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Understanding and improving non-UK service and transition in the British Armed Forces

FiMT
forces in mind trust

COMMUNITY FUND

Contents

Glossary

BAME	Black and Minority Ethnic
Cobseo	The Confederation of Service Charities
D&I	Diversity and Inclusion
ILR	Indefinite Leave to Remain
MIR	Minimum Income Requirement
MoD	Ministry of Defence
NHS	National Health Service
Non-UK	Throughout this report, 'non-UK' refers to those who possessed anything other than a sole, British passport at the point of joining service. This includes individuals from commonwealth countries, Ireland, Nepal, Hong Kong, and British Overseas Territories, and those with dual citizenship.
Non-UK AFC	Non-UK armed forces community, i.e. serving personnel, veterans and family members
OVA	Office for Veterans' Affairs
VFI	Veterans and Families Institute, Anglia Ruskin University

Foreword

As co-chairs of the non-UK Cobseo cluster we warmly welcome this research from ARU's Veterans and Families Institute, funded by the Forces in Mind Trust. Particular thanks should also go to the 108 participants from 26 countries who agreed to take part in this valuable research.

Non-UK service personnel make up a small but significant group within the UK Armed Forces, and are a group who are under-researched, and arguably, as this report highlights, undervalued.

The Cobseo non-UK cluster exists to gather evidence of the challenges and barriers faced by the serving and veteran non-UK community, raise the profile of their experience and to champion improvements in the welfare of non-UK serving personnel, veterans and their families. This research will be invaluable in helping the cluster better understand the experience of non-UK personnel and their families, and meet our objectives.

There are over 6000 non-UK personnel currently serving in the UK Armed Forces and over 100,000 veterans living in England & Wales who were born outside the UK. The UK Armed Forces have long benefitted from the diversity of our military personnel, with non-UK personnel bringing a wealth of perspectives, experiences, skills, and cultural insights that enrich the fabric of our armed forces.

In his foreword to the most recent review of visa fees for non-UK personnel the (former) Defence

Secretary acknowledged that 'through their service in the Armed Forces, these individuals show a commitment, loyalty and dedication to the defence of our nation, and the values we treasure. *This service can come at a very high cost to them and their families and can sometimes lead to them making the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy.*'

Yet this research details the many ways this cohort are unsupported and under-served by existing practice and suggests the commitment, loyalty and dedication shown to the UK is not always reciprocated. The research suggests far greater clarity of purpose and prominence could be shown to the non-UK cohort as well as gratitude for their service.

The research highlights three broad areas where improvements could be made; Visa and citizenship policy, where prohibitively high costs can create vulnerabilities such as personnel living on temporary visas and facing long periods of family separation. This is sometimes exacerbated by inadequate or incorrect immigration information. The second area focuses on the career trajectories of non-UK personnel and the impact of direct and indirect

discrimination on progression through the ranks. And finally issues relating to culture and belonging, where recruits do not expect special treatment but hope to work in 'an inclusive and equal-opportunity environment.' The report cites evidence of progress but notes the pace of change is too slow; 'creating an inclusive culture and a supportive policy framework for non-UK service in the UK armed forces is a strategic and moral imperative.'

The research proposes sensible recommendations to improve transparency and information for non-UK personnel from recruitment to transition and suggests areas for valuable further research.

The current reflection on the terms and conditions of the UK Armed Forces prompted by the Haythornthwaite Review provides an opportunity for the Government to reset its approach to non-UK personnel to anchor their service within a framework that more clearly recognises and values their contribution. These individuals are prepared to lay down their lives for our country and in return our country should 'ensure that their contribution is properly recognised and reciprocated, the conditions

of their service, transition to civilian life and the culture of the armed forces itself all need to be supportively aligned.'

As one of the participants so powerfully put it '…from Africa, from Barnsley, I don't care, you know I'm just the same… on the battlefield.'

**Hannah Pearce and
Angela Kitching**
Directors – Campaigns, Policy & Research, RBL

Executive summary

The non-UK armed forces community (non-UK AFC) is a highly diverse group, comprised of individuals from the 54 countries whose citizens are permitted to serve in the British armed forces.

Building on our previous work (Pearson & Caddick 2018), this study sought to understand the experiences on non-UK Personnel, veterans, and their families within the British armed forces. Interviews and focus groups conducted with 108 members of the non-UK AFC indicated that despite the considerable diversity within the cohort – with regard to ethnicity, country of origin, service branch and length of residence in the UK – commonalities and shared experiences across three core themes were identified. These included visas & citizenship, careers, and culture & belonging.

Non-UK personnel are exempted from immigration control for the duration of their service, though this exempt status expires upon discharge from the British armed forces. Acquiring visas (e.g., Indefinite Leave to Remain, for families and veterans) or citizenship (for all members of the non-UK AFC) were found to be complex and expensive processes for which our respondents often felt underprepared. Information and support from official channels, despite having improved over time, lacked depth and specificity - particularly with regards to their country of origin. Amongst current serving personnel, it was typical to have acquired or be planning to acquire citizenship during service. Amongst the small cohort of serving personnel who were eligible to apply for citizenship, yet had not done so, reasons given often centred on cost. Indeed, the costs of acquiring citizenship and/or ILR were almost universally perceived as being excessive or prohibitively high. Visa fees and the Minimum Income Requirement were found to be placing additional pressure on non-UK families, with both leading to extended periods of cross-national family separation. For veterans who had left service without having secured the right to settle in the UK, significant difficulties were experienced.

Some were not aware of the necessity to apply for settled status or of the process for doing so, resulting in involuntary return migration to their country of origin. Veterans who had returned to their country of origin also struggled to access adequate healthcare for service-connected mental and physical health problems.

Non-UK Personnel described feeling 'held back' in their careers, and of having to work twice as hard as their British counterparts to be recognised and rewarded. Lack of UK nationality was considered detrimental to full career advancement by limiting deployment and promotion opportunities. Acquiring citizenship during service therefore became a means of overcoming these career barriers, which some respondents viewed through the lens of 'operational effectiveness' for their unit. Given the temporary status of the visas they possessed upon joining, non-UK personnel felt their recruitment options were restricted to only those roles which were open to them within the time frame of their recruitment period. This resulted in 'deskilling', or for some, horizontal career moves once in service, which delayed their career progression. Branch or unit transfers were not always as straightforward (or possible) to obtain, as non-UK personnel had anticipated.

Our findings also revealed evidence of racism and discrimination, both within and outside of service, experienced by all constituencies (i.e., serving personnel, veterans, and families) within the non-UK AFC. Some of the career delays experienced within service were perceived to derive not only from technical barriers posed by a non-UK nationality, but also promotions systems which were considered liable to cultural misunderstanding or racial bias (conscious or otherwise), and a perceived over-emphasis on subjective criteria.

Our findings also revealed evidence of racism and discrimination, both within and outside of service, experienced by all constituencies.

Despite the satisfaction felt by many non-UK personnel in their service and with their achievements throughout their careers, ambivalence towards belonging within the UK armed forces, and wider British society, was noted. In addition to experiences of racism and discrimination, a sense of 'difference' was experienced through immigration processes which created points of obvious separation of non-UK from their UK counterparts.

Examples of this included separate passport controls and conditions of travel for non-UK nationalities on deployments. In these circumstances where 'difference' was highlighted, non-UK personnel then questioned their own place – and the extent to which they really belonged – within the UK armed forces. Our respondents felt that the direction of travel – with regards to inclusion and belonging within the UK armed forces – was positive, but that the pace of change was "too slow" and that more needed to be done to create a genuinely inclusive working environment.

Overall, non-UK personnel experience challenges that were unique to them and that UK personnel would likely not experience. These included visa and citizenship complexities and costs, potential involuntary return migration on transition, a lack of access to healthcare for service-connected issues amongst veterans in their countries of origin, and perceived slower progression in their careers when compared to their British-born counterparts. Additional challenges were noted alongside all major milestones of the non-UK service person's journey.

