014).

The national concern regarding the impact of social isolation and loneliness has resulted in a renewed focus on social prescribing (NHS England, 2019). There is a general consensus that social prescribing is a holistic approach that considers health needs more broadly by recognising that maintaining wellbeing is primarily determined by a range of social, economic and environmental factors. Social prescribing enables GPs, nurses, and other primary health care professionals to refer patients to a range of local, non-clinical services for practical and emotional support. This approach was also a recommendation made by Connor et al. (2020) in a recent study that aimed to gather expert consensus relating to the cause, impact, and ways to tackle social isolation and loneliness of military veterans.

For the military bereaved population, where widowhood is a complex phenomenon, the potential importance of employing the principles of social prescribing may go some way to increase the use of this approach for bereaved military families as a method of developing appropriate pathways to services designed for their particular needs and recognising the impact of widowhood on relationships, financial hardship and a lack of access to social support in addition to adjusting to the loss of their spouse (Collins, 2014; 2014; 2017; 2018). There is also a need to raise awareness that this complexity is, in part, due to the fact that those who serve in the Armed Forces are often employed in high-risk environments as well as potential exposure to traumatic experiences. Receiving the news of the death of a loved one as a result of a military service, commonly referred to as ‘the knock on the door’, has a long-term impact on surviving family members and this sudden death situation has the potential to lead to traumatic bereavement that requires immediate, medium, and long-term support that is needed (McGill et al., 2022; Fadeeva et al, 2022).

Despite widowhood being recognised as a key transition impacting social isolation and loneliness, there is currently a lack of research focusing specifically on widow/ers whose partner’s death is attributable to service life. In 2018, the Chair of the War Widows’ Association clearly articulated in the Defence Select Committee inquiry into the Armed Forces Covenant her concerns of the dearth of research into the experiences of Military Widows and very little funding available to remedy that issue.

Fuelling the argument that the Armed Forces Community is a ‘unique’ cohort who can experience social isolation and loneliness in different ways, the much-debated Widow’s pension payments policy further exacerbates the relationship between widowhood, social isolation and loneliness in the Military Widows’ population. This policy has recently changed in that all recipients of survivors’ pensions who remarried / cohabited after 1 April 2015 have been able to keep their pension, unless it has been previously surrendered (Thurley and Kennedy, 2021). However, previous policy removed this pension upon re-marriage or cohabitation. Specifically, widows whose spouse died before 31 March 1973 could keep their War Widow/er’s pension if they remarried, formed a civil partnership or started cohabiting with another person after 6 April 2005, whereas those who had remarried/began cohabiting before this date did not have their pension reinstated. Since 31 October 2000, Armed Forces Attributable Benefits Scheme pensions have been paid for life, despite remarriage/cohabitation, however, this was not backdated to those marrying before this date.

Whilst not all Military Widows are older adults, the vast proportion are over 65 years old. Age-related illness, such as arthritis or hearing loss, can exacerbate feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Collins, 2014). Widowhood, particularly in later life, is detrimental to health and

wellbeing (Davies, Crowe & Whitehead, 2016), although social relationships are thought to assist in the management of widowhood, this is dependent on the quality and flexibility of ties (Collins, 2014; 2014) as well as access to social support and participation (Collins, 2017). Adaptation is also dependent on the personal agency and resilience of older widows and widowers (Collins, 2018).

For the purposes of this study, and integral to the findings and recommendations in this report, the term Military Widow is defined as “the spouse/partner of Armed Forces personnel whose death was in service, attributable to their service (but not necessarily in theatre), hastened by service, or related to a disablement attributed to service”. This definition was agreed by the research team and the steering group (which consisted of representatives from the FiMT, War Widows’ Association, and each of the single services widows’ associations).

Project Rationale

Over the past three years, the national conversation around social isolation and loneliness has increased and health and social care services are now giving more attention to people who are attending services with non-medical needs. Experiences of social isolation and loneliness through widowhood are complex and compounded by military experience. This research project set out to explore the experiences of social isolation and loneliness, as well as seeking to understand the availability and nature of services targeting social participation of Military Widows. Specifically, this project aimed to:

- Map and understand levels and experiences of Military Widows’ social isolation and loneliness
- Identify the services available for social participation of Military Widows
- Identify the unmet needs of Military Widows with regard to social participation, social isolation, and loneliness
- Inform national conversation around social isolation and loneliness of Military Widows, and to develop policy recommendations and guidance for service provision



Project Methodology

Aims

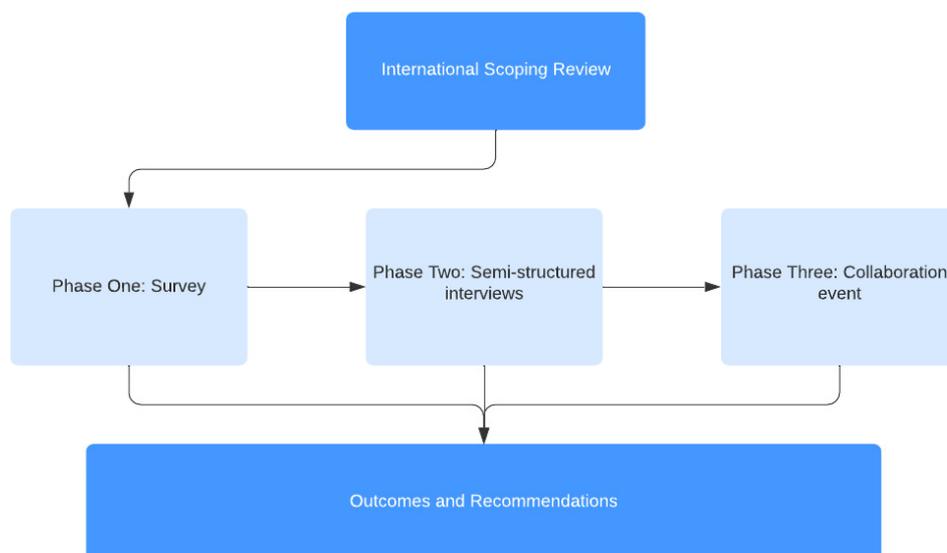
The primary aim of the project was to understand the experiences of Military Widows who have experienced social isolation and loneliness and to identify service provision and unmet need. At the heart of this project were the Military Widows themselves, who guided the research and were integral to the design and development of this research through a peer-informed approach (Barker et al, 2022).

A second aim was to explore and develop guidance for service provision in collaboration with Military Widows and relevant stakeholders/representatives from key organisations in order to increase social participation. In doing so, this will allow service providers to better respond to social isolation and loneliness.

Research Design

The study used an iterative approach over three phases, with each phase informing the subsequent data collection (Figure 1). This explanatory, sequential, mixed-methods design aimed to understand lived experience of social isolation and loneliness as well as the current landscape regarding support services available. The design and data collection for each phase is discussed and described in the following sections.

Figure 1: Phases Involved in the Project



Scoping Review

The full scoping review will be submitted to an academic journal for open-access publication and therefore, only an overview is provided below.

The scoping review aimed to build upon the knowledge of widowhood being a key transition period that could impact experiences of social isolation and loneliness. There has been limited focus on the service provisions available to Military Widows experiencing loneliness or social isolation within the UK or internationally. The aim of the review was to answer the following questions:

- What is the current evidence-based for service providers aiming to reduce social isolation and loneliness experience by military bereaved?
- What UK based and international services are available to reduce social isolation and loneliness experienced by military bereaved?

Method

There were two phases to the review and were completed following the criteria suggested by Arksey and O'Malley (2010). Phase One was a literature search of published academic literature completed through Journal Databases. Phase Two was a grey literature search which identified service provisions through online search engines.

Table 1: Overview of Scoping Review Search Methodology

Step 1: Developing research questions to guide the search strategy
Step 2: Completing literature search
Step 3: Identifying relevant studies using the inclusion criteria
Step 4: 'Charting' key data from the included studies
Step 5: Collating, summarising, and reporting the results

Phase One identified 59 papers for initial screening, 56 of these were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria, leaving 3 papers included in this review (See Table 1):

- Fyre (2012): Qualitative PhD thesis completed in the USA
- King, Carr & Taylor (2021): Peer-reviewed quantitative paper completed in the USA
- Wilson & Supiano (2011): Peer-reviewed qualitative paper completed in the USA

Table 2: Phase One Papers included in Scoping Review

Author(s)	Aim	Participants	Method and outcome measures	Findings relating to social isolation and loneliness
Frye (2012)	To understand young Military Widow's shared attributes of grief following loss of spouse in active military service.	5 participants, aged between 18-25 years old, who had been widowed within the previous 12 months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How participants identified as a Military Widow was seen as affecting social connection with other Military Widows, resulting in experiences of loneliness. • All participants described episodes of loneliness that fluctuated over time. • Peer support from other Military Widows, particularly of those of a similar age, was seen as vital. • Social support was required but fluctuated over time; more social support was required long-term; however, this was often associated as a time with reduced social connections.
King et al. (2021)	To investigate experiences of loneliness between widows of veterans compared to those of non-veterans, and the role of social support from friends.	428 female widows aged over 51 years; 284 who were widows of male veterans and 144 who were widows of male non-veterans. All were widowed within the previous 4 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and Retirement Study self-report survey • UCLA 3-item loneliness measure • Social support question 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a significant difference ($p < .05$) in reported levels of loneliness; widows of veterans reported lower levels of loneliness following the death of their spouse compared to widows of non-veterans. This was due to having access to more social support structures and consistent social support from friends.
Wilson & Supiano (2011)	To explore the unique experience of grief experienced by widows of veterans.	6 veteran widows, aged between 59-82, bereaved between 7-13 months, and attending a support group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No participant was romantically involved with their spouse during military service. • Social support was perceived as valuable for coping during bereavement; however, support needs were personal. The quality of social support was seen as more important than the quantity.

A total of 61 searches were completed for Phase Two to identify service provision(s) for Military Widows experiencing social isolation and loneliness (see Table 3). Due to the excess number of search results, only the first page of each search was considered for the review.

Table 3: Phase Two Search Terms and Number of Results

Search Terms	Date Search Completed	Number of Hits
Social isolation and loneliness help	28 May 2021	24,500,000
Military social isolation and loneliness help	3 June 2021	9,950,000
Military social isolation and loneliness help United Kingdom	10 June 2021	8,780,000
Support for Military Widows	10 June 2021	7,830,000
Social isolation support	14 June 2021	275,000,000
Help for Military Widows	14 June 2021	10,200,000
Help for Military Widows UK	14 June 2021	35,400,000
Military bereaved	17 and 24 June 2021	2,550,000
Military Widows isolation	24 June 2021	11,700,000
Military Widows isolation Support	24 June 2021	14,700,000
Isolation and loneliness support for Military Widows	1 July 2021	23,200,200
Isolation and loneliness help for Military Widows	1 July 2021	9,010,000
Help for socially isolated War Widows	9 July 2021	12,200,000
Help for socially isolated Military Widows	9 July 2021	12,800,000
Help for socially isolated military bereaved	9 July 2021	6,650,000
Help for lonely Military Widows	12 July 2021	25,200,000

Review Findings

Four key themes were generated from the results of the two phases, described and discussed below. Further findings regarding the available civilian and military-centric support for Military Widow/ers experiencing social isolation and loneliness is provided in Supplementary Information (page 82).

Table 4: Themes Identified from the Scoping Review

Themes
Measurement of Social isolation and Loneliness
Organisation Types
Support provided for Specific Military Bereaved Population
Direct and Non-Direct Access to Support/Formal and Informal Peer Networks

Measurement of Social isolation and Loneliness

None of the included studies directly addressed social isolation and only Frye (2012) and King et al. (2021) assessed loneliness. King et al. found that Military Widows experienced significantly less loneliness compared to those of non-Military Widows. All five participants included within Frye's study reported episodes of loneliness that fluctuated over time and there was an interesting finding noting that peer support groups could reduce this.

Organisation Types

Phase Two identified 38 organisations that could provide support to Military Widows experiencing social isolation and loneliness; 33 were in the UK and 5 were in the USA. It was difficult to define the type of organisations that offer specific support, particularly those based in the USA, and there was a mixture of charitable and commercial providers. Further searches of identified websites revealed limited support for social isolation and loneliness. However, some organisations only provided access to content about access to support via membership. See Supplementary Information (page 82) for further information.

Support Provided for Specific Military Bereaved Population

Identified services largely provided support to serving personnel, veterans, and their families, few focused on the military bereaved population; those that did provide support was specific to factors such

as spouse's rank, age or geographical location. This was reflected in published literature; for example, Fyre (2012) interviewed younger widows due to the large focus on older Military Widows.

Direct and Non-Direct access to Support/Formal and Informal Peer Networks

Services either provided 'direct support' (providing direct access to a service provision), or 'indirect support' (signposting to other organisations). The type of support available included practical help (such as handyman services), signposting, formal peer support, advice, and information. Whereas Phase Two identified formal peer networks, the findings of Phase One largely focused on informal peer networks. For instance, Wilson and Supiano (2011) found that informal peer networks were valuable for coping following a bereavement. They reported that needs varied according to the individual and the quality of these networks were of more value than the quantity.

Summary

The scoping review provides an overview of the published literature focusing on experiences of social isolation and loneliness by Military Widows, as well as an overview of UK and international service provisions. None of the published literature focused on Military Widow's experiences of social isolation, indicating a clear gap in the literature. All relevant literature from Phase One was instigated in the USA and therefore cannot be transferable to the UK. Consequently, Phase Two explored mainly UK-based service provisions and found that there is limited support for Military Widows, with support available largely provided for widows in the civilian population or dependent on specific criteria, for instance age. There was also a gap regarding the impact and experiences of Military Widows accessing formal support for social isolation and loneliness.



Phase One: Online Survey

Phase One utilised an online survey tool to ascertain levels and experiences of social isolation and loneliness in the Military Widows' population (Appendix 1 – online survey). The survey was distributed via the War Widows' Association and the single service widows' associations³ using a social media campaign on Twitter and by contacting relevant organisations and media outlets. There were 230 initial responses to the survey returned, partly completed surveys were removed resulting in 165 completed surveys (please see Table 5).

Table 5: Survey Respondent Demographics (N=165)

Age (n=162)	26 – 96 years old (Mean = 57.61, SD = 11.82)
Gender (N=165)	Female (96.97%) Male (3.03%) ⁴
Ethnicity and Nationality* (n=160) * Ethnicity status was self-reported so descriptions are based on individual preferences.	White (36.88%) English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (16.25%) White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (44.38%) Irish (0.63%) White Irish (0.63%) Indian (0.63%) White/Hispanic (0.63%)
Current marital status (N=165)	Single (72.12%) Married, Civil Partnership, Co-Habiting (25.45%) Separated (0.61%) Divorced (1.82%)
Been in intimate relationship since bereavement (n=162)	Yes (56.79%) No (42.59%) Prefer not to say (0.62%)
Previously or currently serving (n=163)	Yes (24.85%) No (73.94%)
Service served (n=40)	Army (30%)

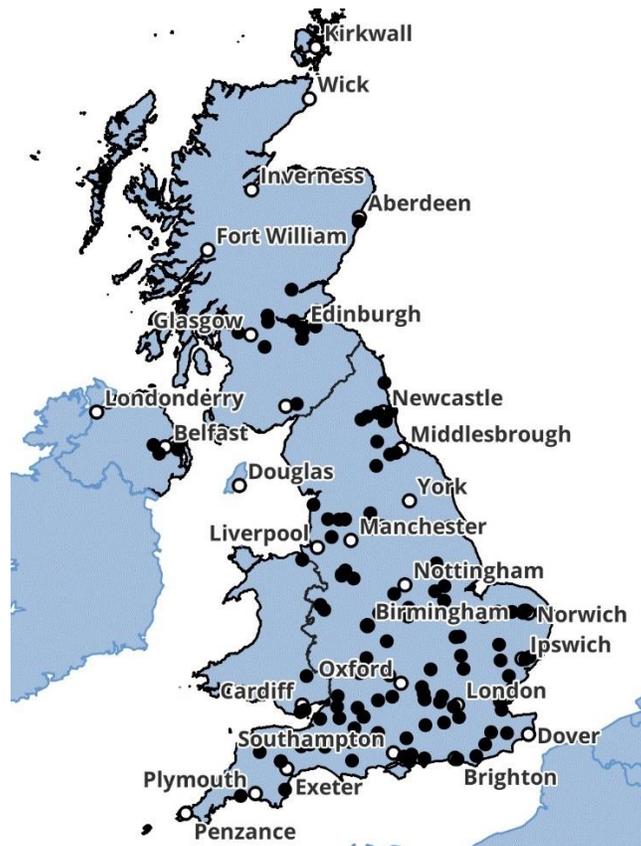
³ Single Service Widows' Associations consist of Royal Navy and Royal Marine (RNRM) Widows' Association, Army Widows' Association, and Royal Air Force (RAF) Widows' Association respectively.

⁴ Phase One included a small number of male respondents. Therefore, this section will refer to widow/er to reflect this demographic.

*Some respondents stated multiple categories.	Royal Air Force Reserve (15%) Royal Air Force (45%) Royal Navy/Royal Marines (6%) Territorial Army/Army Reserve (2%)
Time since bereavement (n=165)	1 - 66 years (Mean = 15.41, SD = 11.67) Under 10 years (36.97%) 10-19 years (32.12%) 20-29 years (18.18%) 30+ years (12.73%)
Widow's age when spouse died (n=165)	20 - 76 years old (Mean = 42.81, SD = 12.02)
Age of spouse at time of death (n=165)	20 – 83 years old (Mean= 44.13, SD = 12.46)
Circumstances of Death (n=163)	In service (34.55%) Attributable to service (24.24%) Hastened by service/related to a disablement attributed to service (10.91%) Unrelated to service (29.09%)
Child/ren	Yes (72.39%) No (17.18%) Other (10.43%)** **Child/ren from previous relationships, child/ren from previous relationships and with partner, pregnancy, and not stated.

Respondents who completed the survey were located across the UK. Figure 2 represents the geographical locations utilising a 'heat map' that is not a specific identifier but illustrates the geographical spread.