The recruitment, promotion and transition processes came with higher stakes for non-UK personnel than for UK citizens due to these being tied to their citizenship or right to reside in the UK. For example, a lack of career progression, already perceived as being delayed amongst non-UK personnel, was of greater consequence given their salaries were intertwined with their ability to reunite their family in the UK consequent of having to meet the UK Home Office's Minimum Income Requirement. Transition or the prospect of transition also came with the additional risk of involuntarily returning home for non-UK personnel if they had not acquired citizenship or

ILR within the permitted time frame. Mitigating this risk, therefore, became another important motivator for acquiring citizenship within service.

Overwhelmingly, the non-UK personnel, veterans, and families who took part in this research spoke of their pride at being part of the British armed forces, and of their gratitude for the opportunities they had taken up through service to the UK. None believed that they were due special treatment. They did, however, expect to be able to work in an inclusive and equal-opportunity environment, and believed that more work was needed to make such an environment a reality.

Some of the issues encountered by non-UK personnel during their service were as a result of their nationality, while others, many believed, were related to their ethnicity. As such, there may be similarities between their experiences and those of UK-born BAME personnel, veterans, and their families. Further research is recommended with UK-born BAME personnel, veterans, and their families to disentangle these various threads and issues as they relate to both ethnicity and nationality. Moreover, given the huge diversity within the non-UK AFC, which is comprised of 54 different nationalities, there are certain issues (e.g., visa regulations, racial differences and differential experiences of discrimination) which manifest differently depending on country of origin. Again, further research is necessary to explore differences so that accurate and country-specific advice can be given to future cohorts of non-UK personnel.

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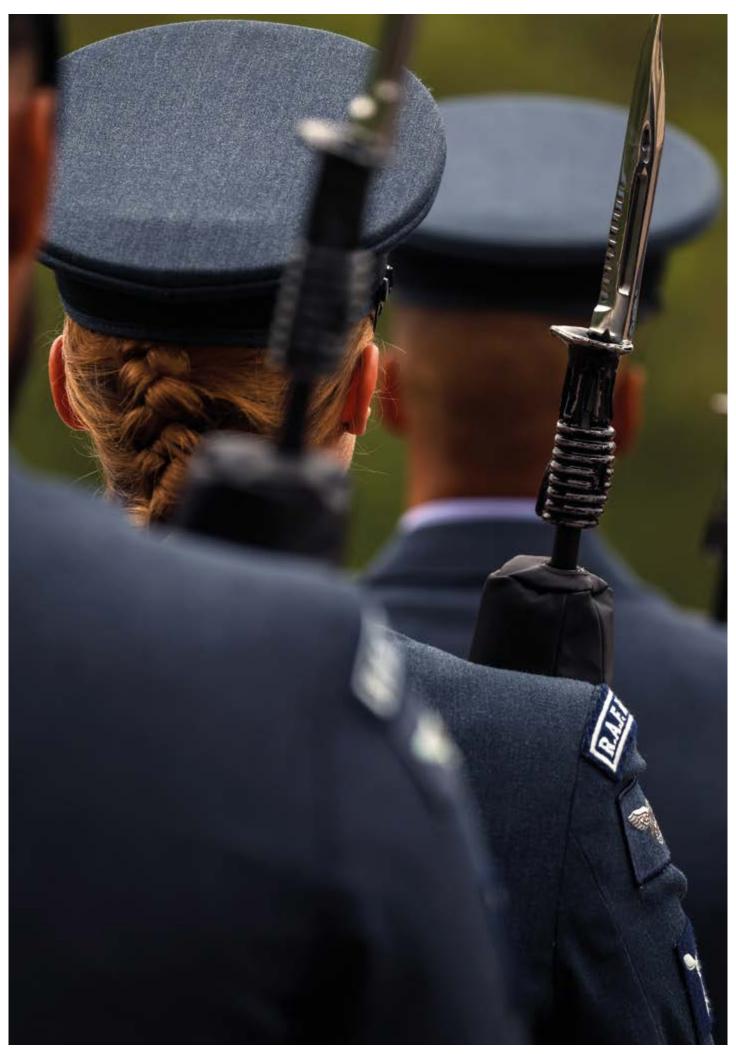
HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

The UK armed forces want and need to be recognised as an equal-opportunities employer, supporting a diverse workforce and creating an inclusive environment for all (MoD 2018).

In a competitive economy, the ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce is essential to meeting the UK's defence requirements. To meet its recruitment goals, it is important that the armed forces' 'offer' – regarding both the terms and conditions of service and the workplace environment and culture – can meet the needs of all those who have chosen to serve. People from across the 52 Commonwealth nations, together with those from Ireland and Nepal, are a major constituency here, making an enormous and essential contribution to the UK.

To ensure that their contribution is properly recognised and reciprocated, the conditions of their service, transition to civilian life, and the culture of the armed forces itself all need to be supportively aligned. It is not enough to simply be non-discriminatory, but rather anti-discriminatory and fully inclusive. Consequently, creating an inclusive culture and a supportive policy framework for non-UK service in the UK armed forces is both a strategic and moral imperative. Furthermore, it is also integral to upholding and improving the armed forces' reputation in the eyes of the media where reports of bullying, harassment, and abuse leave the institution vulnerable to critique.

Inclusivity for non-UK personnel, veterans and their families (hereafter non-UK armed forces community, or 'non-UK AFC') often revolves around debate on visas or immigration policy. Changes introduced in April 2022 mean that non-UK personnel discharging from the UK armed forces will no longer have to pay the substantial cost of obtaining a visa to remain in the UK, provided they have served for longer than six years. The change was prompted by strong campaigning effort from non-UK AFC groups and their supporters, and was initially championed by a small but vocal cohort of cross-party MPs.

The qualifying period was reduced to six, down from the proposed twelve years, following the UK government's consultation on the proposed changes. Many viewed this as a victory for the right of non-UK personnel to belong within the UK in exchange for their service. Yet others argued that the changes do not go far enough, as they do not encompass families, do not apply retrospectively, and only offer to cover the cost

of indefinite leave to remain (ILR), rather than full citizenship – the latter being something the Ministry of Defence currently views as a choice. Nor is ILR the only aspect of UK Home Office policy which affects the non-UK AFC. The Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) – i.e. the £18,600 salary threshold personnel must meet before becoming eligible to bring their first family member to live with them in the UK – also has an impact by imposing constraints on people's ability to maintain family relationships.

Immigration is not the only issue which affects the non-UK AFC. Genuine inclusion means the UK armed forces' providing a culture in which the non-UK AFC can find purpose and belonging.

This means promotions, representation at senior levels, inclusion within networks of camaraderie and solidarity, creating an environment free from all forms of racism and discrimination, and actively welcoming the presence and contribution of non-UK AFC in whatever part of the UK armed forces they reside. It also entails an MoD policy structure which recognises that the needs of non-UK AFC may, at times, differ from those of their UK counterparts, for instance in relation to family members being overseas and the timing of leave allowances.

Immigration is not the only issue which effects the non-UK AFC. Genuine inclusion means the UK armed forces' providing a culture in which the non-UK AFC can find purpose and belonging.

For veterans, it may require far more active efforts to ensure that they and their families leave service with the appropriate immigration status and support to set themselves up in civilian life. And for families, it may require a more active approach to removing barriers to work and/or study, and community inclusion within the UK.

In 2018, the Veterans and Families Institute produced a research report on the state of service provision for the non-UK AFC (Pearson and Caddick 2018). This report asked what forms of support were available to the non-UK AFC, and where perceived gaps and issues lay with provision. After speaking with leading voices within the military charity sector, and with key sources in the Army and MoD, it was concluded that a reassessment of – and uplift to – support for the non-UK AFC was needed. Specifically, the report identified a stark gap in knowledge of non-UK AFC experiences of life in the UK military and society, with few previous studies having provided any insight. Whilst it was widely believed that immigration and visa issues were causing problems for the non-UK AFC, there seemed to be few places they could turn to for qualified advice or assistance.

Such concerns were beyond the remit of Welfare Officers within the Services, and outside the Army Families Federation was most often relied on for support. Whilst the military charity sector generally offers support to all personnel, veterans, and families regardless of nationality or race, it was believed that there was a low take up of welfare support from the non-UK AFC, though in the absence of first-hand experiential accounts the reasons attributed to this were speculative. Therefore, among the key recommendations from the report were calls for research to take seriously the needs and experiences of the non-UK AFC in the UK armed forces.

Accordingly, the Veterans and Families Institute worked with the Cobseo non-UK Cluster Group to devise a research plan to address the gaps identified by Pearson and Caddick (2018).

A programme of research designed to engage directly with the non-UK AFC and to highlight their experiences of serving in the UK armed forces was subsequently proposed. The research questions set out to address:

- How do non-UK AFC experience life in the UK military and beyond? What challenges do they face and what support do they require?

- Are differences between the UK military and other (i.e., non-UK) cultures influencing the careers and experiences of non-UK Personnel? If so, how?

- What is the impact of UK immigration regulations, processes, and costs on non-UK AFC, including the impact on their ability to transition well into civilian life in the UK and/or in their country of origin?

- What sources of information and support do non-UK AFC access (if they do access support) to assist with challenges they face?

By addressing these questions it is hoped that the views and experiences of the non-UK AFC are represented, in turn providing a platform from which numerous stakeholders can work together to support their service in the UK armed forces.

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Methods

We took a qualitative approach to answering the research questions, seeking to put non-UK AFC's voices at the heart of the research.

Qualitative research explores and provides deeper insights into real-world issues, gathering participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours. It answers the 'hows' and 'whys' instead of 'how many' or 'how much. Consequently, qualitative research methods i.e. interviews and focus groups were considered to be the most appropriate means of exploring the experiences of non-UK personnel, veterans and their families, at a breadth and depth that could not be achieved by collecting numerical data via quantitative methods.

Rather than attempting to fit our findings into a priori categories, such as the numeric categories of quantitative research or qualitative research analyses which attempts to align findings with pre-existing theories or ideas, we took an inductive, data-led approach to the analysis. This meant that the final themes and categories were generated through a systematic, collaborative process of analysis by four members of the research team, who simultaneously developed and refined these groupings of data until all transcripts had been analysed and all data adequately attributed. There has been much debate about whether qualitative research findings are 'generalisable' i.e., can the findings from this study apply more generally to the wider non-UK AFC population? Whilst one cannot apply statistical-probabilistic generalisability to our findings, 'generalisability' in this sense is not an intended outcome of qualitative research. Instead, the 'transferability' of the findings is a more realistic goal, typified by an interpretative process for which both the researcher and the report's reader is a part. Whilst the researcher has a responsibility to aid transferability through providing a rich and authentic account of the participants, the findings and their context and limitations, the degree of transferability to other contexts is also partially determined by the reader who may/may not feel these findings resonate with areas and populations outside of this report's 108 participants.

Therefore, the findings discussed in this report are derived from a careful and exhaustive analysis of interview and focus group data from the 108 research participants, amounting to over 42 hours of interviews. Recognising that the overall non-UK AFC is extremely diverse –

incorporating a wide range of representative countries, ethnic backgrounds, all service branches, different military occupation types, and different views and opinions – we took a broad and inclusive stance toward recruiting participants for the research.

In addition, we wanted to hear from all 'constituents' within the non-UK AFC, and therefore sought to include currently serving non-UK personnel from across the rank structure, veterans (including those who'd stayed in the UK after service, and those who had returned to their country of origin), and family members. Participants were therefore deemed eligible for inclusion if they, as a serving person, or their serving partner/family member held anything other than a UK passport at the point of joining service. This was to ensure that non-UK personnel who are now British citizens only, having relinquished their home nationality, were able to contribute their voices.

Recognising that the overall non-UK AFC is extremely diverse, we took a broad and inclusive stance toward recruiting participants for this research.

Non-UK serving personnel and veterans from countries which were in the Commonwealth when they joined service but have since left the Commonwealth, such as Zimbabwe, were also eligible for inclusion.

Although there are a total of 54 different countries from which non-UK personnel can join the British armed forces, representation from each country was not possible, with 26 countries represented in this research (see Appendix A).

Additionally, it should be noted that this study did not include any participants who were British-born personnel with non-UK partners. Like with any cohort, while there may be unique circumstances and experiences to be found in each group, it is also possible that some of the findings and recommendations from this report are transferable to the lives of British/non-UK partnerships and to non-UK personnel from countries not included in this research. In the absence of specific research into their experiences, readers who have personal experience of being from one of the 28 countries not included in this research or who are in a British/non-UK partnership are welcome to draw their own inferences in how well the issues raised in this report reflect their own circumstances.

Recruitment

Recruitment practices exert a strong influence on the research that becomes possible thereafter, and in order to contextualise this project it is necessary to describe our recruitment practices in more detail than might often be the case. Working with our partners and stakeholders in the Cobseo non-UK Cluster Group, Ministry of Defence, Single Services, and non-UK AFC representatives, we devised a recruitment strategy designed to include as broad a sample as we could within the constraints of one time-limited project. Time and trust were our key considerations when devising and enacting this strategy. Ethically sensitive recruitment of participants for qualitative research studies, particularly in cases where studies focus on groups who may have been marginalised or stigmatised, is an essential component of the

research process. We were conscious therefore of the need to take time to build trust with the communities we wished to engage with. Herein lies much of the 'unseen' work of qualitative research; of reaching out to people, attending community events, taking care, developing rapport and trust. Even with a careful approach, there is considerable risk that people will choose not to engage in research relationships that they view as unequal or take part in research which they perceive – perhaps rightly – as extractive.

Furthermore, when research is presented with the logo of an institution, together with the formality of documentation and requests to participate, barriers can easily be created between a team of researchers and the people they are attempting to reach. Recruitment is unlikely to be successful – and research therefore unlikely to take place – if a project is viewed as fulfilling an institutional imperative rather than providing a genuine and respectful space for stories to be told. As such, it is around the edges of the mandatory formalised approach to recruitment that much work is required to build connections with people and gain trust.

With few contacts of our own to draw upon, however, we were reliant on our research partners to assist us in communicating and disseminating our project to their networks. We worked with Commonwealth Network leads, officers responsible for coordinating policy and support for non-UK personnel, our partners on the Cobseo non-UK Cluster Group, the Fiji Support Network, via social media, and via veterans' support and advocacy groups to make initial contact with potential participants, and sometimes to arrange interviews and focus groups on our behalf. When the project began, the UK and much of the world were still living under COVID-19 travel restrictions, which meant that all our interviews and focus groups had to be transferred online.

This increased the challenge of building rapport and connection with people and meant that we were unable to actively network and build relationships within communities as we had planned. Once restrictions lifted, we conducted more of our interviews and focus groups

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in-person and attended community events such as a Talanoa workshop for Fijian Military spouses and a Fijian Bula festival.

Relevant here too was our own ethnicity and positionality. All members of the research team are white and hold British passports and with all the rights and privileged access to services that accompany that status, we differed in important respects from at least some of our intended respondents.

Of course, it would be impossible and naïve to try to set this positionality aside when conducting our research, and we often acknowledged it in the interviews and focus groups we conducted. In addition, the lead interviewer on the project (Nicola) hails from an immigrant family (third generation) and has a 'non-UK' migrant partner. In terms of recruiting and engaging participants in the research, this provided a degree of 'status similarity' that proved influential in building familiarity and rapport amongst some of the participants.