Figure 2: Heatmap of the Locations of UK Survey Respondents



Data Collection

The survey was available online between 1 March 2021 and 30 June 2021. It was developed and distributed using Qualtrics.⁵ A total of 214 organisations, including respective Widows' Associations, were contacted, asked to share information about the study, and were provided with a link to the survey. Participation was voluntary and included the option to complete the survey on paper if preferred. An Information Sheet and Consent Form were integrated into the Qualtrics survey and were read and/or signed before completion of the survey. The survey asked questions on the following:

- Demographic information
- Life before bereavement (e.g. living arrangements, household income)
- Life at present day (e.g. living arrangements, household income)

⁵ Qualtrics is an online survey software

-
- Current social connections
 - Access to services and support
 - The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social connections
 - Any other comments

Analysis and Results

Quantitative data analysis utilised descriptive and non-parametric tests using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Excel. A reliability analysis⁶ was completed to assess the internal consistency of the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (1987) and Lubben Social Network Scale (2006). This is presented in the Supplementary Information Section (page 89). A repeated measures t-test⁷ was completed to assess differences between household income prior to and following bereavement. Spearman's Rank Correlation coefficient⁸ was used to further explore the relationship between household income, age, and social isolation and loneliness.

Braun and Clarke (2006)'s Thematic Analysis was utilised to identify the themes within the qualitative data gathered from open-ended questions. The six steps of conducting Thematic Analysis have been applied as follows:

⁶ A reliability analysis assesses the internal consistency of a questionnaire. If found to have a high level of internal consistency, this indicates that the scales are a valid measurement of an outcome within that population; essentially this is measuring what the scale was designed to measure.

⁷ A repeated measures t-test demonstrates whether there has been a *significant* difference between variables at two time points, in this case household income prior to and after bereavement (Field, 2009). A t-test is used to assess whether this change was statistically significant, i.e. due to the variable of interest, or whether this was due to probability or chance. If the P Value is less than 0.05, results are seen as statistically significant.

⁸ Spearman's rank correlation coefficient tests ranks the data before assessing the positive or negative relationships (known as correlations) between variables. This assesses the strength of the relationship between variables, in this case household income, age, social isolation and loneliness (Field, 2009).

Table 6: Overview of Thematic Analysis

Step 1: Responses were read and re-read for data familiarity.

Step 2: Initial codes were generated, and the data organised in a meaningful and systematic way, related to the questions asked in the survey.

Step 3: The themes were characterised by their significance to the research questions and the data coding (Step 2).

Step 4: The themes were reviewed, modified, and developed to consider how closely they supported the data set and to check for coherence.

Step 5: The themes were defined and refined and sorted into main themes and sub-themes.

Step 6: The themes and sub-themes were collated and described in the results section.

The overall aim of the Thematic Analysis was to extract themes and sub-themes based on the respondents' comments, discussed in detail next under the Results heading below.

Quantitative Results

72.12% of participants reported being a member of associations, clubs, or social groups. Membership to the Military Widows' Associations are as follows:

- The War Widows' Association (53.33%)
- The Royal Navy and Royal Marine Widows' Association (12.73%)
- The Army Widows' Association (20.61%)
- The Royal Air Force Widows' Association (22.42%)

Further information about the membership to the War Widows' and single service widows' associations are outlined in Table 7.

Table 7: Overview of Survey Respondent Membership to the War Widows' and Single Service Widows' Associations

Association	Time Joined
The War Widows' Association (n=78)	Before bereavement (1.28%) Immediately after bereavement (34.62%) Within 10 years of bereavement (47.44%) After 10 years of bereavement (16.67%)
The Royal Navy and Royal Marine Widows' Association (n=21)	Immediately after bereavement (38.10%) Within 10 years of bereavement (38.10%) After 10 years of bereavement (23.10%)
The Army Widows' Association (n=30)	Immediately after bereavement (56.67%) Within 10 years of bereavement (30.00%) After 10 years of bereavement (13.33%)
The Royal Air Force Widows' Association (n=32)	Immediately after bereavement (75.00%) Within 10 years of bereavement (25.00%)

Of the 165 participants who responded, 55.76% of survey respondents reported being in other intimate relationships (41.82% reported not being in other intimate relationships; 2.42% no response). Of the 90 respondents who answered the question, 43.64% reported that their relationships had been impacted by their bereavement (45.45% no response) and 40% reported difficult making friends (1.82% no response).

An overview of additional key descriptive statistics is provided in Table 8.

Table 8: Number of People in Household and Gross Household Income Prior to and Post Bereavement

	Prior to bereavement	Following bereavement
Number of People in Household (n=161/n=155)	One person (3.11%)	One person (38.06%)
	Two or three people (57.15%)	Two or three people (52.26%)
	Four or five people (39.13%)	Four or five people (9.68%)
	More than five people (0.62%)	More than five people (0%)
Gross household Income (n=164/n=165)	Less than £20,000 (17.58%)	Less than £20,000 (21.21%)
	£21,000-£40,000 (29.70%)	£21,000-£40,000 (41.21%)
	£41,000-£60,000 (23.64%)	£41,000-£60,000 (16.26%)
	£61,000-£80,000 (14.55%)	£61,000-£80,000 (8.48%)
	More than £80,000 (7.88%)	More than £80,000 (5.45%)
	Prefer not to say or no response (6.67%)	Prefer not to say or no response (7.27%)

Respondents to the survey reported a significantly larger annual household income prior to the bereavement of their spouse (mean= 2.62, SD = 0.097) compared to their current household income (mean = 2.32, SD = 0.091), $t(148) = 2.95, p < 0.01$. When considering age, current household income was considerably reduced; the older the participant, the lower current household income reported ($r = -0.264, p < 0.001$). See Appendix 3 for statistical outputs.

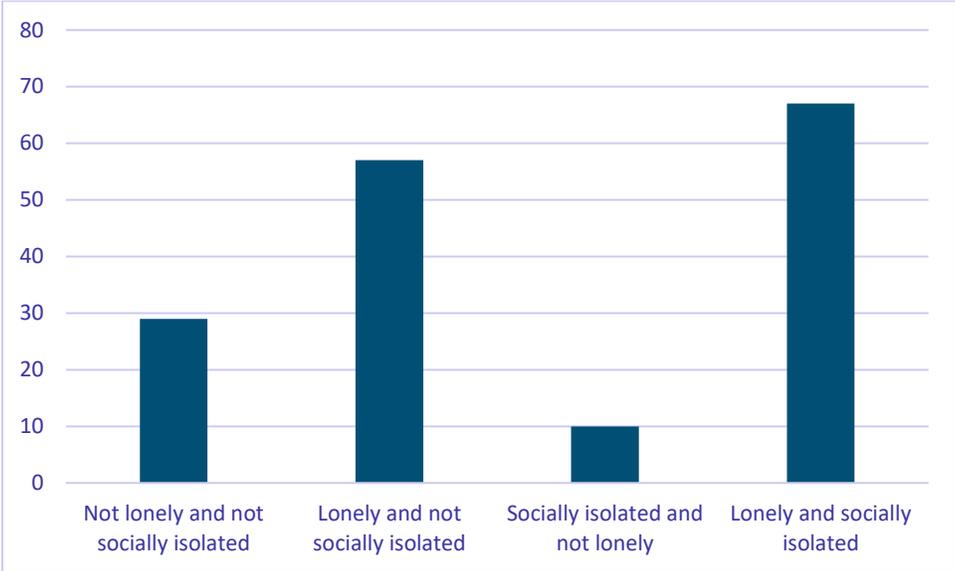
Responses to the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale and Lubben Social Network Scale were grouped into three categories:

1. not lonely and not socially isolated (17.58%)
2. lonely or socially isolated (40.61%)
3. lonely and socially isolated (40.61%)

A visual depiction of the categories across the dataset is presented in Figure 3. There was a negative correlation between social isolation and loneliness levels and current household income $r(150) = -0.161, p = 0.049$.



Figure 3: Visual representations of categories of social isolation and loneliness



In summary, these results suggest that there was a significant perception of financial instability post bereavement among older survey respondents, which was related to reports of social isolation and loneliness.

Qualitative Results

Three broad themes were generated from the qualitative data, each with their own sub-themes as set out in Table 9.

Table 9: Themes generated from Survey Open Responses

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Widowhood, Loneliness, and Social Isolation	Impact of Bereavement Complexities of Widowhood
Connecting with Others	Personal Relationships Support Services
Challenges to Social Engagement	Practical and Personal Barriers Social Media

Widowhood, Loneliness, and Social Isolation

This overarching theme reflects the respondents' feelings about the impact of bereavement, the changes brought about by an altered marital/relationship status and the complexity of this transition.

Impact of Bereavement

Respondents discussed the personal impact of bereavement, including experiences of mental ill health manifesting in varying levels of anxiety and depression. For some respondents, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was also described as being a fundamental result of the sudden and trauma nature of loss:

No one understands how cold I feel since being widowed young - this has been the most awful thing that will ever happen to me, and it has made me shut down to the world a great deal...losing my husband when we were both 27 has had an enormous impact on my wellbeing. (P011)

At times when I feel exceptionally down, I find it hard to escape and spend time on my own to reflect, I always seem to have to put a false face on. (P117)

I was unaware I was dealing with PTSD due to the tragic nature of [anonymised's] death, it made me irrational and fearful of those close to me. (P179)

Some respondents said that they were unable to trust anyone, making it difficult to adjust which impacted on their self-esteem and family relationships. The resultant sense of loneliness was compounded by feelings of taboo or stigma and a feeling that, although there was a rhetoric about offering help and support, the reality was that friends and family found it difficult to know how to help and what to say:

I received no help when husband died and was unable to get close to commit as always afraid, they would die...But now I have no confidence, low self-esteem and find it difficult to socialise. (P174)

Huge impact on my ability to trust anyone fully after death of my spouse. It took me years before I would agree to remarry. My kids struggled with my new husband - they felt I had betrayed their deceased father. (P121)

People say 'call if you need anything' but they can't handle death so actually avoid calls or you at any opportunity. Death needs to be talked about more. (P155)

Complexities of Widowhood

Respondents talked about the impact of losing their own 'military' identity as a result of bereavement and loss of the associated lifestyle that had been so closely integrated into military life. Numerous respondents described feeling fundamentally different and felt disassociated with military life. Some could no longer relate to the friendships they had developed 'behind the wire':

My late husband lived for the army not his family. (P032)

Because we moved about, we didn't really keep close friends, so my support network was good initially but after a few months it didn't really exist. (P151)

I felt unique in my circumstances, I didn't think that anyone else would understand my situation. I felt isolated from my military friends, and I had only just moved into my new home when my husband was killed in action, so I had not established many new friendships. (P107)

A large number of survey respondents reported that relationships with their immediate family and friends fundamentally changed following the death of their significant other. Respondents described the loss of friends and family following bereavement:

Some of my late husband's friends quickly left the circle as soon as he died, on the instructions of their wives/partners! I also found it difficult to accept invitations, and still do, to anything that is in any way a 'couple' event. Some friends eventually took me at my word and stopped inviting to me these occasions, for which I was grateful, although I still see them on a coffee/informal basis. (P006)

Unable to trust friends, at the time of my late husband's death I had to incur statements from so called friends that left me speechless i.e., you've got the money, you'll forget him after a few weeks. The best came from his parents when we went down to the Falkland Islands in 1983, the first time we saw his grave they stood one side of the grave holding hands and I and my son, who was 3 years, the other side and his mother said, 'well it's alright for you, you have [anonymised]'. (P117)

Most couples who were previously friends withdrew. People who initially said they would be there if I needed anything were not. One or two people stepped up who I previously hadn't been especially close to, but this was rare and occasional. I felt abandoned, isolated, a complete lack of understanding, bereft and completely broken. I didn't know anyone else who had been widowed young and felt completely lost. My world stopped and no-one else seemed to notice. (P132)

However, despite the challenges involved, some respondents reported separation from the military and extraction from their previous lifestyle as necessary to foster a sense of autonomy and flexibility:

You have to move on not become a victim (P032)

Main thing is not to be too rigid in your view of how to live your life be more spontaneous and open to change as we will never go back to how our lives were previously. Everyone reacts differently to each set of circumstances so I believe that a one shoe fits all approach will not reach those who most need the help to overcome the loss of a partner/covid/or any other life changing event. (P090)

Other life changing events for some of the respondents occurred around the same time as the loss of their significant other, including the death of close family members (parents and siblings) resulting in a cumulative traumatic change:

Two of my own children moved to different parts of the country. My stepdaughter moved away from me. (P016)

My father died 10 weeks before my husband and my mum and I have become closer and more supportive in grief. (P147)

It was tricky I lost my mum as well who was close and like a mum to my late husband. (P003)

Connecting with Others

This overarching theme demonstrates the importance of connecting with others through personal relationships and accessing more general support during widowhood. It encompasses the subthemes of personal relationships (intimate relationships, family, and friendships) and support from community services.

Personal Relationships

This sub-theme illustrates the complexity of social connections and intimate relationships, including positive and negative aspects. For some respondents, marrying again was key to recover from the trauma that grief brought to their lives and tackling the difficulties associated with loss:

I've tried really hard over the years to heal and help heal my son and I think we're both quite stable individuals now and because of that I have been lucky enough to find love again and get married again. (P022)

I am now in a 9-year relationship with a kind loving man who is also a serving soldier so understands my circumstances. We are getting married this year. (P036)

I met my new husband while I was grieving, he helped me through some of the darkest days of my grief and accepted me and my children in spite of the chaos, pains and challenges facing a family which has been widowed at an early age. He is not jealous of my late husband and is happy for me to talk about him. Even over 10 years since I was widowed, my new husband continues to support me through difficult days when unexpected waves of grief overwhelm me. He has also brought joy and laughter, love, and security back to my life. (P132)

6 years after I was widowed, I reconnected with a friend from my teenage years. We married 5 years later. (P002)

In contrast to the positive aspects of subsequent relationships, other respondents reported negative aspects to marrying for the second time and forging new relationships, including incidents of domestic abuse and conflict:

After 2 years started dating. Two years of dating one man, at end of that first year introduced to son and allowed him to stay over occasionally. 4 years after my husband died got pregnant with my daughter. Moved home bought somewhere nearer daughters fathers work but did not marry. He defrauded me of thousands and started domestic violence. I split up with him 2018. Have now remarried and settled. (P003)

I found another partner and was married. My new husband turned out to be an abusive partner and I had to escape that marriage. It was a bad experience. I am divorced and single again now. (P027)

My second partner could not cope with the fact I had been widowed and blamed my late husband for the reason he ended the relationship. (P138)

Although I explain that my new partner can never replace my husband and that the relationship between us is different, I think my partner feels a little intimidated by the previous relationship... feels that he can never measure up. (P162)

Other respondents described feeling vulnerable as a result of the challenges and negative experience of subsequent relationships with others:

After 16 years of widowhood, I entered a significant relationship that failed after a year because it became obvious that my financial position and my status as a homeowner were the motivators for the other individual, and not me as a person. (P006)

I had one relationship with a narcissistic individual who preyed on the fact I was a vulnerable widow. (P036)

I got (mistakenly) married again. Someone I worked with very persistent, which culminated in a marriage that I didn't really want. It's very hard to explain what state of mind leads to this, but I was just numb & got swept along. (P042)

In response to the survey question about whether bereavement impacted on subsequent romantic relationships, those who replied stated that the loss of their significant other did affect their ability to 'move on' underpinned by a worry that the same, traumatic thing, would happen again:

I married a fireman and I constantly panic if he is late home and doesn't phone me...I constantly think I will lose him too...if it happened once, it could happen again. (P054)

I have a fear of my partner dying and breaking down again so can't allow myself to build close bonds and my depression and anxiety has made me very ill over the years not being able to get close to anyone and build any trust or bonds... leading me to breakdowns and suicidal attempts. (P125)

For others, finances and issues related to a loss of pension were important considerations and the associated complications impacted on subsequent relationships:

7yr relationship not living together because of rules back then and had a daughter...unable to afford to get married relationship broke up. (P125)

I met my husband 4 years after I became a widow, we married 2 years after that. I lost my late husband's military pension as I did not understand that I would lose it as he hadn't been in the military when he died, I hadn't understood this at all, it has had a detrimental effect on my finances. He served for 23 years, and I thought his pension would be like any other occupational pension. (P151)

Difficulties regarding confidence, status, broad financial concerns, and the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic were evident for some participants:

I met a widower on holiday in 2007 and I moved closer to live near him in 2008. We don't live together as we consider the financial situation for both sets of adult children would be complicated after our deaths. I am partially his carer now as he is 15 years older than me. I spend half the week full time at his house and most days I cook his meals. In the pandemic I am also cleaning and shopping for him. (P067)

I am thinking of doing online dating but lack the confidence to do more than think about this. (P063)

Unable to take part or meet up with people due to lockdown. Also, as carer to my dad and my age I have to be even more careful...The whole isolation I feel as impacted on my grieving process as I have been unable to share feelings or emotions fully. I have felt that I should be presenting a 'me' that I don't actual feel is a true picture therefore I feel my grieving has stuck... (P016)

Whilst over half of survey respondents reported that they experienced no difficulty making or maintaining friendships following their bereavement, there were clear challenges arising from the impact of military bereavement on relationships with family and friends. Particularly as the support of family and friends can be significantly helpful during the grieving process and beyond and in the absence of trusted networks, participants struggled:

An already difficult relationship with my in-laws became much more difficult and eventually became non-existent; they blamed me for my husband's death totally irrationally. (P041)

Sister/Brother-in-law became distant and finally ignored me completely...now 8 years with no contact. (P075)

My relationship with my mother-in-law deteriorated - we were not in regular contact. As a result, my relationship with my brothers-in-law improved as they were all very scared of losing

contact with me and the girls. I remember "we are family" being said by them very regularly in the early days after my husband's death. (P063)

All of my relationships changed, I was somewhat overwhelmed by my family caring for me and feeling sorry for me, it must have been difficult for my younger siblings when I moved back home for a while with 2 children. But I eventually moved around 10 miles away, just so I could breathe (P080)