Ethics and data collection

Ethical approval was granted by Anglia Ruskin University (FREP: 20/21/024) for the veteran and family member interviews, and by the Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee (MoDREC) (2085/MoDREC/21) for the interviews and focus groups with serving personnel. All participants were provided with a participant information leaflet and provided informed consent to take part in the study.

We offered participants choice over whether they wanted to take part in the project via an individual interview or a focus group. For serving personnel, focus groups were conducted with peers of a similar rank. Questions followed a chronological order, allowing for discussions on all aspects of their journey to the UK, their service and beyond. Questions focused on prior expectations and reasons for joining, recruitment, visas and immigration, how they experienced life in the armed forces in terms of culture, careers and belonging, and their aspirations for their post-service life.

Families and veterans, who were often more dispersed or had more restrictions on their availability, tended to take part via a one-to-one interview. Interview questions for veterans and family members covered similar topics but were adjusted and worded in a way that was more relevant to their circumstances.

As data collection ran in parallel with, and continued beyond, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and UK Home Office's 2021 public consultation on waiving settlement fees for non-UK personnel following discharge from service, perspectives on the consultation and the government's response to it, were also captured as part of this project.

Data analysis

All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. To analyse the data, we followed an inductive, thematic analysis process through which we aimed to create and collate core themes to summarise the views and experiences of our respondents.

In practice, this involved detailed and systematic review of the transcripts by four members of the research team, using Collaborative Qualitative Analysis (CQA) (Richards and Hemphill 2018). Initial coding of the interviews and focus groups took place, followed by higher-level theme choices made through dialogue among the research team.

Theme choices were systematically driven by the interview and focus group data, and we have endeavoured to represent as faithfully as possible the range of views and experiences of our participants. These are their stories of life in the British armed forces and beyond.

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Findings

26 Countries

Map 1 - Location of participants' countries of origin

Characteristics of sample

108 participants from 26 countries were represented in this research (see Map 1). The majority of the sample were serving personnel (81), with 14 veterans and 13 family members. Serving personnel from all three service branches were included (see Table below). For a full breakdown of countries represented, please see **Appendix A**.

Table 1 - Tri-service breakdown

	Serving Personnel	Veterans	Family Members
Army	61	10	12
Royal Navy	14	4	–
RAF	6	–	1
Total	81	14	13

Pseudonymisation

Whilst we strove to provide data as accurately and specifically as possible, this also occurred alongside a responsibility to protect the identity of those who participated in this research. Each individual participant was assigned a pseudonym which appears alongside the verbatim quotes used throughout this report.

Due to there being areas within the serving community that have low numbers of non-UK individuals from certain countries, disclosing the rank and nationality of these individuals was avoided to reduce the possibility of individuals being identified by their responses. Instead, participants were assigned to broader rank and nationality groupings. Although service branch (e.g. Army, Navy, Royal Air Force) were maintained as a classifier, rank was re-categorised as either junior, senior or officer rank, with nationality also re-classified to the broader region in which their home country was situated i.e., Africa, Asia, Australasia, the Caribbean and Pacific.

Themes

Three overarching themes : **Visas and Citizenship, Careers** and **Culture and Belonging** were generated from the data, under which a number of additional sub-themes were contained. Although there is some overlap between the themes, each theme will be discussed in turn, with any linkages between the theme discussed as they arise. Each theme and sub-theme under which this report's findings are to be presented can be seen in the thematic map below:

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                        ┌─────────────┐
┌──────────────┐        │             │        ┌──────────────┐
│ Opportunities│ ------- │   Careers   │ ------- │ Working twice│
│              │        │             │        │   as hard    │
└──────────────┘        └─────────────┘        └──────────────┘
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Careers

Opportunities

Working twice as hard

Feeling held back

Career barriers

Policy and legislative barriers

Deskilling and 'funnelling'

Communication barriers

Discrimination and bias in promotions system

Culture and Belonging

Cultural differences

Strategies used to address racism and discrimination

Racism and discrimination

Belonging

'Overt racism'

'Subtle racism'

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SECTION 1

Visas and citizenship

Visas and citizenship issues often featured as a central point of discussions and served as an anchor for other issues.

Veterans' experiences and concerns surrounding transition were found to cluster around the issue of visas and citizenship status, and the impact these had on their post-transition choices and futures. Obtaining one's desired visa or citizenship status was influenced by, and impacted on, non-UK individuals' broader financial circumstances and conditions. The costs associated with the visas and citizenship process were largely perceived as being excessive and unfair, and the recent ILR visa fee waiver offer deemed inadequate, and/or potentially irrelevant to the majority who were instead choosing the route of full citizenship. The adequacy of information and formal support on the complex issues of visas and citizenship was variable, and whilst this had improved over time, gaps remained.

The consequences of leaving service without having secured a right to reside in the UK were often stark, as demonstrated by a cohort of non-UK veterans and their families who had returned to their home country involuntarily following discharge from service.

Recruitment process and routes to service

Our sample of non-UK personnel and veterans was highly diverse, not just in terms of their demographics such as country of origin, service branch, age, sex, prior career, and family backgrounds. Serving personnel and veterans also varied widely in their routes to recruitment, their current visa status and their visa status at the point of recruitment. Individuals either entered the UK with the explicit intention of joining the UK armed forces (having acquired the appropriate visa to enter in their home country) or were recruited in the UK whilst temporarily resident on another type of visa, typically for the purposes of study, travel, or temporary work.

Understanding how non-UK personnel 'arrive' in the British armed forces is important in order to contextualise their subsequent trajectory through military life. There was not one typical route of recruitment into the armed forces across the non-UK AFC. Some earlier cohorts of personnel and veterans from Fiji and the Caribbean had benefited from (now ceased) direct selection

programmes in their home countries in the early 2000s, similar to the process that continues for Gurkhas in Nepal.

"March 2000 I came across…I was one of those who were recruited when the training team from here visited Fiji…it's a lot different to those who are coming now. We were met at Heathrow and straight into the army camp, rather than those who are coming now who need to come on a visa and then go through the process. They maybe stay with their sponsor…until they are accepted, and [then] they go training"
(Army, Senior Rank, #37, Pacific)

Rather than direct recruitment and selection schemes in their home countries, it is now more typical for potential recruits to apply online from their home country, reflecting a shift towards greater personal and financial responsibility for the process on the individual. Following invitation to proceed to the UK to complete their assessment, potential recruits travel to the UK at their own expense, usually on a six-month visa which requires a sponsor, or visa-free for up to six months for countries such as Trinidad and Tobago.

Non-UK personnel and veterans identified points of tension and difficulty within the existing recruitment system which requires the final elements to be conducted in the UK. Supporting themselves financially for up to six months in the UK without the ability to earn an income or returning on a flight home (at further expense) to await the outcome of a recruitment decision could sometimes be the reality for non-UK personnel who had started their application in their home country.

Some non-UK applicants reported that their ability to join a regiment or career path of their own choosing was restricted, having discovered – after arrival – that recruitment for these roles was suspended and subject to waiting times. Having a maximum of six months on their visa, in addition to the cost of supporting themselves financially during this time, led to pressure to accept offers in roles and regiments that were not their first choice and did not build upon their interests and/or existing skillset.

"I originally wanted to become an electrical engineer because that's part of what I studied at secondary school. But there was a delay in recruitment as it was put, and you'd have to wait six months and that would have visa implications. So my other option was [redacted] which I was successful in applying for"
(Army, Senior Rank, #69, Caribbean)

"Non-UK are coming from a vulnerable place because they really want the job"
(Navy, Senior Rank, #71, Africa)

Our respondents reflected on the vulnerable positions they and others had been placed in due to holding temporary visas while waiting to complete the recruitment process. Prospective recruits are unable to access the support networks of the armed forces while waiting to complete their assessments and begin training, nor can they access many other forms of statutory support because, in the words of one respondent "*They're considered visitors!*" (Navy, Senior Rank, #71, Africa). Amongst those recruited in the UK whilst temporarily residing on another visa (e.g., study, working holiday visa or travel), there was also a sense of urgency associated with recruitment due to the time limits of their existing visas, changes in circumstances, or limited opportunities elsewhere.