For some respondents, relationships with family and friends improved:

Although we had been a close and loving family, I would say that my relationship with my daughters became even closer and we formed a 'gang of three'. (P006)

My sister moved into my house for 3 months to support me, as did my mum. Our family became closer. (P027)

My daughter was worried about me and I her, she doesn't want me to be lonely and also not dependent on her and kids for a social life, doesn't happen! They are my life. (P057)

Support Services

The sub-theme illustrates that the nature and extent of support that participants described as helpful:

Military Widows should join their appropriate charity, Navy, Army, Air Force, my own Military Widows' charity has provided me with much fellowship, laughter and tears, everyone willing to share the journey and thus being inspirational to my own journey. I have made new friends and developed new interests. Pre-Covid there was a lot to do and many opportunities to take part in visits and fellowship meetings. Nothing beats a good face to face chat. (P059)

I can honestly say that the only time I feel I can let my guard down is at an Army Widows' function as no one is there judging you. (P117)

The help I received from The RM charity was second to none on the death of my ex-wren wife, with both telephone support and them paying for her funeral. (P165)

For some respondents the lack of support resulted in reflection on what might have been helpful and what some of the barriers were:

More support when you leave the military network. I had to move from Germany to stay with relatives until I moved into a council house near my parents. I found it very hard to fit in, as civilian life is so different to service life. (P004)

Contact from specific charities. I have never heard from [name of association] since I have been bereaved- 23 years ago. I was given a leaflet at the time, but the telephone number was wrong. I contacted the [name of association] some years ago, but they never contacted me. (P022)

For me its talking to somebody who would understand what it was like living with a veteran, my husband had a squaddies humour which made me laugh so much but civvy people just don't get that...I wasn't aware there were support groups for me as a widow of a veteran. I would like to make sure that this information is freely available, most councils have signed the armed forces covenant and they should promote it on their webpages. (P115)

As a widow of a veteran, I felt left out of the military family. I met and married my husband after he was medically discharged, however I cared for him for many years due to the medical issues. I think that some support for those who may feel they are not entitled to be a 'war widow' and for younger widows/widowers, it might be possible to support them in a practical way (e.g., education, training for their future) as well as bereavement support. (P031)

The need for access to support on a local level was also highlighted by a number of respondents:

I sometimes think it could be useful and supportive if there was a way of bringing together local, smaller networking groups of Military Widow(er)s. (P100)

Someone local to widow's new home to give advice on facilities etc in a new location. I realise this may be unrealistic. As I had moved 20+ times and spent 8 out of the previous 10 years on overseas postings I had no obvious UK base. Starting completely from scratch was daunting and hard work. (P055)

Challenges to Social Engagement

This overarching theme illustrates the challenges participants discussed in relation to social engagement including, practical and personal barriers to participation and the accessibility.

Practical and Personal Barriers

Participants described practical difficulties with attending events related to candidacy – eligibility for support and how this is negotiated between service user and service provider - as well as access to informal social engagement:

If I didn't have a car, it would be almost impossible for me to attend associations/clubs/social groups, public transport is irregular in rural communities - e.g. I need a car to get to the bus stop. (P041)

Sometimes I couldn't afford to attend (quite often). Fuel and or train tickets plus hotel meant a few hundred pounds I can't afford. (P169)

I think you are best to find your own. The associations are just a [clique] who are rather outdated and don't update to present day issues. (P048)

When I was first widowed, I felt incredibly isolated despite having an overbearing family network. My health visitor recommended a local bereavement group, I went along but they were all old and it was somewhat of a social event. it wasn't what I needed. I needed to be with young people like myself, who understood. I would like there to be young widows support groups. (P080)

Social Media

Interestingly, online provision of support, particularly social media, was highlighted by participants as unhelpful or ineffective as a means of connecting with others:

I'm on a Facebook widows' group, which is a mix of inspiring quotes and depressing unburdening. I haven't felt sufficient connected with any of the people on this group to consider them friends or ask them for help. Most widows are just trying to get through the day, the week, the month etc. In person social groups would be much more helpful, but impossible for last 12 months due to covid. (P066)

I am an extrovert and I miss not being able to socialise and meet people face to face. Some days I feel 'Zoomed out'. (P055)

Not all people have access to internet-based services, a better non digital presence (P074)

Summary

Widowhood, social isolation and loneliness, relationships and support services, as well as challenges to social engagement were identified as factors that had a significant impact following bereavement. A lack of support and understanding of widowhood was highlighted as significant and, for some respondents, the personal impact of this included exposure to anxiety, depression and diagnosed PTSD.

Survey respondents described complex bereavement that extended to the loss of contact with friends and family or a breakdown in relationships. Feelings of being different from the civilian bereaved population was a prevalent theme that was linked to the unique aspects of military life. The process of transition from the 'military community' into civilian society extends to the family and those informal networks forged during service life have fundamentally changed.

Some respondents experienced cumulative grief and loss, and this complicated the 'grief journey' as well as shaping personal narratives of widow identity. Closely linked to the complex grief process described by the respondents was the experience of support derived from both within the family and beyond, particularly following sudden, unexpected death. Social isolation due to the absence of social relationships or effective social integration has the potential to increase the risk of poor outcomes based on a lack of support from those who were previously close to them (Umberson & Montez, 2010). The quality of relationships with support services has the potential to reverse exposure to poor outcomes and it is clear from the findings of Phase One that this needs to be appropriate, far-reaching and accessible.

The change of financial stability post-bereavement was revealed through in-depth analysis of the quantitative survey responses which related to annual household income pre and post bereavement, measures of social isolation and loneliness, and age (see supplementary section). The results suggested that the risk of financial instability among older survey respondents was significantly increased post-bereavement. Perception of financial instability was significantly associated with reports of higher levels of social isolation and loneliness.



Phase Two: Qualitative Interviews

Phase Two involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 26 participants (see Table 10). Interviews aimed to gather a deeper understanding of experience of social isolation and loneliness of Military Widows to understand not only the lived experience but also to gain knowledge on support networks and services available (Appendix 2 – interview schedules)

Table 10: Participant Demographics for Individual / Group Interviews.

Age (N=26)	40 - 79 years old (Mean = 60.96, SD = 9.06)
Gender (N=26)	Female (100%) ⁹
Ethnicity (N=26)	White (100%)
Previously Served (n=24)	Yes (20.38%) No (79.17%)
Service Served (n=5)	RAF (20%) Women's Royal Army Corp (20%) Wren (20%) Army (20%) Army Reserve (20%)
Spouses Service (N=26)	Army (34.62%) Navy (15.38%) RAF (42.31%) Marines (3.85%) Marines Reserves (3.85%)
Time since Bereavement (n=19)	4 - 39 years (Mean = 18.63, SD = 9.41) Under 10 years (10.53%) 10-19 years (47.37%) 20-19 years (31.58%) 30+ years (10.53%)
Circumstances of Death (n=20)	In action (10%) In service (25%) Attributable to service (45%) In service and attributable to service (15%) Not attributable to service (5%)

⁹ Please note that all participants were females and in this section of the report will be referred to as Military Widows.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 26 participants over Zoom¹⁰ or over the telephone and lasted between one and two and a half hours. Seven participants were recruited from staff/volunteers of relevant organisations. Of those who were staff members/volunteers, 6 were also Military Widows. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview schedule was developed from Phase One and interview topic guide included questions related to:

- demographic information
- bereavement
- self-identity
- loneliness/social isolation
- support services
- technology use

The topic guide for those participants who were also staff/volunteers at relevant organisations included questions related to experience of working with Military Widows/Armed Forces Community, services and support provided by their respective organisations, loneliness/social isolation, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as technology use by Military Widows.

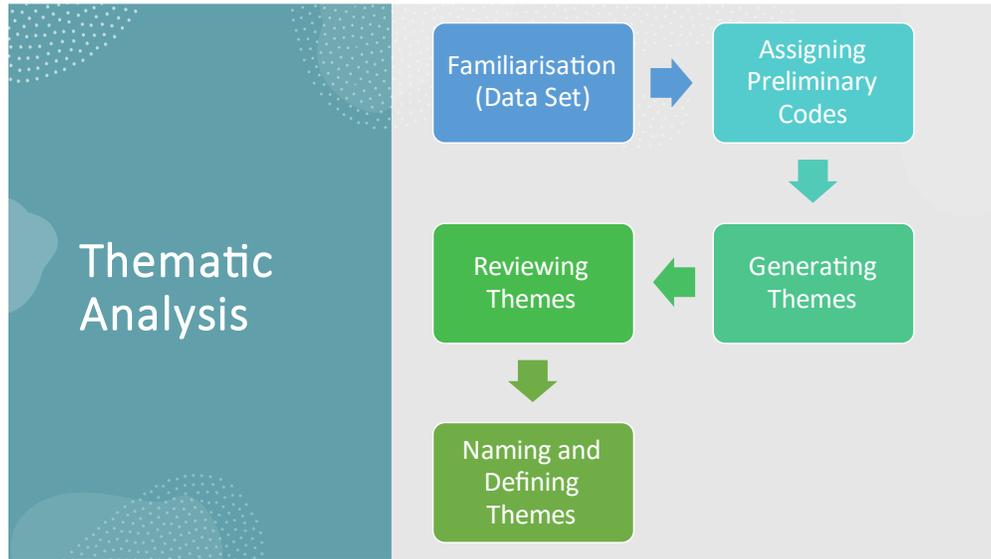
Results

All the interview transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis and followed the same process as the qualitative aspect of the open-ended survey questions (Phase One). NVivo¹¹ software was used to ensure reliability and three members of the research team analysed transcripts separately and compared initial codes (Figure 4).

¹⁰ Zoom is a communication software that allows one-to-one or group audio and video calls. It can be accessed using digital technologies, such as Smartphones or computers.

¹¹ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International. It is designed for qualitative researchers working with rich text-based data and helps to organise and analyse, classify and sort to help researchers make observations and build a body of evidence.

Figure 4: Thematic Analysis in Practice



While emergent themes were being considered for Phase Two, it was clear that the substantial amount of data was best suited to adaptation of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)¹². The IPA approach was adapted to provide a focus on the subjective lived experiences of individuals and used in the analysis in recognition that the themes derived from narratives were socially situated (Love et al, 2020). Therefore, superordinate and subordinate¹³ themes were utilised to convey the depth and breadth of theme clusters identified from the Phase Two interviews.

Three superordinate themes were generated from the qualitative data, each with their own subordinate themes. Each overarching, superordinate theme is discussed below together with the subordinate themes (Table 11). Participant quotes are utilised to support these descriptions.

¹² IPA is a qualitative methodology which places specific focus on the lived experiences of participants and has been noted as valuable in examining complex and emotional topics (Smith and Osborn, 2015).

¹³ Superordinate themes are defined in this instance as the overarching theme identified from the Phase Two interviews. Subordinate themes are key elements within the superordinate themes.

Table 11: Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
Identity: Transition and Sense of Belonging	Military Wife to Widow
	'War Widow'
	'Military Widow'
	'Association Member'
Aftermath & Changing Relationships	Loss of Military Structure and Community
	Struggling to Adapt to New Relationships
	Resilience
	Independence
Tackling Social Isolation & Loneliness	Coping Strategies
	Nature and Extent of Support
	Access to Support
	Peer Support
	Life-long Support

Identity: Transition and Sense of Belonging

Widowhood resulted in significant challenges for participants, both emotionally and in terms of role changes. The first superordinate theme presents the complexity of 'widowhood identity' in terms of the transition from Military Wife to Widow, the loss of military structure and community and the language used to categorise widows from the Armed Forces community together with the resultant stereotypes and ambiguities associated with the use of titles such as *War Widow*, *Military Widow* and *Association Member*. The narrative accounts of a 'sense of belonging' depict its importance as part of the transition from Military Wife to Widow. Participants described feelings as if they had been 'cut off' from the Armed Forces community, uprooted and abandoned.

Military Wife to Widow

Participants reflected on their past life as a 'Military Wife' and the impact of the loss of this identity and the community shared during their married life as part of an Armed Forces family:

I think for a lot of women... you know we are taught to be quite social in the army, aren't we? Or as partners you have to go to mess functions and all that sort of stuff, but I still think it is quite difficult if suddenly you are just there by yourself. (P035)

I'd gone from this confident 27-year-old who had everything, you know, who had a lovely partner, we'd got our own house, I'd got a great full-time job. I loved what I did, I was teaching... to then having everything pulled under and not knowing what I was doing. (P013)

I suppose, in those initial kind of days and weeks, you as a person almost ceases to exist because the only thing that matters is everything that needs to be done around that... it is not until you are kind of, I think several months down the line that anything about you starts to come back, if that makes sense, because the thing that was you has just gone and you have lost everything because with that person who's gone... (P033)

I'm still Mrs [anonymised] and I still wear my wedding rings... (P010)

For some of the participants, the challenges associated with the transition from Military Wife to Widow left them feeling reluctant to disclose their widow status to others:

So since then, friends that I have recently met, like the last couple of years, don't necessarily know that I am a Military Widow. See you don't necessarily talk about that, you don't say, hello, I am so and so and I'm a widow, do you?... unless you get to know them quite well, you don't want to bombard them with that, do you?... You know, a couple of friends assume that I've been married to [anonymised] for years and think that [anonymised] is [anonymised] dad, but he's not. (P018)

I think most people realise that I'm a widow, those that I've told... when I started this job, I deliberately didn't say anything to start with, because I didn't want [sighs], not the fake empathy... that, oh no, oh that's terrible, I'm so sorry. Why are you sorry? You didn't know him, you don't know me, so why are you sorry, you know? (P012)

Many of the participants spoke about the importance of recognising that being a Military Wife also involves a level of dedication to the Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence and that 'service' is very often a family commitment:

I think in some ways, the widows can be the forgotten heroes, can't they of the conflict and I think that it is so important that, you know, the MOD or when they are doing events and everything that they think about the inclusivity of it that actually, you know, the widows are left, you know, and they are the ones that should be representing those that died in the conflict... I think the Royal British Legion are pretty good, aren't they, because at the end of the Remembrance service, they always bring the widows in as a poignant reminder of you know, this is reality of it. (P035)

I think the MOD needs to remember the widows a little more in respect of events that happen or services or parades or anything along those lines, you know, and I'm not saying we should be front and centre of all of it, but you know, just occasionally it would be quite nice to be able to... for all of us to bring forward our husbands' memories of the service they gave to the country. (P012)

I do think that war widows should get recognition for life. I mean your spouses have been serving the country. It's a big ask, even if it's not in war time there are things that happen maybe behind the scenes and this sort of thing that most people just don't know are going on. So yes, I think a recognition that somebody's served their country which has actually seemed to be quite lacking at times. (P019)

War Widow

It was clear that, for some participants, there was confusion regarding what constitutes a 'War Widow'. This confusion related to perceptions of the term itself and the assumption that this status was reserved for widows whose spouses were killed in action. Others noted that whilst, they were 'officially' classified as a War Widow, they were uncomfortable referring to themselves as such:

I suppose you can be a war widow if people die later on, but in my day you were only a war widow if you were killed in action, or service, or whatever... I haven't met any war widows whose husbands had died after service. (P026)

...the reason I don't say war widow is because, I mean it is a strange one. I suppose you identify, I always think of war widow as going back to the world wars... (P009)

I always felt uncomfortable saying war widow and I don't think the [0:40:01] is right. Because he didn't die in a war situation, they were training. (P018)

Military Widow

A number of participants spoke about how they choose to identify as a Military Widow to describe their status and how they felt that this was best suited to their personal circumstances, while others argued that their widow identity was complex and widowhood itself was only one part of this:

I think a Military Widow probably, yeah, but ultimately you're a widow. Whatever else, whatever adjective you put in front of it, I think you are first and foremost a widow. (P005)

I am widowed, you might even say, if you are an RAF widow, it still wouldn't necessarily need to be in such description, but when something comes up, I think people are often surprised. (P002)

I would probably say widow. If you were to push me on like... I would say Military Widow. I don't really class... I have never really used the word, war widow, all be it I am a member of the War Widows Association, and I am also, by the definition of a war widow. But if I am generally speaking I just say a widow, but if I was to put it down in a document or something, then I would be a Military Widow (P009)

I will say, not war, I am a Military Widow and yeah, I do and then it sparks some conversation... Face to face, because I feel like when I've got, have eyes on somebody, I will say, oh yeah, I'm widowed... or... Military Widow, depending on the circumstances of it (P023)

Association Member

The image of members of the War Widows' Association and single service widows' associations was described by participants as stereotypically biased towards 'older women' as it was felt that there is a significant focus on the age of members. Being older in age, and widowed for a number of years, brought with it assumptions about the characteristics of the people who join the respective associations. For some participants this resulted in a reluctance to join and/or to identify as an 'association member':

... I see them quite distanced from the actual community of widows because not everyone is 90. And it's also for the public to change that perception of what a widow actually is. Like when you hear the word widow, you automatically think of someone older, don't you? Actually there's widows in their 20s, 30s. (P008)

Oh I'm sure they expect us... When you say, you know, I've got a party of war widows here and they go, oh God, no. They will all be grey and old and have perms and be wearing black and they will be crying but we're not like that at all... We're the daftest bunch you're ever met. Well we are really. We've got quite a sick sense of humour, you know, but you have to. (P001)

I mean we've got some very young widows and well apart from anything else curiosity gets the better of me... you think well crikey, you know, you're only 30, what on earth happened to you? Well what happened to your husband? You know, when you've got an 80 or a 90 year old telling you she is a widow, then it is not unexpected, but anything below 60 and you think, I wonder what that was all about. (P001)

I did go to meet two ladies for lunch from [name of association] but... I found it really difficult to engage. They were lovely and very welcoming and friendly, but they were... so much further on in their lives. Both in terms of the place they were with regards to their being widowed and also where they were in terms of their stage of life, you know, neither of them worked, you know, and their kids were all grown up ... (P031)

Loss of Military Structure and Community

Participants described the loss of their previous life as difficult, particularly for those who not only lost direct military connections that brought structure to their lives, but for those who lost access to the military community or no longer felt part of it:

Because I will always consider myself navy, always, always. Even though I never served myself, you know, you do feel like you are, when you are living the life you feel that you are in the service... (P007)

You know the Air Force is for the living and if that person isn't there anymore then the wife or husband now, then it was just wives, then really the sooner you were off their radar the better. (P005)

...it was quite hard being in the married quarters when you're the only one suddenly that's single. Everybody else is married... suddenly you, you're used to being invited as a couple and then for a few months you get invited on your own and then suddenly, you know, you are not invited then... because they think, she is going to be miserable because she's on her own,

you know, that's my perception, anyway, but maybe I did, maybe I did go on about things, or maybe I wasn't as, not completely myself because you're grieving aren't you? (P018)

Several participants discussed how they felt about the absence of a 'male role' in the household and general attitudes towards this, both from a personal introspective and the perception of others:

Just because, you know, my mother and I have had to be men because we didn't have a man and now I have to be a man because I haven't got a man, you know, you're the head of the household. You have to be tough so that people don't push you around. (P026)

...This guy came and he said, where's your husband and I said, why? And he said, well I usually do these appointments with the wife and the husband together and I thought... it's the assumption firstly that there is a husband around and secondly... even if there is a husband around, that you are not capable of doing it on your own. So I said, it is me that made the appointment with you, it is me that wants the bathroom done and I will be paying the bill, I will be making the decisions. Ah well, he said, I have been to so many appointments like this where... I sit for a couple of hours and go through all the options and then we get to the end and then she says, oh well I will have to wait until my husband comes home and say what he says. I said, are you telling me that you are not going to do this unless my husband is here? And he said, well yes, I am sorry, but yeah. I said, hold on, just a minute then and I came upstairs, and I got his ashes out of the cupboard... and I walked downstairs and I sat with this little casket on my knee, I said right, he's here now, would you like to start. (P007)

As well as a loss of military connections and associated identity, participants described instances where they felt that bereaved families are forgotten and no longer associated in any way with their spouse's/significant others military service. Participants described how they felt that, initially, they received recognition, this gradually decreased as time passed:

I don't know how they'll do it, but somehow we've got to not be forgotten and again they are very good when your husband dies... I got a letter from the Chaplain in Chief. I got a letter from the Chief of the Defence staff. A letter from the Minister for Defence... you get all these official letters that tell you what a good chap he was and all the rest of it, which is nice at the time, and you keep them and yeah, they're lovely but then they move on... (P001)

...I gather the scenario is... my son could arrange... to remove the military gravestone and replace it with just a civilian one at that point in time and then my name will go on it. Otherwise

I could get buried there with no name. So invisible in life and invisible in death as an army wife. (P029)

Summary

The themes associated with *identity* and *transition* describe and discuss very important observations with regard to understanding why Military Widows find it difficult to articulate their own needs and can struggle to adapt to a different life without their spouse/significant other on a personal level but also societal and environmentally – arguably in a unique way.

These themes highlight the loss of military community and the shared military identity following bereavement as paramount to loss of social connections or perceptions of loneliness. Furthermore, difficulties identifying as a War Widow (as well as clear confusion as to what constitutes the term), have a clear impact on the access to support. One key example here relates to access to organisations specifically generated for War Widows, such as the War Widows' Association. The above theme clearly highlights that some of the barriers to joining peer-support networks were self-perceived views of what constitutes as a 'War Widow', however there were instances where individuals were initially unable to join or, in some instances, left organisations due to eligibility requirements. For example, following remarriage or not meeting the initial criteria required for full membership. It is of note, that the eligibility requirements of these organisations have evolved over time and therefore some individuals were able to join. However, it is possible that some were unaware of these changes which could have delayed applications for membership and subsequent peer support. With regards to the formal peer-support organisations, further stereotypical assumptions regarding age could impact the willingness to undertake membership and access social connections or support for social isolation and loneliness.

Aftermath & Changing Relationships

The concept of recovery is ambiguous and is often measured by relationship transitions and their emotional impact (Balk, 2004). Following the loss of their spouse/significant other, participants told personal stories about their experiences of fostering new relationships and the impact of changing relationships while building resilience, independence, and coping strategies.

Struggling to Adapt to New Relationships

The subject of relationships was complex and multi-faceted, including changes to existing relationships that for some participants meant friendships irrevocably changed. For instance, those previously considered friends viewed widows, who they perceived as romantically available, as a threat to their own relationship, and distanced themselves as a result. For some participants struggling to adapt to new relationships, either intimate or with family and friends, resulted in a sense of vulnerability and exposure to unpleasant situations, prejudice and fear:

It's a lottery, whether you're actually going to stumble across somebody who's right for you and I mean when I met [anonymised] 3 years ago, I'd all but given up. I mean... I mean... I could tell you some stories... People that buy you a drink and then excuse me, I've got to make a phone call, go out for the phone call, you go out 10 minutes later and their car's gone... Or the man whose wife only died 2 months ago and he's out dating already... They lie about their, yeah, oh, it's just... it's a nightmare... It's frightening, quite frightening. You have to be so, so careful. (P004)

I was once called a scarlet woman by somebody's mother in law... see if you got on with somebody and seemed a bit friendly and they'd ask you to be a bit supportive. Well his mother in law didn't like this at all. So she called me a scarlet woman. (P019)

The absolute judgement they get. Well that means you've forgotten, that means you're over it then. No, it doesn't mean I've forgotten that person at all... And it doesn't mean I'm over it and it doesn't mean that it hasn't and doesn't affect me, I'm just choosing to move forward with my life with it part of me and I'll be honest, I think of all the widows we support, and I would say the majority, and this is an area for research some time, the majority are in, either on dating sites, have dated, are in relationships... no one will ever know. (P008)

Participants lost access to emotional support, such as formal peer networks, and financial support. Some described instances of avoidance by friend groups. It was suggested this was due to their discomfort and not knowing what expected of them in terms of providing support or comfort, and how this would be received. For the widows themselves, several described limited patience over perceived trivial matters experienced by their friend group or described maintaining distance as a form of self-protection.

...when [anonymised] and I started to live together and I lost my War Widows' Association, I didn't feel worthy of being part of the association... But now, they encourage it, I've been to

those events with [anonymised] as well, because that's what happens, people move on, don't they. So they've evolved as well, so I do feel more welcome there now... So I didn't continue with the group really because I lost my pension, so I didn't feel worthy. They didn't intentionally make me feel not worthy, but that was the way I felt because I lost my pension. (P018)

... how can I explain this because I still put widow as my status because to me, unless he walks through that door, that's never going to change regardless of if you are living with somebody else or have moved forward, not moved on, moved forwards. He's never coming back and as I say, the day that he does then I'm no longer, you know, that's not my status anymore and I think it's really, really awful for the ladies who don't have their pension ...Do the government think that he's going to come back. It's... the loss doesn't change on a daily basis. It's still exactly the same... I will join your fight as soon as I am strong enough to do so. (P013)

I also shut off to a couple of friends, really close friends, even now to this day, I'm 18 years down the line and I struggle with these two particular friends who were like my bridesmaids and things and the reason being, they were smothering, they were just too intense, they were... It was like, hold on a minute, I'm the one that has lost my husband, you know, it is not you that's lost... Whereas you would have thought by the way they were reacting and even, I mean I still struggle, like because I know they were well meaning and it was all from a good place, but it is yeah, it is very difficult for me, that was the thing I struggled with, with people's reactions, I just needed them to kind of be normal, if there is such a thing. (P009)

Resilience

The term *resilience* in the context of the participants lived experience, represents the phenomenon of 'doing well' despite experiencing adversity. Many participants facing the challenges of adapting to loss, felt they demonstrated signs of resilience, noting that they just 'kept moving forward' despite experiences of grief:

I don't know. I can't think. I just dealt with everything, you see, because as you know, with being a military wife, you just... while they're away, you just have to deal with it, don't you? You just get on with it. (P010)

I think they think I am a strong person and I say to myself, well there is a solution, it might take years, but there is a solution, so you know, you might have something that you need to do

in the house, so you have either got to have your own strength, people or money or a bit of all of those. (P011)

I've always been, I suppose one of these stoic people who put their heads down and gets on with it and people don't really know what's going on underneath, do you? I suspect that's probably a lot of us actually. (P032)

To some, resilience was developed due to pride and a fear of being seen as unable to cope. This resulted in portraying resilience to others which may not necessarily be felt:

Because constantly and I mean constantly I was aware of the fact that I had to be up and dressed and presentable because you never knew who was going to knock on the door. You never knew who was going to call in and yeah, you know, pride won't allow you to look like a bag of rags. You know and make sure you've hoovered the carpet just in case the CEO drops in again and that sort of stuff, you know. Have I got enough tea and coffee because, you know, it was those little things that, I don't know, I don't know how people cope, but you do. (P001)

...know I can be really resilient, and I can be really composed and just getting on with things, so I think maybe to people you would come over as if you were totally in control or super confident and you are like, oh my God, I am just screaming inside, you know. I think, you know, I always look at people, because I know I have my hair done, put some make up on and I always think when I see someone who is really done like that, I think they are struggling (P023)

Participants described the assumption that widowhood was associated with vulnerability, increasing the risk of being exploited or verbally abused. Whilst not always the case, several participants described instances of entering into abusive relationships post-bereavement, with some feeling trapped due to the risk of financial instability if they left.

...you've got to dance with everybody so, you know, you're going round the room and I thought, oh I am not too happy about this, but anyway, I met him on the street a few weeks later... he was cursing me for being out in society being a widow and I would be struck down and all this sort of thing. Oh my gosh. So anyway I had to go to the class and make a complaint and they said, oh him again. So they knew of him and yet they hadn't stopped him going, you know. So anyway it spoilt it completely for me, so I don't go there anymore... (P010)

It is so funny, on the dating site, I wouldn't put anything. I'd just put single, because I am. I thought, I am not putting that down and that was more a case of feeling vulnerable or attracting the wrong people. But yeah, I do, I will say I'm widowed (P023)

So obviously a few years later I did remarry. It was a total disaster, you know. My mum was right, they don't like your children, you know, my husband never had anything to do with my son and my local MP kept me posted, sent me Hansard's about restoration of war widows' pension and the day he wrote to me and said, it's through I walked out. (P028)

As a result, some participants needed to be assertive in order to ensure that their voices were heard. One example of this was the fight experienced by some participants to access financial support:

So I'm a fighter, I'm a determined person, but the trouble is, having to fight all these battles on my own has left me completely exhausted. So sort of mentally and physically. (P004)

I mean I had all sorts of issues with the bank, you know, where for many, many years. I had to send them many copies of the death certificate before they got it right and that impacted my own account, you know, and I do... but these are just, you know, it's nothing to do with the military. (P029)

Independence

Participants described instances of independence deriving from their initial status as a Military Wife, which was further enhanced following bereavement. There were instances of enforced independence due to limited availability of social networks, the absence of which had initially resulted in feelings of social isolation and loneliness by the participants who felt unable to attend social events or activities.

And I think that is the hardest thing. It is not always great, but if I don't go, I will never go. I can't be waiting for there to be someone else who is going to support me... (P002)

And also how independent we, as wives have to be. I think a lot of my friends who aren't related to any military people find me inspirational because of how independent I am and how much I do as a solo. I've travelled such a lot. I've been on 5 cruises since I lost [anonymised] and I'm doing things because those are the things we would have done together... So I still do go away on my own. In fact, I'd rather be on my own to be honest... I sometimes wonder whether I am depriving myself of more... I don't know, contact I suppose. I don't know. I still

don't know what to do about it. I mean it is nice having somebody to share a few things with, but... (P010)

You don't go to the cinema anymore because you're on your own and it just felt sad, you see the difference. Things that you did, you don't do anymore, but some of that I've overcome, yeah. I went on holiday on my own, quite happily now. I look forward to it, some peace and quiet. (P017)

Coping Strategies

Coping capacity is most effective when specific functions of support match the demands of the cause of the stress. Participants described the process of 'keeping busy' to overcome feelings of grief, examples of this were focusing on current, or in some instances, beginning employment opportunities or engaging with further education. Focusing on these endeavours was seen as providing focus or facilitating coping strategies:

...one of the funny things I always say to my work colleagues, is when the lockdown came in and we had to start working from home and I said, oh I never realised how much I gallivant because I am always out and about or always going and doing something and they just laughed, because they are like, oh my goodness you are always gallivanting about. So I think like [anonymised] will sum it up. She'll say like, when we are down in [anonymised] and things, I will sit and chat to somebody on the tube. I will always find somebody. (P023)

... I was at uni, you know, I was the mum or the granny on the course if you like with all these youngsters. So that was kind of the - developing... and then obviously at home I had these, you know, my 2 kids and I was mum and they're kind of, sort of my focus and so yeah, life became complicated, but busy. Yeah, busy and complicated, which I suppose was another, another way of me, I suppose getting forward a next step, because I had something to focus on again and I suddenly just remembered one morning thinking, I am not just functioning, I am not just existing now. Actually I am living again... (P009)

That's why when I said I threw myself into work. I did literally that was how I, you know, I suppose I coped, and I got through it, is you know, the void was just filled with work and that became my world really. (P032)

Similarly, participants who were parents described focusing on caring for their children. Whilst this could open some opportunities for peer social connections, this focus was often at the expense of other relationships or opportunities. The experience of loneliness came to the forefront once now adult children left home.

I went for a long time without even looking for another relationship because I felt it wasn't fair on my son. So again I put him first. So the first 10 years, I didn't even look for another and you know, I was not that old at that time and then I got into a relationship that wasn't very positive. (P004)

When I left the hospital that day... I mean he had been in hospital all weekend and I had been with him all the time and I was exhausted. I just came home, lay on the settee and I thought, I can't live without him. Not that, I didn't think I wanted to kill myself. I just thought I can't live without him. I shut my eyes and just my girls faces were there, and I thought, I have to carry on for them. (P020)

Some participants described the value of spirituality or faith as a support network:

Yeah, but I have always had my faith and I have to say that my faith is something that helped me through it. Somebody said to me, oh that must have tested it and I said, no, it was my strength to help me through. (P017)

...so I had friends, you know people through church which is, again, it was another, it was a place to go with the children where the children were accepted and it was also people that, you know, quite a lot of people that I knew who were supportive. I mean it was kind of more superficial social on the whole, but at least it was, you know, people to see the... you know, I don't know really, it was helpful. (P031)

Summary

Aftermath and Changing Relationships described the struggle that some participants felt they had when developing relationships and maintaining friendships following bereavement. Participants all described being affected by fundamental changes that occurred in ways that were unexpected and many of the issues raised related to both fostering, maintaining, and ending relationships, either by choice or as a result of stressors/circumstances outside of their control.

The transformation and adaptation of widowhood for some of the participants has led to potential vulnerability in relation to the threat of further distress brought about the changing relationships and a fear of loss or being exploited. Thinking about vulnerability in this way encompasses an understanding of external risks of social isolation and loneliness and feelings of defencelessness and a lack of ability to cope with the transition to Military Widow.

The kind of challenges individuals face differ from person to person and can change over time. However, the processes and mechanisms have distinct similarities as each challenge faced requires access to resources to adapt and overcome. The resources need to match the challenges in order to avert the risk of social isolation and loneliness.

Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness

Situational loneliness, that occurs after a particular life event, and the long-term state of continued isolation, depends on the nature and extent of support, access to services, and the model utilised – such as peer-led. The impact of bereavement is enduring and can fluctuate across the life course, resulting in a need to consider continued access to support to avoid significant impact on social wellbeing, anxiety, and self-esteem.

Nature and Extent of Support

Social, financial, and emotional support is an important factor following loss (Scott, et al, 2007), and for the participants, it influenced their ability to cope with their grief and acted as a protective factor. However, there was a clear difference in the level of support available and a hierarchical response related to the nature of death, i.e. while serving and following transition from the Armed Forces.

Probably more so for veterans, because if they were serving they get the purple pack which is a whole other thing, but...veterans widows, don't get anything at all. No signposting, no, no help with funerals, nothing like that. They've got to find out every bit of information themselves. (P008)

Well for me like the National Arboretum, my husband's name will never go on there and yet, I'm a war widow and he died as a result of war. He is one of thousands more that disappeared off the record. And yet, you know, they are a casualty in their own way. (P017)

Participants described accessing a range of different types of services, the most prevalent being peer-led support networks, such as The War Widows' Association and single service widows' associations (see page 55) and financial support. Additional support avenues noted were that provided by the Ministry of Defence immediately post bereavement, therapeutic support, and statutory/third sector support.

Access to Support

Armed Forces service personnel die from a variety of causes; accidents, illnesses, and suicide while on duty or in theatre and also following transition to civilian life. Participants discussed how the different ways in which their respective spouse/significant other died, played a part in looking for support, in particular the perceived hierarchy of access that was related to rank and the nature of death:

...he was obviously just passed, so he was quite a low rank. And I said, oh he really wanted a military funeral and they laughed and went no, that just goes to the officers or whatever it was, but at the funeral, when the car arrived we were waiting ages and it turned out that we were waiting because they had two planes from the squadron fly over. (P002)

Participants who provided support for bereaved families who died as a result suicide felt that there was a stigma surround the death and access to peer support:

I think within the community as well, there's a hierarchy within the way that someone died... If they died by combat they are the highest of the high... not everybody who is on the wall at the national arboretum, even though it says that they died in theatre, some of them died from accidents... Some people are on there because they took their life, but they happened to take their life in theatre. I know of two widows whose husbands were really good friends. One husband took his life in Afghanistan at [anonymised]. He's on the wall, she's honoured. She's seen as someone that's, you know, of worth. The friend's husband took his life two weeks later and he came home. He is not on the wall, he's not honoured and feels that complete kind of, well why was my husband less than yours. (P008)

I think some of our families have found that when they've gone to support groups that are generic. Say it's for parents, for example, and if they then say, well my son took his own life, they have left that support group because of the utter ignorance of other people saying, yeah, but my son, he died with honour. (P008)

It was clear that a barrier to accessing emotional and financial services was lack of knowledge regarding access or the level of support, particularly from those participants whose bereavement occurred after their spouse's military service. To participants, having a direct point of contact to guide access to relevant services, providing or signposting to advice would be invaluable:

Oh I can't think what the word would be, a point of contact for support when things were not going right. Somebody who could actually give you some advice and some practical support... it's like a fairy godmother that I could just ring up and say, look this is... and somebody who would say, it's not a problem, I will sort it out for you. This is what we'll do, but there aren't any, there aren't... all these organisations they don't have the practical... [name of association] they don't have the practical help that you actually need. (P004)

I didn't even know [name of association] existed... I will look that one up, yeah, that's a new one, as I say, that's a new one on me... That's why you don't know, if nobody tells you, you don't know. I don't think I was even a member of the [name of association], 10 years ago, that was something else I just found out. (P025)

From an organisational perspective, it was difficult identifying and contacting those who met the requirement for support due to barriers such as Data Protection Act (2018). As a result, these organisations were reliant on Military Widows contacting them directly.