To mitigate the difficulties associated with recruitment, some of our respondents thus advocated for more of the recruitment process to be conducted in their home countries.

Current visa status of serving personnel

Amongst serving personnel, all were exempt from immigration control for as long as they continued to serve in the British armed forces (indicated by a stamp in their home country-issued passport). Some, however, also held British passports, having acquired citizenship through naturalisation during service.

There were multiple reasons cited for why some continued to serve with solely 'exempt' status rather than acquiring citizenship. Firstly, those in the early stages of their armed forces careers were often ineligible to apply for citizenship, having not yet resided in the UK for the qualifying five-year period. This group were often aware of their ability to apply for citizenship at the five-year point, and their need to save for the cost of application, although not all were confident of the details regarding the process. Many did plan to apply as soon as they were eligible. Gurkhas, however, were not automatically eligible to apply for citizenship after five years' service due to the nature of their contracts and could only acquire citizenship if they transferred into another regiment.

Acquiring citizenship during service was considered a form of security against untoward events such as redundancy or injury that may lead to a person being discharged from service earlier than they had planned.

"[It provides a] calmer state of mind because if anything happens to you, they can just kick you out and go back… send you back to your country. And that's you pretty much give up your life. You're in a more, I would say, stable state of mind. I don't want to speak for everyone, but there's more stability… while you're still in as opposed to at the end".
(Army, Junior Rank, #28, Africa)

Despite the sense of security that citizenship offered, our respondents were also aware of wider political discussions about the nature of citizenship and belonging within Britain, fearing that their citizenship could still be revoked should legislation change in the future. As one participant put it:

"Because they [UK Home Office] might reserve the right to deport someone and take your citizenship away or they are trying to get that passed".
(Army, Junior Rank, #28, Africa)

Applying for citizenship within service appeared to be the norm amongst our respondents. Indeed, within our sample of 81 serving personnel, 54 were currently eligible to apply and the majority of those eligible (43 or 80%) had already done so.

The 11 serving personnel who had been in the UK for five or more years and were hence eligible to apply, but had not done so, typically cited costs. Whereas some of this group intended to apply but were being deterred or delayed by the cost, some held back due to principled beliefs about the cost of citizenship, stating they did not intend to apply whilst the current rules and fees remained. For example:

"I refuse to pay that fee to become a British citizen after spending over twenty-two years in the army!"
(Army, Senior Rank, #22, the Caribbean)

"I don't have British citizenship….I think it's disgusting that we have to pay for our citizenship having been shot at for the country"
(Army, Senior Rank, #30, Australasia)

"I still disagree with the principle that having served the country now for twenty years that I still have to pay for that privilege"
(Army, Senior Rank, #10, Pacific)

Some of those who had not yet applied were also holding off in hope of impending legislative change whereby fees for citizenship would be waived during their time in service. However, given the rising cost of fees over time, postponing their applications on this account meant that personnel were subject to higher fees than if they'd applied at an earlier point in their careers.

Acquiring citizenship for operational reasons

For those serving personnel who had already acquired citizenship within service, operational reasons were frequently cited as a motivating factor. Being subject to additional travel restrictions such as delays at immigration checkpoints, cancelled assignments and additional travel, caused inconveniences and inefficiencies for both the individual and their unit. British citizenship therefore was considered the solution to the barriers to deployment that could occur when non-UK personnel travelled on their home-country passports.

Of the numerous complex scenarios we were told about, the following quotes summarise the difficulties non-UK personnel experienced on account of travelling on their original passports.

"The reason why the majority of people naturalise is just because of the presence of a visa... sometimes we get the good assignments, but because we cannot get the visa in time the assignments have been cancelled. So as a result, we were forced to naturalise"
(Army, Senior Rank, #24, the Caribbean)

"But receiving that naturalisation certificate... it's a relief. Because I've experienced going on ops, exercises, reccies due to my job where... my fellow colleagues... would go through immigration, all of them across. And you... get stopped by immigration. Where they have to do checks and everything. That pushed me to become naturalised and have that British passport in order to make it easier for me when I travel on ops and exercises and do reccies".
(Army, Officer, #65, Pacific)

Although both the individual and their unit's operational effectiveness benefited from the ease of travel that citizenship afforded, the costs and additional burdens of acquiring citizenship were typically shouldered by the individual alone.

Whilst there was consensus that information provision had improved over the years, feeling uninformed about visa entitlement, processes and costs was nevertheless a common finding amongst family members, veterans and serving personnel.

Members of the non-UK AFC gave examples of country of origin-specific rights and entitlements, such as public sector pensions and the right to hold land, that were dependent on them retaining their original citizenship. Since not all countries allow/allowed dual citizenship (e.g., Nepal, Malawi and Kenya) such entitlements would be relinquished along with their passports if British citizenship was acquired.

"If I give up my citizenship, like if I apply for a British passport, I have to give up my citizenship back home. Which means that I can't own any land, I can't own any property. Every time I go back I have to apply for a visa, can't stay there long term"
(Army Spouse, #2, Asia)

However, citizenship applicants were not always made aware of such issues at the point of application, leading to additional complications after they had acquired citizenship. One participant described having to relinquish their hard-earned British citizenship and re-apply for Nepali citizenship in order to return and reside in their home country following transition.

Information adequacy

Attitudes towards the adequacy of information regarding visas and immigration during service differed depending on the recruitment cohort to which non-UK personnel belonged. Accounts were heard from earlier cohorts of non-UK serving personnel, now veterans, who were unaware of their right to apply for citizenship or Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) during service or following discharge. Information provided to the cohorts who arrived in the early 2000s was frequently described as limited or non-existent.

"None. No, not at all"
(Army Veteran, #2, Africa)

"Absolutely minimal... they didn't know they needed to apply for leave to remain... they didn't tell me, I got it off my friend"
(Army Veteran, #3, Africa)

With scant information and discussion around visas and entitlements, some incorrectly assumed that their exemption from immigration controls would automatically extend beyond their service, and that this would be taken care of for them. As one of our respondents reflected:

"One thing I didn't realise is that even if you are under a visa with the army, that visa doesn't mean anything...you don't get anything with that visa... It only allows you to come in England as a British soldier, to go to work, to fight for the country...and expect[s] you to leave [to] your country"
(Veteran, #12, Africa)

Whilst there was consensus that information provision had improved over the years, feeling uninformed about visa entitlement, processes and costs was nevertheless a common finding amongst family members, veterans and serving personnel. Moreover, interviews with personnel who had recently arrived indicated that feeling uninformed was not just a legacy issue that affected the earliest cohorts of non-UK personnel.

Recently arrived personnel also felt there were gaps in the information they received from official channels, with one respondent commenting that he felt only *"partially informed"* (Army, Junior Rank, #44, the Caribbean).

In general, within-service advice from leaflets, recruiters, chain of command and welfare officers that was country-specific, accurate, and up-to-date, did not always meet the information needs of serving personnel and their families.

"I wish that in all these units they have someone from the Commonwealth sitting inside welfare. Because only we will know exactly what we need. For all the welfares that I've come across, all the welfare units, if I went in and asked something about visas they will not have a clue what I'm talking about"
(Army Spouse, #6, Pacific)

The availability and accuracy of advice received through official channels was varied. Individual chain of command or welfare officers with previous or personal experience of non-UK issues, and those who offered to go over and above in their advocacy and assistance towards the non-UK individual, were thought of as best placed to provide the required level of support. As a result, there was often a need for serving personnel and their family members to supplement visa advice from official channels with support from informal networks of other non-UK personnel, individual-directed online research and/or armed forces charities such as the Army Families Federation.