The initial stages after bereavement, we are relying on the Visiting Officer to have given the bereaved person our information, because of GDPR, we can no longer directly contact the bereaved person... We have to wait for them to contact us. So we have to rely on the Visiting Officer giving the information, which doesn't always happen. (P034)

...I mean because we used to, years before GDPR and Data Protection, we used to send, the association used to send a letter directly to the bereaved person. We were given their name and address and our information, a letter, a condolence letter and introductory information would go directly to the bereaved person. So they had it, they were reading it, you know, they were reading that there was this organisation for people like you who, you know, I can ring them... but we can't everything is so much more... hurdles to jump over. (P034)

[Talking about reducing social isolation and loneliness] A better means of being able to reach out to others probably. So if you don't know who they are, how can you contact them? I know there's all the GDPR issues, but if somebody is happy to. (P004)

One organisation was able to overcome and directly contact prospective members immediately following bereavement.

...we are really lucky, we've got a really good relationship with [name of association] and I have got to say, that was established from previous Chairs and they really, they are excellent. So they basically open the avenue for us to be able to write to every... widow from a serving point of view. So if somebody dies in service, you are able to reach out to them in those early days. So we get two chances. We write the first letter and then we normally give it about 6 months and if we haven't heard from them, we do a follow up letter where we explain that we can't contact them again (P009)

Peer Support

For participants, bereavement also involved a loss of social networks. For peer support to be successful, participants described and explained how this needs to be in a social context and include emotional and practical help. Some preferred an informal network to access peers while others preferred association membership as a route to support. However, a number of participants described that they did not feel the same affinity with associations offering peer support resulting in a feeling of exclusion rather than inclusion:

...I think because I have now met them and because I can now talk freely about my first husband, with no, you know, embarrassment, no nothing and people will listen and tell you their stories. Whereas the, my civilian mates don't do that anymore. So yeah, the military widows is a different friendship altogether and you don't realise how beneficial that is until you find it. (P001)

I think that they should consider changing the name of war widows to Military Widows... Yeah, yeah. I don't know if that is anything that they think about because war widows you immediately think of someone in the second world war. A little old lady with grey hair and it is not the case anymore at all. (P018)

Well the army do that for you don't they? They put you down as a... actually it's a bit of a hybrid mixture. I'm a war widow, but I'm not fully deserving of that because they don't, you know, there's this whole thing that you've got to prove, yeah, in order to get the proper, full pension. So I don't meet those criteria because they've destroyed all the records. So yeah, they can call me whatever they want to really. I don't like the tag of widow. (P029)

I don't want this to be a sort of label of all this because this is what I hate about everything to do with war widows and army is you're... put in a box where... somebody like me, they will just say well, nothing to do with us. (P029)

Access and eligibility to support was raised as an issue for some participants, particularly in relation to status (i.e. not serving in the Armed Forces at the time of death) and relationship status:

... there is a young widows and widowers association, club, whatever... I looked at it and I thought, oh that sounds good and then I thought, oh I am too old and then, I think a couple of years ago, somebody, I read somewhere, they went oh no, they have got one for older widows... So do you want to use the label that you have, and you never, ever wanted... how do you want to use that label and what does it offer you? (P011)

I have issues about being, calling myself an RAF widow because, this is another... stupid little things that bug me, but [name of association] ... I can only be an associate because [anonymised] wasn't in service when he died... it's not like, it's not like the biggest thing in the world, what does it flippin matter? But it, so you know, I feel like I can't call myself an RAF widow and yet I feel like an RAF widow because I've got an attributable pension that says that the RAF, his service contributed to his death so [sighs] anyway, there you go (P031)

Some participants were reluctant to fully engage in formal peer support networks:

I think they do some great stuff and I think it's really good what they have done for keeping people together and the coffee morning type thing. I'm not a coffee morning type person... I know that sounds so dismissive... I don't want to have to go for a coffee with somebody once a month or these group of people. That's like a burden for me, not a pleasure and it would be for any other group... (P031)

Whilst participants who were staff/volunteers stated that the level of support provided by organisations was the same regardless of individual circumstances, others described perceived hierarchies and cliques with other members:

I would like to meet more Military Widows actually, but I do have this reticence about the fact that [anonymised] wasn't in active service when he was killed.... I wondered whether that's why... the [name of association], I wondered if that's why they hadn't been in touch with me, because of it being, me being a reservist widow. I was really disappointed in that because I thought they would at least try and help me out with a bit of advice about the uniforms, because they must have... get rid of their uniforms, mustn't they? (P010)

I find it difficult with the [name of association] and a lot of it is my fault because... I don't have time for the, and I can't afford to do the things that they say they're doing and also, I am just very shy and nervous about meeting up with them and I don't feel like I am one of them... there's a rank structure and I still feel like they are up there and I'm down here. (P020)

...it doesn't matter whether, you know, it was natural causes or whether it was killed in action. Everybody in our association gets that same support... (P009)

...I don't fit in at all with [name of association] ... I'm not part of the [name of association] either and I don't feel I belong in that space, you know. It seems a bit of a... almost a cult and it seems that there is a kind of group of people that do benefit, and they get invited to you know, nice places or whatever and or maybe they can bathe in the glory of their husbands death or something of that nature, but no, you know, I sort of, you know, I am not really part of that, and I don't think they want me to be part of it. (P029)

So even though I still feel that I don't belong. I am like in this really weird Venn diagram, that I don't sit in anywhere. My experiences sit in the middle of lots of things, but I don't sit, I don't belong to any one of those things. It is a part of my life that I am really happy that I had an opportunity to be... So I am a proud Military Widow, but I am probably not so much a war widow (P002)

Further difficulties arose with regard to the provision of support services across the regions of the UK. This unequal access resulted in some participants describing positive experiences where services are well resources and there are local support networks. However, for others, barriers existed such as funding restrains or the lack of staff/personnel resulting in a lack of access or limited access to services.

I think at the moment, we're divided into 60 regions, and I think there is now about half of them don't have a regional organiser. So half of the members are disadvantaged, you know, they don't get the chance to have the lunches and things like that. So I think perhaps we could manage the, our regions better. (P007)

...it is having more, more structure in terms of people being able to meet up in their local areas, I think that is really important, I think that's the important thing is when, you know, going forward, we need to focus on that local support for people. So that they, you know, there is more of a network support locally for people, when there is more than one RAF widow, there is that network of support there for them in their local area, not having to wait for the,

you know, the regional organiser to organise something. That they form their own networks and their own support organisations nearer to their own homes, to give that support. (P034)

So that must have been around about the time that I joined the [name of association], but they all have area groups, but the person who is supposed to be running 3 of the groups... she is probably about 150. She never does anything. She never has a meeting, there's no people. Nothing at all. So I joined for companionship, and I've not had any. (P026)

For some participants, the connections made within the formal peer support networks led to more informal social networks over time. This is equally important in terms of long-term support, together with support from friends and families:

But also the friends that I was good friends before I met [anonymised], so the ones that have seen me all the way through, the support from that is really good because a couple of times on the anniversaries what I will get, is I will just get a little text, just to say I am thinking of you or something like that. (P002)

I've got some wonderful friends, you know, I've got some close friends. I've got a wider circle of friends. Life is different, very different because you are a woman on your own (P005).

Life-long Support

Participants indicated that the support received, in particular, formal peer-networks and financial provisions, was of significant benefit in learning to cope with grief. If their significant other's death was in or attributed to service, Military Widows are entitled to receive a life-long pension. Whilst for some, this was a straightforward process initiated quickly post bereavement, others described difficulty in determining eligibility in order to receive these payments. Participants also spoke about fighting perceived unfairness, such as the removal of pensions following remarriage.

...We have a big Remembrance parade and put our own wreath on the cenotaph on the Saturday... because in the good old days, they wouldn't accept the war widows as part of the parade... And it took a long time before we got in that, but they do now, we can now do the Sunday muster as well... if you remarried you lost your war widows pension, until 2015 when they decided that they could keep them. So there's about, I don't know, there's between 200-300 of us lost our pensions because we got remarried when, you know, our fellow war widows

have kept theirs. So we are campaigning and saying, that's not fair, we want equality and please give me my money. (P001)

I think the pension should be lifelong actually. The same as it would be, as I say my husband would have qualified, you know, he would have got 4 times my salary and death in service plus an annual pension and that would continue, you know. I do understand, you know, we're not of interest, you know, to the MOD or the, you know, our husbands are dead, they were, you know, they were a resource if you like or whatever the word, the word I'm looking for, but once they're dead then, you know, we're not of any interest to them, are we, you know. (P029)

...the first year is a bit of a nightmare and you are kind of dealing with everything. So you are having to spend what you are having to spend in that first year, it doesn't matter what is sort of said to you, but I think sort of hitting the 3 year mark, I probably could have done then with somebody saying, you know, you've got to think, and you know even silly things. (P009)

Life post-bereavement involved initial intense feelings of grief which led to an increased awareness of the finality of loss and the continuation of the life course. For some, this included developing their lives within a new marriage. Despite this, episodes of grief fluctuated over time, with key life events, remembrance or anniversaries triggering emotive responses, indicating a need to ensure continued access to support if needed:

I think it goes back to what we've said kind of all the way through about that kind of whole life cycle of bereavement staying with you all through your life and you know, these spells of loneliness and self-isolation will happen all the way through your life but ultimately it is happening because that one person you chose to spend the rest of your life with, is not there anymore... (P033)

I always think about my son, my daughter, you know, if they get married and you know, especially my daughter, in particular, you think, oh my dad would have walked me down the aisle and you know, these kind of things. (P009)

I said, well sometimes it is silly things that will come up and just hit you in the face when you're not expecting it. It's a word, it's a picture. It's just a song, it can be anything and you can just dissolve and the number of times I have had to get up and walk away from something and say, oh just excuse me a minute, I need the loo... and I haven't, and I have had to just compose myself and come back or you know, do you mind if I get a glass of water, and it is because of that. (P025)

Summary

The superordinate theme *Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness* described the importance of both formal and informal peer support, and the value of shared experience or understanding. With regard to the nature and extent of support, there were varied views on how appropriate and relevant current support services are, with regard to both the criteria for access and a fostering of inclusivity.

Access to support highlighted the difficulty accessing needed services due to different circumstances, such as their significant other's death or rank. From the Military Widow perspective, there could be difficulty identifying relevant services, particularly if the bereavement occurred after military service. Additionally, from an organisational standpoint, there was a reliance on self-referrals due to an inability to identify prospective members who would benefit from the support provided.

The extent to which Military Widows benefitted from *peer support* varies but is broadly split between formal and informal peer support. For bereaved survivors, peer support has the potential to reduce grief symptoms, improve well-being and personal growth. Participants have reported significant benefits that include peer support interventions over time but the interactions between peers needs to be considered in the context of individual level variables if it is to be needs led and accessible in a broad context.

Finally, fluctuating experiences of grief were evident across the life course indicating a requirement for access to support if required.



Phase Three: Collaboration Event

The aim of Phase Three was to facilitate a collaboration event to better understand the findings from Phase One and Phase Two. Phase Three aimed to explore (1) the categorisation of widowhood; (2) access to services; (3) what are the next steps to collectively respond to and address issues related to social isolation and loneliness.

The definition of widowhood used by the research team, following consultation with key stakeholders via the project steering group, was shared with the delegates as follows: “*The recognised partner of personnel who died in service or veteran who died following military service.*”

Participants

Thirty-one delegates in total attended the one-day collaboration event held at Northumbria University’s London Campus. Two of the delegates were Military Widows unconnected to services and seven were Military Widows who worked in services/associations represented on the day. Table 12 provides an overview.

Table 12: Organisations Represented by Delegates*

Organisations	Number of Representatives
ABF The Soldier’s Charity	1
Scotty’s Little Soldiers	1
Forces in Mind Trust	4
Widowed and Young (WAY)	3
Ministry of Defence	2
The Forces Pension Society Charitable Fund	1
The Campaign to End Loneliness	1
Cruse	1
Royal Navy and Royal Marine Widows’ Association	2
SSAFA	1
Veterans Welfare Service	1



RAF Widows' Association	2
COO Forces Pension Society	1
Armed Forces Covenant Trust	2
Royal British Legion	1
War Widows' Association	2
Army Widows' Association	2
RFEA – The Forces Employment Charity	1

*This table does not include the military widows who were not connected to services.

Delegates were allocated to one of four tables, with each table having representation from the military bereaved community. Each table had 10/11 delegates supported by two members of the Northern Hub for Veteran and Military Families' Research to collect the data and facilitate the discussions.

Data Collection

Upon entry to the collaboration event each delegate received a welcome pack containing the following:

- Attendee biographies
- Contract to ensure 'active' and respectful listening
- Evaluation form
- Additional question/comments page

During the table discussions data was collected based on the following summary discussion points and resultant delegate responses (See Figure 5):

Figure 5: Phase Three Table Exercises

Table Exercises Phase Three

Categorisation of Widowhood: How do we define Military Widowhood, and solutions to preventing/reducing social isolation and loneliness that can be experienced through the categorisation of widowhood.

Accessing Services: Current landscape with regard to service provision, barriers to accessing services and potential solutions (targeting social isolation and loneliness)

Next steps: Improvements that could be made to collectively address social isolation and loneliness

At the end of each table exercise facilitators fed back to the wider delegate group in summary and note-takers collected the data for analysis. Delegates were invited to make additional anonymised comments on post-it-notes or on their Additional Comments/Questions page throughout the co-production event.

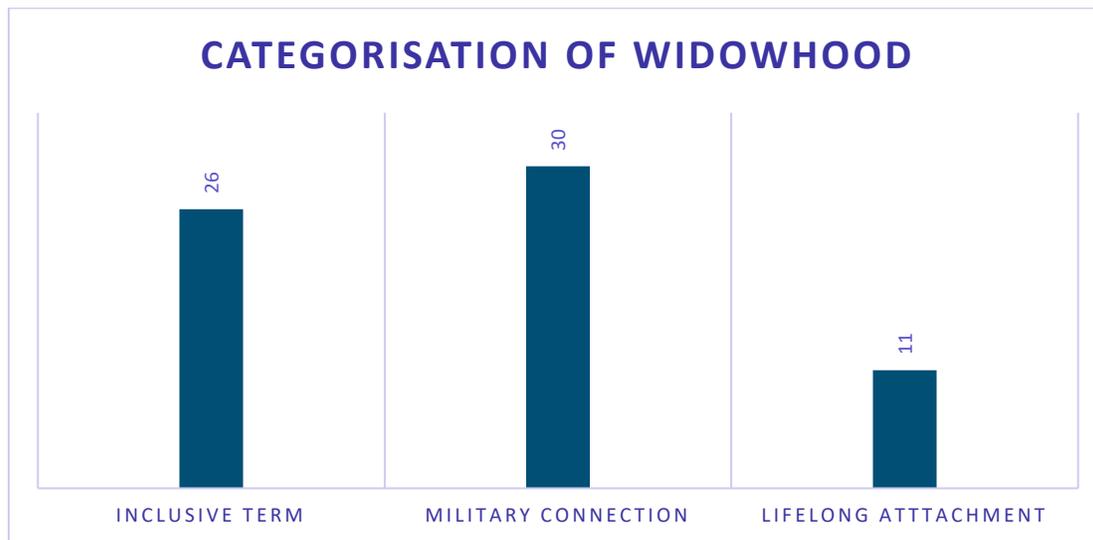
Analysis and Results

All answers to the questions were analysed using conceptual analysis. This method of analysis involved quantifying and tallying the occurrence of terms or words used by the delegates. There were recurring phrases/words that delegates used to define *categorisation of widowhood*, *access to services* and *next steps* in relation to social isolation and loneliness.

Categorisation of Widowhood

For the first task, delegates were asked to define Military Widowhood before reviewing these definitions and the impact of such. Figure 6 presents the total recurring phrases/words used to define Military Widowhood.

Figure 6: Categorisation of Widowhood Phases/Words



The *Categorisation of Widowhood* debate centred around hierarchy of widowhood (as discussed in Phase Two) and the complexities around 'legal status' - the need to 'fit' a certain definition to access support and how the classification of widow is defined in relation to be in "receipt of pension".

Delegates discussed how they found the categorisation and the concept of Military Widowhood complex, both in terms of the use of language and the relationship between the terms *War Widow* and *Military Widow* and the application of these terms to personal circumstances. It was felt that getting this right in the future is hugely important as any one definition is likely to impact significantly on the perception of 'a widow', both short term and long term.

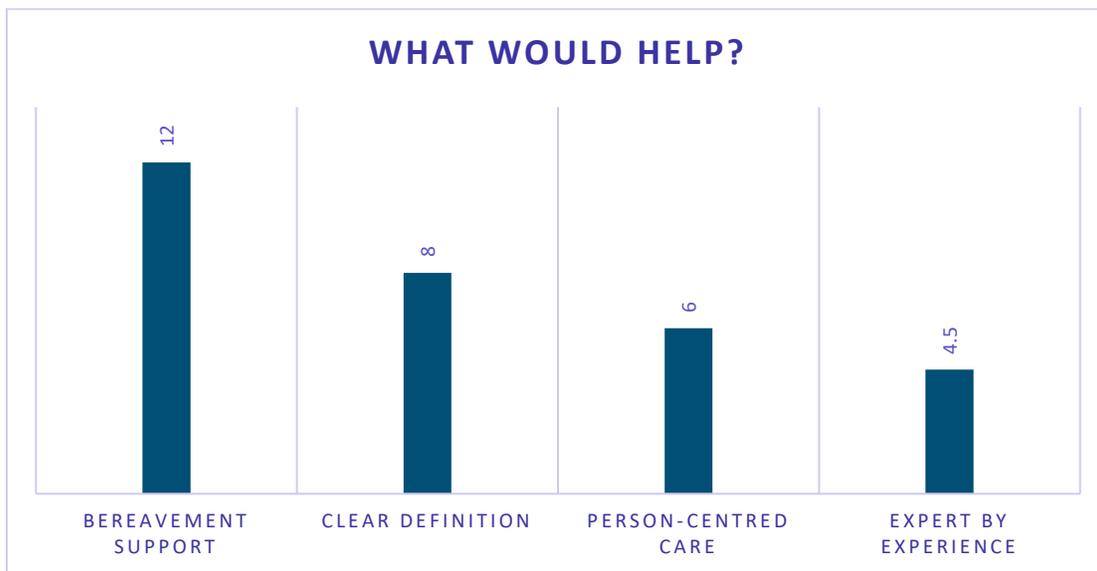
Military Widows in attendance spoke about their own personal lived experience of gaining access to the Military Widow community. Some talked about "imposter syndrome" in relation to the nature of death of a loved one – pre-service and post-service. Specifically, when death did not occur as part of military service or in the theatre of war and there was no 'knock on the door', the feeling of 'imposter syndrome' resulted in a reluctance to join respective widows' associations. In addition some, in this group of delegates, described any 'widow label' as unwelcome as it signified a loss of identity and of the military community, with a shift from 'inside the wire' to an outsider.

Gender and relationship status also gave rise to debate and delegates described the focus on Military Widows as 'the wife of a serviceman' and discussed why this needs to be addressed. It was suggested that 'Military Bereaved' or 'Military Widow' should recognise those who are not married but shared a military life with their partner and have a link to the Armed Forces. However, some delegates questioned whether an individual could be classed as a Military Widow if the relationship had begun post-service.

Summary

As part of the table exercise delegates were asked to think about solutions (please see Figure 7). The recommendations include consultation with 'experts by experience' and clear, concise adoption of a term that is inclusive - agreement on the categorisation of widowhood and terminology - similar to the national adoption of the term 'veteran'. Further suggestions related to access to bereavement support and person-centred care.

Figure 7: Solutions to the Issues Raised by Categorisation of Widowhood

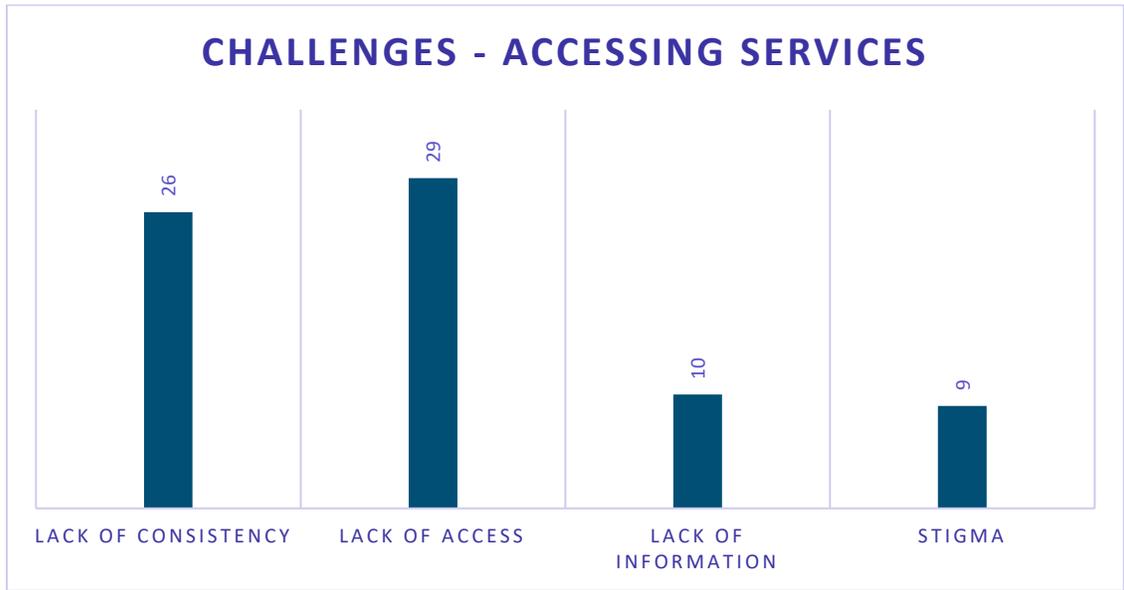


Accessing Services

Delegates were asked to consider the current landscape regarding service provision, barriers to accessing services and potential solutions to target and address social isolation and loneliness (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Phases Used Regarding Barriers to Accessing Services



Delegates identified services and support options already available and accessible to Military Widows (see Table 13):

Table 13: Services and Support Options for Military Widows

Armed Forces/Military Specific	Civilian Support
The Royal British Legion	Widowed and Young (WAY)
SSAFA	Silverline
Respective Widows' Associations	Derbyshire Bereavement Hub
Military Wives Choir	Ageing Better Programme
Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Clubs	Good Grief Trust
Scotty's Little Soldiers	Age UK
Woodland Xperiences	Cruse Bereavement Support
Veterans' Gateway	

In addition, the Purple Pack was highlighted as a resource that contains extensive and relevant information. However, delegates with experience of receiving the Purple Pack discussed how, in the immediate aftermath of loss, the information is 'too much' when provided in the midst of trauma and, importantly, there is not an equivalent resource offered to those who are bereaved post-service.

The challenges and barriers that delegates identified (Figure 7) impacted on access to services and support for a variety of reasons. These included perceived stigma relating to the nature of death, particularly suicide (also discussed in Phase Two), geographical issues such as rural locations, access to transport, and financial status. Digital exclusion was also discussed as a barrier to online community support – particularly relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Problems associated with bureaucracy and restricted access to services was also discussed. This related to data protection and a reliance on the Military Widows making the initial contact, without appreciating that this can be extremely difficult. Delegates with experience of seeking support talked about disengaging after initial engagement with services due to negative experiences. Some had taken a long time before they accessed service/support explaining that their focus in the early days was on their children; others stated it was about their personal denial and avoidance of not wanting to access services/support as it would make the bereavement 'real'.

Summary

It was acknowledged that bereavement is not a static state and discussed the importance of service provision that is responsive to this fluidity – accessible short, medium, and long-term.

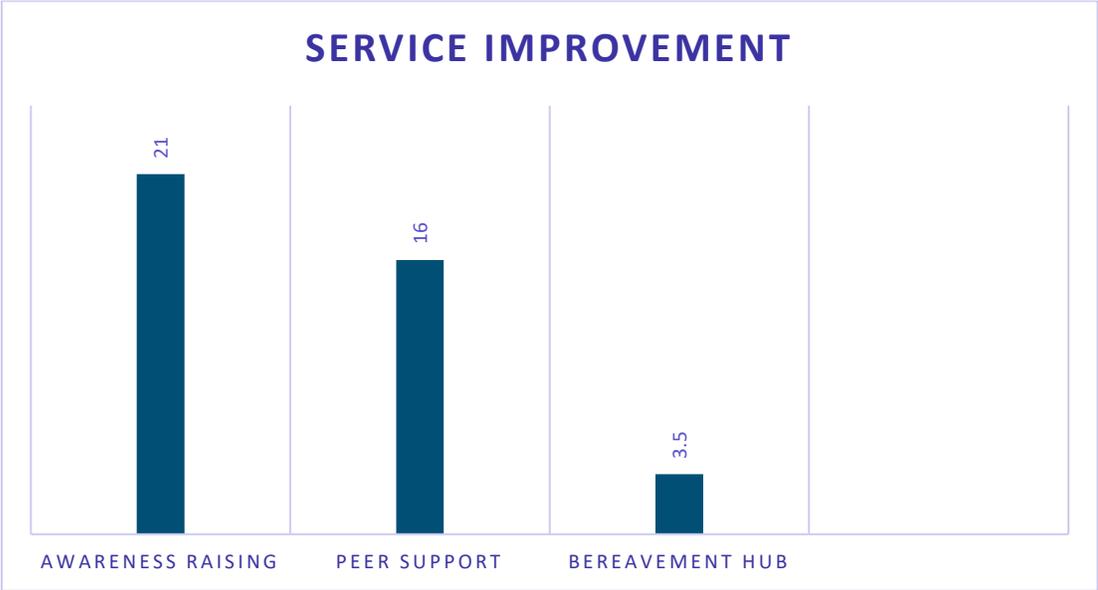
Figure 9 provides an overview of suggested solutions to barriers to accessing services. Delegates recommendations included:

- Improved collaboration between peer-support groups and building a knowledge network based on a peer-led model of care.
- Greater awareness of the services available and support offered to Military Widows and a peer-led outreach approach.
- The development of a 'bereavement hub'.

The subject of language and terminology was also thought to be relevant concerning access to services and inclusivity (gender, marital status, etc). Delegates recommended a programme to raise awareness regarding what being a Military Widow means, what services are available and how to access these. As Military Widows may make contact with various statutory or third sector organisations, it was important that each of these contact points were counted and that the organisations acted on all the information presented and completed a follow up.



Figure 9: Solutions to Promote Access to Services



Peer support was considered a valuable source to support bereaved military families and individuals. There was a call for a more integrated and collaborative approach to this concept across services and organisations to improve access to support and short and long-term engagement with services. Delegates felt that the benefit of this approach has huge potential in relation to tackling social isolation and loneliness and building resilience.

The development of a 'bereavement hub', situated regionally, was a concept that was built on the premise that there needs to be an alternative to 'associations'. Delegates noted the value of a hub which provided advocacy and signposting to both military and civilian-based services whilst attached to formal services.



Discussion

Using a mixed-method, iterative approach across three phases, this study aimed to gather a greater understanding of the issues that lead to social isolation and loneliness. Research questions via an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and stakeholder consultation, focused on lived experience of social isolation and loneliness, access to support and what this means and also considered unmet needs with regard to social participation. The data from Phase One and Phase Two was used to explore these issues further with key stakeholders and provided an opportunity to look at potential solutions to barriers to support.

Key findings highlighted the need to acknowledge the impact of grief and complex bereavement that is specific to the military bereaved population. Across the three phases of this study, it was largely agreed that the terminology used to describe a bereaved spouse or significant other needs to be all-encompassing, widely acknowledged and broadly accepted. It appears that the use of the term *Military Widow* was preferred to *War Widow* or *Widow*. Indeed, the use of the term *War Widow* has largely alienated those who do not connect with the connotations associated with this term.

The classification of a war widow has changed over the years but the general consensus from participants supported the view that it conjures up a gender specific image - of a woman who lost their husband on the battlefield. This is despite the fact that the Government applies a more liberal definition alongside the term *War Widow* - in the context of wife, husband or civil partner and a surviving adult dependant is described as someone who is cohabiting and in a substantial and exclusive relationship with the deceased serviceperson¹⁴. Nevertheless, this 'official', more liberal definition does not appear to have helped reassure the military widows who took part in this research with their identity reconstruction and personal battles and societal stereotypes have impacted negatively for some of the participants.

Instead, what is clear is that widowhood forces those bereaved by the loss of a loved one to reconstruct their identities (Bennet, 2010). The processes of identity re-construction are complex and challenges extend to the loss of a continuation of bonds between the military as well as the loss of a loved one. The study illuminates the vulnerability of military widows and their families and reaffirms the notion that

¹⁴ [War Pension Scheme: War Widows or War Widowers Pension - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

the ongoing grief processes, affected by re-marriage and loss of relationships and friendships, is largely ignored in relation to care pathways and support.

With regard to the service provision and formal peer support via War Widows' Association and single service widows' associations, it was clear that there were a number of challenges identified in relation to accessibility. Firstly, it was felt that the nature of Data Protection (2018), more specifically GDPR, created barriers to access because the majority of associations rely on self-referrals that limits pathways in from statutory services or from other support services. Secondly, there were examples of and concerns about availability of support services dependent on geographical location resulting in varied access to appropriate support. Additionally, and significantly, the type of the social activities provided by peer- support organisations were not considered representative across the Military Widow population resulting in unmet need.

Financial support is one way in which the public attitude towards military loss is expressed, in that bereaved spouses are compensated for losing their partners and this also reflects a recognition of the sacrifice they have made (Shorer, Dekel, and Nuttman-Shwartz, 2022). The supplementary section of Phase One that focused on the analysis of the survey responses to the question of finance provided significant findings for consideration. The findings of Phase One show a lower reported annual household income post bereavement which was increased by age. This reduction in reported annual household income was associated with greater levels of social isolation and loneliness experienced by survey respondents. Further research is needed to fully understand the reasons for this. Whilst it is possible that a contributing factor is the move from a dual-income to a single-income household following bereavement, the Phase Two interviews highlight further complexities to consider. For instance, the variations around available financial support as determined by the nature of spouse's death and whether this was in or out of service, as well as the removal of such support following co-inhabitation or remarriage.

The process of bereavement undoubtedly caused disruption to relationships with friends and families alike. For the participants in Phase Two, this disruption reshaped their connections with support networks and led to vulnerability and isolation. This was described as a self-imposed interpersonal protection for some, while for others this was an unwelcome consequence of loss and grief and changing relationships.

This research has strengthened the evidence that suggests that sudden and traumatic deaths often lead to complex and problematic bereavement that has long-term consequences on military widows and family members (Cozza et al., 2017; Feedeva, et al, 2022). Consideration needs to be given to how

access to appropriate support is gained and what provision needs to be in place. It is evident from the findings of this research that this should be targeted, timely and evidence based.

It is also worthy of note that Phase Three, the co-production event, was viewed positively by those who took part. Anecdotally, through evaluation at the end of the event and 'off-record' discussions, delegates felt that their voices were being heard and that they were making a worthwhile contribution to this research project. The research team would like to explore this in the future more formally and consider the value of a working group to support implementation of the recommendations (outlined below). Most importantly, this could act as a vehicle to demonstrate impact and make demonstrative changes in policy and practice that are aimed at preventing social isolation and loneliness rather than responding to the challenges it brings.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that a limitation associated with this research is the predominately female sample participating in Phase One and Phase Two. This study was unable to have a more representative sample (e.g. widowers or LGBT+) and therefore limits the generalisability of the research findings and recommendations. However, it is acknowledged that the majority of service personnel are men and therefore it is unsurprising that the majority of military widows in this study are female. Women have served in the Armed Forces for more than a century and can now apply for all the same roles as men. Between 31 March 2020 to 31 March 2021, women made up 11.8% of the intake of personnel into the UK Armed Forces, with more than 3,000 servicewomen and female veterans (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2021). The research team recognises the risk of gender bias towards female-orientated research into social isolation and loneliness limits some of the findings and this needs to be considered with interpretation and the development of future research.

Recommendations

All recommendations are aimed at tackling social isolation and loneliness as well as informing potential future research and identifying solutions.

- Consult and collaborate further to agree on the use of the term Military Widow in a way that is accessible to the military bereaved population as a whole. By using a 'lived-experience' approach, the delegates who took part in Phase Three of this research project felt it could be beneficial to maintain contact, as a form of steering group, to build on the strength of this collaboration and to support implementation of this recommendation. Based on their position, it

is possible that the War Widows' and single service Widow Associations may be ideally situated to maintain contact with group members and therefore bring this recommendation forward. However, there needs to be caution with this approach. It is clear from the Phase Two Interviews that there is a portion of the Military Widows population who do not actively engage with these organisations. It is therefore paramount that these views are reflected within this steering group to ensure inclusivity.

- Recognise that the rationale and justification for the use of an inclusive term is intended to raise awareness and understanding of the war widows in a way that promotes cultural competence and should become a term that is familiar to those who work in the field of military studies and those who deliver services. Doing so could avoid disparities and improve access to appropriate support. For example, the term *veteran* is now widely adopted and is familiar to the majority of those who work in the field of military studies and by healthcare providers with 'veteran friendly' status. Whilst it is acknowledged that not everyone who has served in the Armed Forces will relate to the term or adopt it personally, it is now widely accepted and used in policy documents and health care initiative that aim to improve access to support and information. There is evidence that this has resulted in consistency and recognition of the term, cemented by the launch of the Strategy for our Veterans by the UK Government in 2018. The Department of Health and Social Care, NHS, MOD and Local Authorities, as well as services charities all use the term veteran in their promotional materials and policy documents as they strive to work together to improve health and social care outcomes. Similarly, consistency of the use of language and a widely adopted, inclusive term could prove effective to improve understanding of the challenges faced by 'Military Widows' and promote inclusivity.
- Consider implementation of a strategy to facilitate conversations where the bereaved spouse actively participates in exploring their health and wellbeing needs, within the context of their whole life and family situation, to ensure access to bereavement support is person-centred and based on a needs-led approach. Across all three phases it is clear that grief is not static, the impact resonates over time, and is triggered by poignant and personal reminders. For this reason, it is recommended that access to support should not be restricted by time and instead should be based on a needs-led, case-by-case approach. Evidence suggests that peer-support models are effective (both formal and informal) and should be adopted to improve access and respond appropriately to the stages of grief and the resultant challenges that arise over time for individuals and families alike. Whilst it is possible that the War Widows' Association and single

service Widow Associations may be situated to provide this, Phase Three delegates proposal of a central bereavement hub could increase inclusivity by expanding reach to a wider representative of Military Widows who are not engaged with the Associations. This approach is likely to involve investment in the training and awareness raising of the unique needs of military widows.