Earlier cohorts of non-UK personnel, along with their families, were keen to share their experiences and information with more recent recruits, so that others might learn from previous mistakes regarding visa applications and immigration concerns. Our respondents believed that this informal networking had over time contributed to improved information and awareness amongst the non-UK AFC. Yet, given the complexities of the UK immigration system, and the scarcity of qualified support, information from both official Service/MoD sources and informal networks was prone to error and inaccuracy.

The implications of receiving limited, or incorrect advice were often born by the individual and included avoidable outcomes such as failed applications, unnecessary costs and additional psychological burden and stress. Such problems extended to family members, too:

> "it's very daunting applying for the citizenship because when I first met him [partner] I had to switch from a student visa to a spouse visa. And that was my first experience with how you know… it gives you a lot of anxiety"
> (Spouse, #6, Pacific)

In some cases, non-UK families incurred additional costs paying for the services of agencies and immigration lawyers to help them navigate the complexities of the immigration system. Although participants were unanimous in their belief that the single services/MoD should take steps to improve the quality of the information, this did not necessarily mean that the Services/MoD should always be source of this information. Some participants recommended this be provided by a third party to which the serving person could be signposted.

Having visa information and support provided by a neutral third party could be preferable to in-house support, as honest conversations could be facilitated without concerns that their discussions and circumstances may negatively impact on their armed forces career.

Being financially able to apply for citizenship at the point of eligibility was not always possible due the costs associated with the process.

Views on UK Home Office/MOD visa fees consultation

Ambivalence towards the UK Government's 2021 consultation on ILR fee waivers for non-UK personnel after leaving service was common amongst serving personnel. Although some welcomed the outcome of the consultation – I.e., ILR fee waivers for those discharged with six or more years' service – as a step in the right direction, many also felt that the government's offer did not go far enough and was not likely to benefit the majority of serving personnel, veterans and their families. Given that most non-UK serving personnel had already applied for, or been granted, citizenship during service, offering ILR to those who leave service without right to reside was sometimes seen as an irrelevance. A typical response we received in this regard was that:

> "So my take is… and from everybody else that I've spoken to is… it doesn't really help anybody serving because it's not the choice you would make"
> (Navy, Senior Rank, #71, Africa)

Instead, a citizenship fee waiver or fee reduction for serving prsonnel would be the preferred offer for those currently serving, and many expressed disappointment that this was not proposed during the consultation. Another commented that:

> "We… most people, we don't want it (ILR). We want the citizenship to be waived"
> (Army, Junior Rank, #62, Africa)

Another commonly expressed viewpoint was that the exclusion of partners and dependent children, together with the non-retrospective provision in the new policy (i.e., excluding those who have left already and applied for citizenship or ILR at their own expense) was a limitation and that the policy changes could have been more encompassing. The exclusions in the consultation were disappointing for those who had campaigned for non-UK veterans' rights to visas and citizenship prior to the consultation's launch.

"it only qualifies for the future or the active members, active soldiers…it defeats the whole purpose of the campaign. It was meant for those people from 2006…those are the current people that are suffering in silence"
(Army Veteran, #13, Pacific)

Visa fees, additional visa costs and requirements

Although serving personnel are exempt from immigration control during their service, their family members are not. Immediate family members e.g. spouses/partners and children are required to apply and pay for their own visas and citizenship to reside in the UK, at significant personal cost. As of 4th October 2023, the cost of a five-year Limited Leave to Remain (Settlement) Visa for spouses/partners and children is now £1,846, an increase of 20% on the previous cost of £1,538 (UK V&I 2023).

The cost of staying beyond this initial five year period through the acquisition of an Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) visa now stands at £2,885, having also risen 17% on the previous cost of £2,404 (UK V&I 2023). Should a family member wish to obtain British Citizenship after obtaining their ILR, this would be at further cost, with naturalisation now costing £1,500 (UK V&I 2023), in addition to supplementary fees associated with English language and Life in the UK tests, biometric ID cards, and travel costs to and from testing and processing centres.For the serving personnel, veteran and family member participants with first-hand experience of applying for citizenship or ILR, a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the high costs involved was frequently noted.

"The amount of money we have to pay! It's diabolic"
(Army, Junior Rank, #27, the Caribbean)

Current costs of both citizenship and ILR were generally viewed as excessive, especially when these costs were compared against the fees paid by service personnel in other countries such as the US and Australia, and the settlement fees paid by Europeans in the UK. Serving personnel also used prior cohorts of non-UK personnel as a reference point against which the current fees could be judged.

When serving personnel situated fees as a proportion of a typical monthly salary, current fees seemed to have increased disproportionately in relation to income, having accelerated significantly over time when compared to the fees paid by earlier cohorts. Typical comparisons people made included the following:

"I was probably earning under £2,000 a month, and it cost us something like £600… And it's about £8,000 now"
(RAF, Officer, #2, Africa)

"I came in 2011 …I think in total I spent about £6,000 to just get myself and the missus and the four children. But that was then. If you're doing it today [it's] double that amount….I'm so thankful I did it then"
(Army, Senior Rank, #53, Pacific)

When serving personnel situated fees as a proportion of a typical monthly salary, current fees seemed to have increased disproportionately in relation to income.

When these costs were contextualised against the nature of risk and personal sacrifice associated with military life, the actual cost of processing a visa, and the Home Office rationale for the high cost of these fees (i.e., administrative cost), participants believed current visa costs were difficult to justify. Moreover, being financially able to apply for citizenship at the point of eligibility was not always possible due the costs associated with the process. Additional financial barriers were experienced by non-UK families with a single earner.

> "I wanted to apply for it last year, but then with this COVID situation and all that and financial situation you know... it's a lot of money. So I have to save up for my two children and mine also.. it's too much as a single parent. It's too much"
> (Army Spouse, #8, Pacific)

As such, fees that were already considered unaffordable could be made worse in circumstances where the applicant was not fully informed of the requirements, their eligibility, or recent changes to the process. The failed applications which resulted did not only have significant financial implications for non-UK personnel whose fees were paid and never refunded. The wellbeing of non-UK personnel and their families were equally negatively impacted by these failed visa applications. Such cases contributed to hardship and distress for non-UK personnel and their families, as the following experience testifies:

> "I applied for citizenship together with my two children after they had received a UK birth certificate. I don't know what was done with the UK Border Agency, but my application fell through with the application for my two children. And I lost that money as well. And then when that fell through... basically they said my children were not eligible and that's why I lost all... the cost of my own application, the cost of my two children's application as well. It really cut me very deep"
> Army, Senior Rank, #66, Pacific)

Fees that were already considered unaffordable could be made worse in circumstances where the applicant was not fully informed of the requirements, their eligibility, or recent changes to the process.

Dissatisfaction with the cost of the English Language test that was required as part of a citizenship application was also noted amongst non-UK personnel, veterans and family members. Similar to their sentiments towards the visa fees costs, participants felt that the cost of the English test (approximately £150 at the time of writing) was excessive for what was described as a short, 'basic conversation' (Army, Spouse/Adult Child #3, Asia).

The effect of these costs on the individuals however was not just financial. Having to take such a basic, yet costly, test was also described by more than one participant as a 'joke' which felt insulting and demoralising, particularly for those who spoke English to a high standard, but had to undertake the process, nonetheless.

> "I teach in defence, well pretty much the whole of defence and you're telling me that I need to do a test as in to prove that I can speak English or I have an idea of which I think is quite demoralising"
> (Army, Senior Rank, #22, the Caribbean)

Remittances

Despite being appreciative of the lower housing costs that came with living in military accommodation, these savings were not always enough to offset the additional costs and financial responsibilities that came with being a member of the non-UK AFC. Compounding the additional financial outlays that came with applying for visas and citizenships, and the costs of travel to and from the UK, were the financial commitments that many non-UK personnel, veterans and family members had to their families back home. Remittances – i.e., the process of transferring money across borders, typically to friends and family who remain in the country of origin, is a common phenomenon amongst migrant workers (Al-Assaf and Al-Malki 2014). Non-UK personnel and their families were no different in this regard with many stating that they and their fellow non-UK colleagues were remitting money to family and friends in their home country.

Sending money home was often motivated by a culturally reinforced sense of duty towards financially supporting friends, family and community members who remained in their country of origin. Money sent served to contribute to basic living expenses, care

provisions and emergencies amongst their immediate and extended networks and was either being remitted regularly each month and/or on an ad hoc basis when friends and family members found themselves in difficulty.

For some, the amount being remitted was significant. One participant shared how they had remitted approximately £6,000 in a year, an amount they felt duty bound to provide, yet regretted doing due to the significant dent it made in their own finances. Consequently, the financial obligation towards an extended network of dependents in their home country proved to be an additional obstacle for non-UK members of the AFC in saving towards and hence paying for citizenship or visa fees.

"[I've been here] about five years and a couple of months now. And for me to try to get a passport would be kind of like expensive, so I need to save more. And I've got a family back home so I need to send more money back home then try to save up as well. Because I've got stuff to pay here as well"
(Army, Junior Rank, #18, Asia)

Minimum income requirement

In addition to the financial outlays posed by visas and their associated fees, remittances, members of the non-UK AFC who had joined since 2012 were required to meet the UK Home Office's Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) in order to bring family to live with them in the UK. This currently requires that serving personnel have an annual income of at least £18,600 in order to bring their non-UK spouse or partner to the UK, a further £3,800 in annual income to bring a child, and an additional £2,400 per year for each additional child after that. In a context where the MIR has remained static, yet armed forces salaries have increased, non-UK personnel who join at the lowest rank from August 2023 onwards will be able to meet the £22,400 MIR to bring a spouse/partner and one child to the UK following six months service (AFF 2023).

For some participants however, joining at the lowest rank and salary band of their service branch meant that those who had already formed families could not bring their full immediate family with them to the UK. Consequently, the MIR, coupled with the high cost of visa fees for family members, led to extended periods of separation for families, sometimes even after years of service. Families therefore faced difficult decisions over who to bring to the UK. The following examples exemplify these dilemmas:

"And I would rather choose my wife because she can come in and support me to get the money to bring… my daughter as well. So it was hard, it was very difficult"
(Army, Junior Rank, #63, the Caribbean)

"then my husband came… then we brought the first child over because we couldn't do both, it's too expensive. So I got my son over to start with, and then… so the second one came a year later. But that was the older one. It was his birthday coming up and we said 'what do you want for your birthday'? And he said, his brother"
(RAF, Junior Rank, #11, Africa)

The ability of non-UK personnel to increase their annual income, and hence meet the MIR appropriate to their circumstances, could be achieved through acquiring second jobs in the civilian world. However, permission to do so was often at the discretion of commanding officers, not all of whom would be willing to grant this permission. The absence of a consistent policy regarding second jobs led to circumstances where some non-UK personnel were allowed to bolster their income and reach the necessary minimum income while others were denied the opportunity to do so.

"I remember…they put on our orders that no one should take a second job unless it goes through their commanding officer. You dare not go to your commanding officer! [LAUGH] And tell him I want to do this job! No! So that means they are telling you no. In simple ways they're telling you no. And you need to go and justify the reason why you want to take that"
(Army, Junior Rank, #63, the Caribbean)

Although many of our respondents joined at a later age, having already built careers and families in their home countries, not all non-UK personnel were negatively impacted by MIR and visa fees to bring in family members. Some non-UK personnel were single at the point of joining service, and as such they did not face restrictions associated with MIR or additional visa fees. Amongst non-UK personnel who were single, there was a sense gratitude for having been spared the costly, complicated and stressful process they had witnessed amongst many of their non-UK colleagues with families.

Visas and transition

Non-UK veterans discussed issues regarding transition that could equally apply to a UK person transitioning out of the armed forces. These included a pressing need to find housing and employment, especially amongst those for whom discharge was unexpected, alongside adjustment and acceptance of the circumstances which caused their discharge from service in the first place.

However, the transition process for non-UK personnel came with higher stakes than it did for a UK person discharged in similar circumstances if the non-UK veteran had not officially acquired the right to remain in the UK prior to their discharge. Leaving service without citizenship or ILR and being unaware of the need to acquire settled status within a short time frame following transition had serious implications for the non-UK personnel who wanted to continue their civilian lives in the UK.

Having to leave the UK, despite a desire to stay, was a consequence borne out by earlier cohorts of veterans who were in the precarious position of not having an entitlement to remain in the country following the cancellation of their exempt status.

Amongst veteran participants, reasons for leaving without either citizenship or ILR were cited as being uninformed or misinformed regarding the necessity of this, or due to leaving service unexpectedly through an unplanned discharge or redundancy before having an opportunity to apply.

"There are a lot of guys that… really got themselves into a mess because they'd done like seventeen/eighteen years… And they had to go home because they had no passport. They…were waiting for the army to do it for them, but nobody comes to them and says listen lads, you need to go and sort your passport out"
(Army Veteran, #7, Africa)

Leaving service without citizenship or ILR and being unaware of the need to acquire settled status within a short time frame following transition had serious implications for the non-UK personnel who wanted to continue their civilian lives in the UK.

In the case of one veteran, rather than being informed of their right to settle in the UK, their travel home was instead facilitated and expedited by their service branch. Involuntarily returning to their home country caused additional hardship for the individual who experienced it.

"They also gave, not only me, but my whole family a one-way ticket to Fiji. I still have itinerary and the costs… I believe I still have it at home. They were willing to pay over £9,000 to get all of us back to Fiji, instead of just granting us to go back to the UK. And we wanted to stay in the UK as I said four of the children are British born. I'm still trying to get over what they did and for them to pay the £9,000 instead of just helping us to settle"
(Army Veteran, #9, Pacific)

For some who had returned involuntarily to country of origin, the psychological burden could also become complicated by service-related medical conditions such as PTSD.

Yet once in their home country, and no longer eligible to access the NHS support they'd have been entitled to in the UK, veterans reported difficulty in receiving appropriate medical and psychological support. As one veteran commented.

"I have been diagnosed with chronic PTSD from Afghan, I can't get any treatment. We don't have NHS here, I've tried to get back [to the UK] just to get treated, but I can't even get a visa to visit the country"
(Army Veteran, #6, Africa)

Again, while we are unable to quantify the existence of such circumstances amongst non-UK veterans, we noted several examples from our respondents whereby access to medical care was insufficient to cope with the burden of service-acquired mental health difficulties, and such cases were not isolated or extreme.