- For those who took part in this study (Phase Two and Phase Three in particular), it was felt there has been an over-emphasis on self-referrals partly due to challenges around data protection and participants highlighted this as a barrier to access. It is essential that Military Widows have timely access to support if the risk of social isolation and loneliness is to be tackled appropriately. Therefore, it is recommended that a strategy is developed, via an expert group, to consider candidacy¹⁵ to understand the interactional factors which can influence how the bereaved community reach out when they feel isolated or lonely. Currently, initiatives that consider improvement to the ways in which access to support services is gained (including healthcare services) by Military Widows is not matching up to the drive to commission and structure services for veterans. For example, E-learning packages have been developed as part of social prescribing initiatives aimed at the Armed Forces Community¹⁶ It is recommended that initiatives such as this one also integrate solutions to improve access to support services for Military Widows to tackle both the risk and consequences of social isolation and loneliness. Similar to the veteran population, while many aspects of Military Widows' health and support needs may well be the same of other members of society, this report has highlighted that there are some significant differences related to life in the Armed Forces, the loss of military life as well as the loss of a loved one.
- Findings from the research suggest that financial challenges faced following bereavement can result in an increased risk of vulnerability. This was particularly prevalent from the findings of Phase One (see Supplementary section) and related to ageing and lower household income resulting in social isolation and loneliness. A recommendation of this report is that consideration is given by the MOD to access to financial support, advice and information that is relevant not

¹⁵ 'Candidacy' is concerned with the way people consider their eligibility for accessing health services.

¹⁶ Social Prescribing and the Armed Forces Community module now available - elearning for healthcare (e-lfh.org.uk)

only at the 'knock on the door' stage, or immediately following loss, but for the months and years that follow. Participants who took part in Phase Two of the project felt that it would be useful to consider a single point of contact for finance-specific advice and information following the loss of a loved one and in the preceding months and years.

- A more general recommendation is based on the fact that this report highlights the dominance of female participants in relation to transferability of findings. There is also an over-reliance on recruitment from respective War Widows' and/or single service widows' associations that may well lead to research fatigue as well as constraints leading to a lack of evidence of lived experience from within the military bereaved population more broadly. It is recommended that future participant recruitment strategies for this population considers those who are seldom heard and who do not currently benefit from association membership.

Conclusion

The project aims were to understand experiences of social isolation and loneliness, and to identify service provision and unmet need, before turning attention to developing guidance to increase social participation within services.

It was clear that identifying as a 'Military Widow' was complex and influenced by preconceived, often stereotypical notions, and confusion about what constitutes to the term. For some participants, this resulted in delay accessing support networks, while other described existing social hierarchies derived from the nature of their significant other's death. Coping with the loss of the military community and changing social networks, along with feelings of vulnerability when entering into new relationships following bereavement was often helped by access to peer support networks. The need for support and access to services varied throughout the life course due to fluctuations in grief, social isolation and loneliness. Despite this, participants demonstrated levels of resilience, independence and engaged coping mechanisms, such as focusing on caring for children or completing further education.

These findings were further explored during the collaboration event where potential solutions were provided. A number of recommendations for practices have been suggested which were derived from the findings of this study.



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Supplementary Information: Military and Civilian Support Available

Table 14: Search Results from the Grey Literature Review

Organisation Name	Target Population	Country	Type of Service	Service Provision	Support
SCIE - Social Care Institute for Excellence	General	UK	Registered Charity and Registered Company	SCIE aims to improve the lives of people of all ages by co-producing, sharing, and supporting the use of the best available knowledge and evidence about what works in practice. Not veteran specific	Indirect
AGEUK	General	UK	Registered Charity	Age UK exists to help older people when they need it most; they provide general information and advice, befriending, handyman service. Not veteran specific.	Indirect
Mind	General	UK	Registered Charity	The focus here is on mental health; more focussing on advice and support, accessing the right support and service.	Indirect
Royal British Legion	Military Community	UK	Registered Charity	The RBL provides advice, personal case histories, historical info, research, reports. A helpline is also available. An internal search of 'social isolation' in RBL website returns 62 results; 'loneliness' search returns 19 results; similar information and advice, research and reports personal case histories.	Direct

The Soldiers Charity	ABF	Army Community	UK	Registered Charity	The ABF are one of the largest funders in the sector, they award grants to individuals and families, and provide essential funding to leading charities and organisations that support the Army family.	Direct
Together Co		General; to the Army family.	UK (Localised service to Brighton and Hove)	Company limited guarantee and Registered Charity	Bespoke programme of outreach; Grant from ABF to provide bespoke service to Army family.	Direct
Cruse Bereavement Care		General	UK	Registered Charity	Cruse provide bereavement counselling, advice. An internal search 'Widows' returns links to other sources of support for military families.	Direct
Winston's Wish		Children and Young people after death of parent	UK	Registered Charity	Bereavement support for military families; advice on how to manage grief through self-isolation and grief focussed around holidays and special events e.g. Christmas, father's day etc	Indirect
SSAFA The Armed Forces Charity		Armed Forces, Veterans and Families	UK	Registered Charity	The focus is on providing direct support to individuals in need of physical or emotional care; veterans and their families.	Direct
Help for Heroes		Service Personnel, Veterans,	UK	Registered Charity	The focus is on injured or ill service personnel injured or became ill during service, or have an injury or illness due to their service.	Indirect

Officers Association	Officers	UK	Registered Charity	Offers confidential and tailored support to help former officers and their families through difficult times; Access to advice and financial support.	Direct
Forces Support	Support to the families left behind when a member of the UK Armed Forces dies,	UK	Registered Charity	Help with maintenance; decorating, gardening; opportunity to volunteer in their shops on mainland, No internal website search facility	Direct
Cobseo (the Confederation of Service Charities)	Military Community	UK	company limited by guarantee	A member's directory, provides a list of organisations that are members of Cobseo.	Indirect
For the Fallen	Military Suicide/those affected by Suicide	UK	Community Interest Company	Focusses on those affected by Suicide and is mainly signposting and case histories.	Direct
Army Families Federation	Army Community	UK	Charitable incorporated organisation	Serving families, Bereavement advice, COVID-19, Education & Childcare, Employment & Training, Family life, Finances, Foreign & Commonwealth, Health & Additional Needs, Housing	Indirect

The British Red Cross	General	UK	Registered Charity	Provides advice, practical help, crisis help to general population.	Indirect
Turn 2 Us	Serving personnel and veterans	UK	registered company,	This site appears to direct Armed Forces personnel to other organisations; uses an online calculator for benefits etc; doesn't offer advice on individual situations.	Indirect
Armed Forces Covenant	Armed Forces	UK	Website Managed by Northamptonshire County Council	This seems to be specific to Northamptonshire council Armed Forces Covenant commitment, provides links/signposts to various organisations and councils, e.g. AWA, SSAFA etc; Likely to be extrapolated across the country as many statutory bodies/Companies have signed up to the Covenant.	Indirect
Scotty's Little Soldiers	Bereaved forces children (<25) and Young People /Families	UK	Registered Charity	They provide support through four Family Programmes: Smiles, Support, Strides and Springboard. Fun based activities, access to counselling, education and development needs and career support.	Direct
Support Line	General	UK	Registered Charity	SupportLine is particularly aimed at those who are isolated, at risk, vulnerable and victims of any form of abuse. Pastoral support and signposting to other organisations. Not military specific but section on Armed Services and Ex-Services signposting to other organisations and also has a helpline	Indirect
Aggies	Naval	UK	Company and Registered Charity	Aggie Weston's help serving members of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Royal Fleet Auxiliary and their families.	Indirect

AJEX - the Jewish Military Association UK	Jewish serving/ex-service	UK	Registered Charity	AJEX exists to ensure that the immense contribution of veterans from the Jewish Community who served is never forgotten. The Charity is organised across three pillars: Welfare, Remembrance and Education.	Indirect
At Ease	Armed Forces	UK	Voluntary	Provides advice and information to members of the Armed Forces.	Indirect
Citizens Advice Scotland	General/ Armed Services in Scotland	Scotland	Scottish Charity	The advice is currently to serving or veterans with signposting. The Armed Services Advice Project (ASAP) provides dedicated information, advice and support to members of the Armed Forces community in Scotland. The service is provided by the Citizens Advice Bureaux network in Scotland, and the funding group is led by Poppyscotland. They work closely with many organisations, both Service related and others, to provide support to the people who contact them; war widows/military bereaved appear not to be identified	Indirect
BLESMA The Limbless Veterans	Injured veterans and their families and widows	UK	Registered Charity	To help individuals live independent and fulfilling lives after suffering the loss of limbs, use of limbs, sight, speech or hearing. Financial assistance in the form of grants to help with the additional costs and hardships of living with disability.	Indirect
Not Forgotten	Serving personnel and veterans	UK	Registered Charity and Private company limited by guarantee	Wounded, injured, sick and/or with a disability, illness or infirmity; social activities and challenge holidays. Internal searches 'widow' returns two results, one highlighting an award of £30,000 from the ABF and the other to useful	Indirect
Veterans Virtual Hub	Veterans and families		Unclear	linked to Forcesonline; seems to be an on-line platform to accommodate get togethers/chats and private meeting rooms	Indirect

League of Remembrance	Retired veterans and nurses	UK (centred in London)	Registered Charity and Company	Aimed at helping people to help themselves; provide direct, practical and enduring support to veterans, their widows and dependents, and retired nurses. No barriers to receiving support as long as you meet the eligibility criteria.	Direct
Age UK Scotland	Veterans (age 50+)	Scotland	Registered Charity	Camaraderie as part of a weekly veteran's telephone. It is also available to veterans', partners, widow/ers. A 'Comradeship Circle' for 50+ and is a group of typically six people who chat together by phone at the same time and on the same day each week. An internal search of 'widows' returned quite a few results – articles and links; 'loneliness' and 'isolation' also returned quite a few items although not military widowed specific	Direct
Army Widows Association	Army Widows	UK	Registered Charity	The AWA help members with information about pensions, savings and tax issues. This is done through signposting, usually to organisations such as SSAFA, RBL and Regimental Associations, they have a private Facebook page where information and peer support is available.	Direct
Family Lives	General	UK	Registered Charity and Company	Family Lives aims to ensure that all parents have somewhere to turn before they reached crisis point targeted early intervention and crisis support to families who are struggling. There is an InSite link 'working with forces families' although it doesn't appear to be working.	Indirect
Widowed and Young	<50's, general	UK	Registered Charity	Provides peer to peer support, advice, guidance and signposting. An internal search 'isolation' returns quite a few 'members stories' and links to groups organised under headings e.g. mental wellbeing, isolation, online, socialising, funerals and young people etc; An internal search 'loneliness' similar results although no returns for military bereaved/forces bereaved, a search, for 'widow' returns quite a few members stories, information about Pride, international widows day etc. Not military specific.	Indirect

Grant Finder		UK	Public Limited Company	Grant Funding Finder /Local/national and international, may be useful for organisations seeking help to fund programmes	Indirect
CDC- Centers for Disease control and Prevention	General	USA	State	Appears to be a signposting site with the main focus currently Covid; recognise that "Veterans may experience worry or anxiety about their risk for contracting Covid-19 or about their ability to get recommended care".	N/A
Real Warriors Campaign*	Military community	USA	Unclear	The Real Warriors Campaign promotes a culture of support for psychological health by encouraging the military community to reach out for help whether coping with the daily stresses of military life, or concerns like depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder. The campaign links service members, veterans and their families with care and provides free, confidential resources including online articles, print materials, videos and podcasts.	Indirect
Tragedy Assistance Programme for Survivors (TAPS)	Military bereaved	USA	Unclear	TAPS provides comfort, care and resources to all those grieving the death of a military loved one. Provides practical advice; sharing groups; expeditions; Good Grief Camp; online chats; retreats, activities; peer mentors and helpline	Direct
US Dept of Veterans Affairs	Military	USA	State	Focused on veterans, survivors including children, health care, education, employment, financial counselling	Indirect
Operation We are here - Gold Star family connect and support	Extended Military Family	USA	Unclear	Supports families, spouses, children, parents, and siblings, Suicide survivors; stories, organizations, speakers, widow tips, links to other support organizations.	Indirect

Supplementary Information: Reliability Analysis of Scales

Table 15: Internal Consistency of Subscales

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha Analysis
De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale	0.88
Lubben Social Network Scale	0.85

Appendix 1: Online Survey



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



Exploring Military Widows' experiences of social isolation and loneliness

Survey



Survey section 1 – Study information

Northumbria University, in Partnership with the War Widows' Association, are exploring social isolation and loneliness in the Military Widows community. This study is one part of a series of studies being carried out by Northumbria University and the War Widows' Association.

Before deciding if you would like to be involved in this project it is important that you understand why it is taking place and what it would mean for you. Please take the time to read this information.

This survey focuses on bereavement and we are aware that this may be a sensitive topic. The survey will ask for information about you (such as whether you have served in the armed forces), life before your bereavement (including circumstances of your spouse/partner's death), your life now (for example, current marital status), current social connections (such as change in relationships), services and support (e.g. membership to services/associations) and the impact of Coronavirus pandemic on social relationships.

As this is a new research area, some of the questions ask for detailed information. We would like to collect this information to understand your situation and experiences. No personally identified information will be shared outside of the research team. You do not have to answer any questions that you find uncomfortable.

If you have any questions you are encouraged to speak to a member of the research team (contact details provided at the end of this section).

What is the purpose of this study?

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of social isolation and loneliness, as well as to understand services targeting social participation of Military widow(er)s.

Loneliness is the unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. This happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want". Loneliness is linked to social isolation, but it is not the same.

Social isolation is an objective state where the number of contacts a person has can be counted. A way of describing this difference is that you can be lonely in a crowded room, but you will not be socially isolated.

Who is carrying out this study?

Researchers at Northumbria University are carrying out this study, in partnership with the War Widows' Association. This study was funded by Forces in Mind Trust. We are working closely with the Army Widows' Association, RAF Widows' Association, and RNRM Widows' Association.

Why am I being asked to take part?

You are being asked to participate in this study as you meet the following definition of a Military Widow(er):

A spouse/partner of Armed Forces personnel whose death was in service, attributable to their service (but not necessarily in theatre), hastened by service, or related to a disablement attributed to service

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you whether you wish to take part in the study. This Information Sheet will help inform that decision, and you are encouraged to discuss participation with others. We recognise that the survey topic is sensitive and this can be a distressing time, especially if your bereavement is recent. Your contribution will be valuable, however there is no pressure to participate in this study if you feel unable to. If you choose to participate, you can choose to withdraw from the study at any point, without disclosing why.

What will this mean for me if I choose to participate?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete this online survey and submit it to the research team. The survey should take between 7 and 15 minutes to complete. Paper-based surveys are also available and can be posted out to you with a pre-paid, self-addressed envelope.

Will information collected in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?

All information collected in this study will be entirely anonymous and unidentifiable. No individual information will be reported. Only the research team will have access to this documentation.

What will happen to my results?

This information will help to guide the development of policy recommendations and services targeted at military widow(er)s community. To achieve this goal, the results of this study will inform further phases of this study and the research evidence base. The findings will also be reported in a scientific journal and/or presented at a research conference. Once more, it is important to note that all information will be anonymous and unidentifiable.

How will my data be stored and how long will it be stored for?

All online surveys will be submitted via Qualtrics and electronic data will be uploaded on a password protected and encrypted server. All data will be stored in accordance with University and GDPR guidelines. All electronic documentation will be destroyed 3 years after project completion.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been approved by Northumbria University's Faculty of Health and Life Sciences ethics committee (reference number: 26679).

If you would like to complain about this research project, please contact the project lead of this study (see below contact information). You are also able to contact the Head of the Ethics Committee, Juliana Thompson (juliana2.thompson@northumbria.ac.uk). For complains or concerns relating to the processing of personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (<https://ico.org.uk/>) or contact Duncan James (dp.officer@northumbria.ac.uk).

Where can I receive further study information?

Gemma Wilson (project lead):

gemma.wilson@northumbria.ac.uk

0191 215 6054

Northern hub for Veterans and Military Families' Research:

<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/business-services/engage-with-us/the-northern-hub-for-military-veterans-and-families-research/>

Where can I receive further support?

We appreciate that by completing this survey, it may be that the questions asked ‘trigger’ some difficult thoughts, feelings and memories. If this is the case, please do seek help. We have provided contact numbers of organisations where you can access support.

War Widows’ association:

<https://www.warwidows.org.uk/> 0845 2412 189

Royal Navy/Royal Marines Widows’ Association:

<http://www.rnmwidows.org/> 07452376850

Army Widows’ Association:

<https://www.armywidows.org.uk/> 03006660136

RAF Widows’ Association:

<https://www.rafbf.org/raf-widows> 08705143901

The Samaritans:

<https://www.samaritans.org/> 116 123

Survey section 2 - Consent

Thank you. We really appreciate your contribution and feel sure that you will be helping to improve the experience of other military widow(er)s throughout the U.K.

The consent is mandatory and must be answered before you progress to all other questions. If you answer ‘yes’ to this question, you are agreeing to take part in the research study.

Please confirm that you are eligible to participate in this study and that you meet the definition of a Military Widow(er):

“Military Widow(er)s are defined as the spouse/partner of Armed Forces personnel whose death was in service, attributable to their service (but not necessarily in theatre), hastened by service, or related to a disablement attributed to service”.

I meet this definition of Military Widow/er

I do not meet this definition of Military Widow/er

Please also read all the questions before confirming your agreement below:

I have read the participant information provided.

I have had the opportunity to ask the research team questions.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation.

I understand the nature of this survey and the nature of the questions that will be asked.

I understand that any information provided will be strictly confidential and that no names/identifying information will be used.

I understand that the information I have given in this study may be used in the future as part of further work on this subject.

I agree to take part and complete the survey.

I agree

I do not agree

Study section 3 – Information about you

This section will ask you a few details about yourself. Please remember that all responses are anonymous.

1. **What is your age?**

2. What is your gender? (Please tick)

Male	
Female	
Other	
Prefer not to say	

3. Please specify your ethnicity:

White	
Mixed	
Black	
Asian	
Chinese	
Other	
Prefer not to say	

4. Please state your Country of Birth (please enter prefer not to say if you do not wish to answer this question):

5. Please state the first half of the Post Code or area code:

--	--	--	--

6. Have you, yourself, previously served or are you currently serving in the UK Armed Forces? (Please tick)

Currently serving	
Previously served	

Never served	
Prefer not to say	

7. If you are currently serving or have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, can you please tell us which service you served in? (Please tick)

Royal Navy/Royal Marines	
British Army	
Royal Air Force	
Prefer not to say	

8. If you are currently serving or have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, please provide the date that you left the Armed Forces (if you are no longer serving):

Month	Year

Study section 4 – Your life before your bereavement

In this section we would like to ask you some questions about your life before the death of your spouse/ partner. We are asking you about this because it is important for us to understand your life before your bereavement as well as after your bereavement. Please remember that all responses are anonymous.

9. What was the year that your spouse/partner passed away?

10. How old were you when your spouse/partner passed away?

11. How old was your partner when they passed away?

12. Did you have any children with your spouse/partner who passed away? (please tick)

Yes	
No	
Other (the deceased may have been a stepparent to your children)	
Prefer not to say	

12a. If you selected 'Other', please provide more information below:



13. If you have selected 'yes' or 'other' to question 12, please indicate the ages of any children/stepchildren at the time of your bereavement:

14. Please indicate the circumstances of your spouse/partner's death:

In service	
Attributable to their service (but not necessarily in theatre)	
Hastened by service, or related to a disablement attributed to service	
Prefer not to say	

15. Prior to your bereavement were you a carer for your military spouse/partner?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

16. What qualifications or vocational training had you undertaken before the bereavement of your military spouse/partner? (Tick all that apply)

5+ GCSEs/O Levels/Scottish National 5 or equivalent	
2+ A levels or equivalent	
First Degree (e.g. BA, BSc)	
Higher Degree (e.g. MA, PhD, PGCE, Post grad certificates/diplomas)	
Professional qualification (e.g. Qualified teacher, medical doctor, dentist, nurse, midwife etc)	
Vocational qualification (e.g. apprenticeship, NVQs)	
Other qualifications	
No Qualifications	
Prefer not to say	

17. What was your employment status before the bereavement of your military spouse/partner? We are looking at multiple responsibilities and the multiple demands on your time (Tick all that apply)

Employed Full-Time	
Employed Part-Time	
Homemaker / Housewife / Househusband	
Carer	

Unemployed currently looking for work	
Unemployed not currently looking for work	
Student	
Retired	
Self-employed	
Unpaid/Voluntary Work	
Unable to work	
Prefer not to say	

**18. How would you have described your living circumstances before bereavement?
(Tick all that apply)**

Own your home outright	
Have a mortgage	
Rent from the Council (Local Authority)	
Rent from a Private landlord or letting agency	
Live alone	
Live with others	
Live on a military base	
Lived overseas	
Other	
Prefer not to say	

19. How many people were living in your household before the bereavement of your military spouse/partner?

By household, we are referring to individuals living within a physical household (including children and adult children)

19a. Of those living at your home, what was their relationship to you?

20. **What was your gross household income (including welfare benefits) before the bereavement of your military spouse/partner?**

By household, we are referring to individuals living within a physical household (including children and adult children)

Less than £20,000	
£20,000- £40,000	
£40,000 - £60,000	
£60,000 - £80,000	
More than £80,000	
Prefer not to say	

21. **Did you move to a different location / region after your spouse/partner passed away?**

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

22. **If you answered 'yes' to Q21, how long after your spouse / partner passed away did you move to a different region / location?**

23. If you answered 'yes' to Q21, what was/were your main reason/s for this move?

--

Study section 5 – Your life now

We are asking you about this because it is important for us to understand your life after your bereavement as well as before your bereavement. Please remember that all responses are anonymous.

24. What is your current marital status?

Single	
Married (first/second/third partner), Civil Partnership, co-habiting	
Separated (but still legally married)	
Divorced	
Widowed	
Prefer not to say	

25. Have you gained academic qualifications/additional skills since the bereavement?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

26. If you have answered 'yes' to Q25, what qualifications or vocational training have you undertaken since the bereavement of your military spouse/partner? (Tick all that apply)

5+ GCSEs/O Levels/Scottish National 5 or equivalent	
2+ A levels or equivalent	
First Degree (e.g. BA, BSc)	
Higher Degree (e.g. MA, PhD, PGCE, Post grad certificates/diplomas)	
Professional qualification (e.g. Qualified teacher, medical doctor, dentist, nurse, midwife etc)	
Vocational qualification (e.g. apprenticeship, NVQs)	
Other qualifications	
No Qualifications	
Prefer not to say	

27. What was your employment status now? Again, we are looking at multiple responsibilities and the multiple demands on your time (Tick all that apply)

Employed Full-Time	
Employed Part-Time	
Homemaker / Housewife / Househusband	
Carer	

Unemployed currently looking for work	
Unemployed not currently looking for work	
Student	
Retired	
Self-employed	
Unpaid/Voluntary Work	
Unable to work	
Prefer not to say	

28. How would you **currently** describe your living circumstances (please tick **all that apply**):

Own your home outright	
Have a mortgage	
Rent from the Council (Local Authority)	
Rent from a Private landlord or letting agency	
Live alone	
Live with others	
Live on a military base	
Other	
Prefer not to say	

29. How many people are **currently** living in your household?

By household, we are referring to individuals living within a physical household (including children and adult children)

29a. Of those living at your home, what is their relationship to you?

--

30. What is your current gross household income (including welfare benefits)?

By household, we are referring to individuals living within a physical household (including children and adult children)

Less than £20,000	
£20,000- £40,000	
£40,000 - £60,000	
£60,000 - £80,000	
More than £80,000	
Prefer not to say	

31. Do you have any long-term illness, health problem or disability that limits your daily activities?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

32a. If you wish to do so, please provide further details here:

--

Section 6 – Current social connections

This section asks you to think about your current intimate relationships, familial relationships, and social relationships. We are asking you about this because when considering loneliness and social isolation, it is important to understand your thoughts around your relationship with others. Please remember that all responses are anonymous.

33. Following the bereavement of your military spouse/partner have you been in other intimate relationships?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

33a. Please provide further information if you wish.



34. If you have been in other intimate relationships, do you think this/these relationship(s) has/have been impacted through your bereavement?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

34a. Please provide further information if you wish.

35. Since the death of your spouse/partner, do you have difficulty making and keeping friends?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

35a. Please provide further information if you wish.

--

36. Following the death of your spouse/partner, did any of your immediate family (parents, brothers, sisters, children), wider family (cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, grandparents) or friendships change?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

36a. Please provide further information if you wish.

37. Please complete the following scales looking at social relationships. When answering the following questions, it is best to think of your life as it generally is now.

	Yes	More or less	No
I experience a general sense of emptiness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I miss having people around me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I often feel rejected	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are many people I can trust completely	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are enough people I feel close to	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

38. Consider the people to whom you are related by birth, marriage, adoption etc...



	None	One	Two	Three or Four	Five to Eight	Nine+
How many relatives do you see or hear from at least once a month?	<input type="radio"/>					
How many relatives do you feel at ease with that you can talk about private matters?	<input type="radio"/>					
How many relatives do you feel close to such that you could call on them for help?	<input type="radio"/>					

39. Considering all of your friends including those who live in your neighbourhood...

	None	One	Two	Three or Four	Five to Eight	Nine+
How many friends do you see or hear from at least once a month?	<input type="radio"/>					
How many friends do you feel at ease with that you can talk about private matters?	<input type="radio"/>					
How many friends do you feel close to such that you could call on them for help?	<input type="radio"/>					

Section 7 – Services and support

In this section we ask you about the associations/clubs/social groups you are involved in. We are asking you this as it is useful for us to understand your wider social networks and activities. Please remember that all responses are anonymous.

40. Are you currently a member of any associations/clubs/social groups?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Prefer not to say	
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41. If you are a member of any associations/clubs/social groups, please tick all associations/clubs/social groups to which you belong and when you joined:

	Before bereavement	Immediately After bereavement	Within 10 years of bereavement	After 10 years of bereavement
The War Widows' Association,				
Royal Navy Royal Marines Widows' Association,				
Army Widows' Association				
Royal Air Force Widows' Association				
Royal British Legion				
Scotty's Little Soldiers				

41a. If the associations/clubs/social groups are not listed above, please list them in the text box below and provide details of when you joined.

42. If you have not joined an associations/clubs/social groups, please tell us why in the box below?

43. What services/support would you like to see available to military widow/ers specifically in relation to supporting loneliness and social isolation. Please provide details below.

**44. Thinking of life before Coronavirus pandemic restrictions, how would you usually travel?
*Please note: We ask this question are it is useful to know how you would attend these social groups.***

Car	
Bus	
Train	
Underground, Metro, tram	

Motorcycle, scooter, moped	
A passenger in a car	
Taxi	
Bicycle	
On foot	
Other	

45. Thinking of life before Coronavirus pandemic restrictions would it be difficult to attend associations/clubs/social groups due to travelling restrictions? Please provide details below.

46. Again, Coronavirus pandemic restrictions aside, would you prefer associations/clubs/social groups to be held face-to-face or online?

Face-to-face	
Online	

47. How would you rate your knowledge of technology (often described as IT)?

	I do not know what this is	I do not use	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
Internet						



WhatsApp						
Text messaging						
Email						
Zoom						
Skype						
Facetime						
Microsoft Teams						
Facebook						
Twitter						
Instagram						
Amazon Alexa						

Section 8 – Impact of Coronavirus pandemic

Due to the significant impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, it is important for us to ask if/how it has affected your social connections. Please remember that all responses are anonymous.

48. Have your social relationships been impacted by the current pandemic and restrictions?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

48a. If you have answered yes, please give details of how these have been impacted.

49. Has your attendance to associations/clubs/social groups been impacted by the current pandemic and restrictions?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

50. Have the associations/clubs/social groups you are part of provided an online alternative during the Coronavirus pandemic?

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

Section 9 - Any other information

Please remember that your responses are anonymous.

51. If you wish to make any further comment or add anything you feel impacts on your isolation/loneliness or on any aspect of the questionnaire, please feel free to us this text box.



Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Invitation to participate in further research

The next phase of our study will include interviews with military widow(er)s to further discuss experiences of social isolation and loneliness. If you would like to volunteer to participate in one of these interviews, please send your contact information to Dr Gemma Wilson gemma.wilson@northumbria.ac.uk or call Gemma on 0191 215 6054.

Where can I receive further study information?

Gemma Wilson (project lead):

gemma.wilson@northumbria.ac.uk

0191 215 6054

Northern hub for Veterans and Military Families' Research:

<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/business-services/engage-with-us/the-northern-hub-for-military-veterans-and-families-research/>

Where can I receive further support?

War Widows' association:

<https://www.warwidows.org.uk/> 0845 2412 189

Royal Navy/Royal Marines Widows' Association:

<http://www.rnrmwidows.org/> 07452376850

Army Widows' Association:

<https://www.armywidows.org.uk/> 03006660136

RAF Widows' Association:

<https://www.rafbf.org/raf-widows> 08705143901

The Samaritans:

<https://www.samaritans.org/> 116 123

Appendix 2: Interview Schedules

Phase 2 interview schedule (Military Widows)

General introductions / verbal consent

Introductory questions

Could you tell me:

Your age

What gender do you identify with?

What is your ethnicity?

If you previously served in the military? If so, what service were you in?

What service was your spouse in?

Are you currently working?

Bereavement

Could you please tell me about the bereavement of your spouse/partner?

How long ago was it?

In what circumstances (e.g. conflict related / due to illness / in service / post service)?

What helped you the most at the time immediately after bereavement? (e.g. social support, services, having a routine etc)

What did you find unhelpful immediately after bereavement?

Do you think the support you received was due to your bereavement being as a result of conflict/illness/in-service/post service? Please explain.

How have things changed since your bereavement?

Marital status

If applicable – Is your current spouse is in the military?

If applicable – to expand on guilt, loss of war widows' pension / financial situation, relationships with children etc.

Children – (e.g. more children; have your children left home?)

Where were you living when you were bereaved? Did you have to relocate following their death?

Work

Education (e.g. have you gained further qualifications?)

Financial situation. Did you receive support (pension/lump sum etc) or advice (guidance on how to manage pension/lump sum etc) and did this affect your decisions post bereavement?

How has your relationship with friends and family, or others (e.g. neighbours) changed following your bereavement? Was this change shortly after bereavement / over a longer period of time? Were there negative feelings towards new romantic relationships – either from friends or family?

Self-identity

Do you identify yourself as a widow, a military widow, a war widow – or neither?

Could you explain this a little bit?

Do others identify you in this same way, or differently?

Do you think this is different to experiences of widowhood in the civilian population? And how?

How do you think [the way you identify] has influenced your life/well-being? Particularly social wellbeing/continued connections to the military?

How do you think [the way you identify] has influenced the way others see you?

Loneliness / social isolation

What does loneliness mean to you?

What does social isolation mean to you?

Thinking about your time before you were bereaved as a Military spouse did you experience loneliness/social isolation?

Thinking of your bereavement, how has this impacted your social relationships?

Did this change before and after your bereavement?

Are you content with your current friendships and relationships?

Who do you usually spend time with?

Christmas / birthdays / anniversaries?

How have they changed – pre-bereavement? Pre-COVID?

Do you live in an urban or rural area? Does this impact your social connections in any way? How (e.g. financially, geographically)?

To what extent has COVID impacted your friendships and relationships? How has this changed from those feelings beforehand?

Is it important for you to have social connections with other widows/military widows? Why/why not?

Services / organisations / support

What support do you believe the government (MOD, the Office for Veterans Affairs) should provide to military / war widows? How long do you feel this should be provided?

Do you think other organisations should offer support to military / war widows? And if so what / how?

Are you a member of the WWA / any of the military widows' associations?

If yes/no, why/why not?

If not, what would help you to become more actively involved / to attend events? (e.g. financial assistance ...)

When did you become a member?

Do you have an active engagement in these organisations (e.g. do you attend events? Are you a trustee, regional organiser etc)?

How do you find the support provided by the association(s)?

Do the associations enable you to connect with other widows?

If not, is there something that can be done differently?

Has this / have these organisations met your expectations?

Have you ever accessed wider services or resources – either bereavement services such as CRUSE, or other non-bereavement services (e.g. community organisations, groups, voluntary work, the library)?

How has your membership or relationship with these organisations changed following the COVID 19 pandemic?

Technology use

Do you have access to digital technology (e.g. smartphone / iPad etc)?

Would you consider yourself as being confident in using digital technologies and/or the internet?

What are your thoughts on digital connection with others?

Do you use digital technology to connect with others socially?

Have you ever used online dating apps to meet a romantic partner? If so, how was this experience?

If you do not use digital technology, what would help you increase your confidence in using technology to connect with others?

Round up

Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed

Do you have any suggestions to reduce loneliness and social isolation in the military widowed population?

Phase 2 interview schedule (Staff and Volunteers)

General introductions / verbal consent

Introductory questions

Could you tell me:

Your age

What gender do you identify with?

What is your ethnicity?

Have you previously served in the military (or have family members who have)? If so, what service were you in?

What is your role/job title within your organisation?

How long have you worked in this role?

Experience of working with Military Widows/the Armed Forces Community

How long have you worked with Military Widows/the Armed Forces Community?

Can you please outline your work with Military Widows?

How are the experiences of Military Widows different to experiences of widowhood in the civilian population?

Services and support

What services does your organisation provide?

What services would you like to provide?

Can you outline the available support that your organisation provides for Military Widows? Does this differ from the support available for widows in the civilian population?

What do you think is most helpful for Military Widows immediately after bereavement?

What do you think is unhelpful for Military Widows immediately after bereavement?

Do you think support for Military Widows varies if their bereavement was as a result of conflict/illness/in-service/post service? Please explain.

Do you think how they identify (e.g. widow, a military widow, a war widow – or none) impacts what support they receive? How?

What services are needed to further support military widows in the area?

What support do you believe the government (MOD, the Office for Veterans Affairs) should provide to military / war widows? How long do you feel this should be provided?

Social connection, loneliness, and social isolation

How would you define loneliness?

How would you define social isolation?

Have you found, within your role, that Military Widows experience loneliness and social isolation?

Do you think that Military Widow's bereavement has impacted their social relationships?

Does your service provide direct support for loneliness and social isolation? What about indirect support?

How could your service provide support for loneliness and social isolation?

COVID-19

To what extent did COVID 19 affect your service? How did this impact on supporting Military Widows?

Are your services still affected?

Are any of the changes implemented during the COVID 19 pandemic continuing? (E.g. virtual events)

To what extent do you think COVID 19 has impacted on Military Widow's social connections, loneliness and social isolation?

Technology use

What is your experience of Military Widow's access to digital technology (e.g. Smartphone, iPad etc)?

Are you confident in using digital technology?

Does your organisation provide digital support? If so, what does it provide?

Round up

Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed

Do you have any suggestions to reduce loneliness and social isolation in the military widowed population?

Appendix 3: Statistical Outputs

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Household income before bereavement	2.62	149	1.188	.097
	Current income	2.32	149	1.116	.091

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences	t	df	Significance	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Household income before bereavement - Current income	.309	1.278	.105	.102	.516	2.948	148	.002	.004

Correlations

			Age	Current income
Spearman's rho	Age	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.264**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
		N	162	150
	Current income	Correlation Coefficient	-.264**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
		N	150	153

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlations

			Current income	Household income before bereavement	Friends feel close for help
Spearman's rho	Current income	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.372**	.068
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<.001	.406
		N	153	149	153
	Household income before bereavement	Correlation Coefficient	.372**	1.000	.175*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.	.030
		N	149	154	154
	Friends feel close for help	Correlation Coefficient	.068	.175*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.406	.030	.
		N	153	154	165

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