The support available for these non-UK veterans residing abroad was typically provided by charitable organisations with limited resources and/or accessibility, or by family members. Furthermore, difficulties arose for non-UK veterans who had returned home with UK-born children.
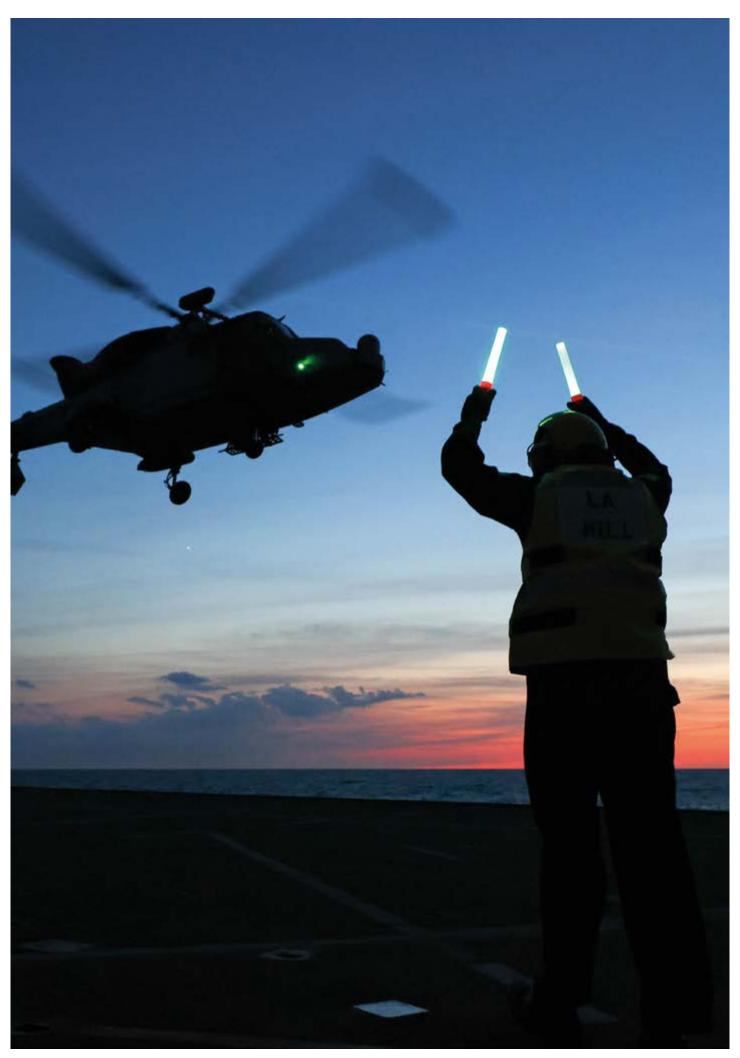
One veteran described how their children were not only disconnected from the public services they were utilising in the UK whilst their parents served but were also blocked from accessing vital services (e.g., state education and banking services) in their parents' country of origin due to their own lack of citizenship.

Visas and citizenship
Key findings

- A lack of British citizenship was perceived to be a barrier to travel and deployment within service, posing barriers to the individual and the operational effectiveness of their unit

- Citizenship was commonly being acquired during service as a means of removing the barriers, for individual and unit, associated with lacking a British passport

- Acquiring citizenship within service was seen as a form of security against the potential negative outcomes that came with being discharged unexpectedly without having already acquired a right to reside, i.e. a potential return to their country of origin

- The majority of serving personnel who were eligible (i.e. >5 years in the UK and not currently serving in the Brigade of Gurkhas) had acquired British citizenship during their service

- For those who were eligible yet had not applied, costs were given as the main reason - either due not being able to afford it, or due to a principled stance against applying whilst these costs were still in effect

- There was agreement across serving personnel, veterans and their families that the visa and citizenship fees were unreasonably high

- The costs of citizenship were shouldered by the individual and their family, yet the benefits were gained by both the individual and the unit/service

- The high cost of citizenship came in addition to financial pressures already experienced by non-UK personnel e.g., remittances and international travel

- Whilst the adequacy of information regarding visas and citizenship was said to have improved over the years, many found the support available through official channels on visas, and how they intersect with other areas such as careers and family life, to be lacking

- Individuals experienced detriment due to these information gaps on citizenship and visas – including additional costs from failed applications and involuntary return migration to their home country on transition

- Some non-UK veterans who had returned involuntarily to their country of origin were unable to access appropriate health and social care, including for physical and mental health issues acquired during service. Some children also experienced difficulty when residing in their parents' country of origin with a British nationality

- Extended periods of transnational family separation were occurring due to the Minimum Income Requirement and visa costs, with children of Non-UK personnel staying behind in the country of origin until a higher threshold of income could be reached by their parent/s

- The recent offer made by the UK government to waive ILR fees for those with six or more years of service was generally seen as inadequate and irrelevant to many non-UK serving personnel for whom citizenship within service was the preferred option.

SECTION 2

Careers

Due to the interconnected and often inseparable nature of visas and citizenship to many aspects of a serving person's career, it was uncommon for decisions about one to be made without consideration of the other.

Lacking citizenship could create barriers to career progression by limiting the availability of roles to non-UK personnel. Likewise, obtaining citizenship within service was beneficial to the individual and their unit as it reduced or removed barriers to travel, deployment and career progression. Career progression was frequently perceived as being constrained for reasons which extended beyond visa and citizenship limitations.

Careers of non-UK personnel and their family members were also influenced by recognition of their abilities, applicability of their previous skillset, and in some cases, stereotyping and cultural misunderstandings that were said to influence promotion mechanisms. The Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) also served as a distinct example of where visas, career progression and family life were found to intersect. Delayed career progression therefore was of great consequence to junior ranks of non-UK personnel who depended on promotion to advance their salary, and hence resolve their circumstances of family separation.

Opportunities

Joining the UK armed forces offered unique opportunities to fulfil often long held aspirations and life goals that may have remained out of reach had the serving person remained in their country of origin. Our respondents were profoundly grateful for the unparalleled opportunities that life in the British armed forces provided in respect to travel, expanding their technical, educational, leadership and communicative skillset, developing lifelong friendships, and for acting as a conduit for their own personal growth and wisdom. For those who considered themselves to have had a successful career, positively grasping the many opportunities that the armed forces offered was thought to be key to their success.

"So how I got here is opportunities, I never turned down any opportunity. And I just put myself.., on it every time and see... maybe I'll learn something new, even if I don't get it, I'll just learn something...So going through the process, be bold and go for it.
(Army, Senior Rank, #53, Pacific)

Feeling held back

Irrespective of the personal determination of the individual, however, non-UK personnel encountered barriers to career success which meant they were unable to capitalise on opportunities as fully, or as quickly, as they had anticipated. Whereas a minority within our sample felt they had achieved career progression at a rate which met or exceeded their expectations, feeling 'held back' in their careers was a more typical experience amongst non-UK serving personnel.

"I'm definitely not where I think I should be and neither does anyone I actually speak to think they should be"
(Army, Senior Rank, #22, the Caribbean)

In particular, non-UK personnel tended to view their careers as stunted when compared with their UK counterparts whose careers served as a benchmark against which to judge their own. Seeing UK personnel with equal or less experience overtake their own progress was a disheartening experience, further reinforcing perceptions that non-UK personnel were not progressing at the rate they believed they deserved. The following examples are typical of the experiences recounted to us:

"knowing someone could come three years after you and get a promotion before you if you're ticking all these targets..... how could you justify...someone who'll be in twenty-two years, still a corporal, and then you have a ten year sergeant going to come and tell him what to do?"
(Army, Junior Rank, #17, the Caribbean)

"I've ticked all the boxes. After eighteen years, I'm still... plodding"
(Army, Senior Rank, #14, the Caribbean)

We frequently heard from non-UK personnel and veterans who felt they had been 'stagnant' in their careers. Some experienced very slow progression, with others reportedly remaining at the same rank sometimes for ten or more years without receiving a promotion. Significant delays to progression from the first rank onwards have major implications for non-UK individuals who intend to bring their spouses and children to the UK as their ability to reach the MIR can be thwarted in these circumstances.

"Twelve years...just a private"
(Army, Veteran, #9, Pacific)

Career barriers

Serving personnel respondents offered multiple reasons why they thought their careers were not progressing at the rate at which they expected. Career barriers ranged from more formalised, organisational issues such as policy and legislation, to barriers which were not always as easy to identify and hence address, such as discrimination and bias. Putting in additional effort was not always enough to overcome these career barriers. In some cases, these barriers were perceived as insurmountable 'roadblocks' which consequently had effects on morale.

"I'm tired of meeting every roadblock everywhere I go. And... it's just... something got to give"
(Navy, Junior Rank, #78, Africa)

Policy and legislative barriers

Travel restrictions experienced through not possessing a UK passport were not only inconveniences that caused delays for the individual and their unit. Opportunities to deploy were sometimes diminished amongst non-UK personnel who did not have citizenship and required visas. Due to the perceived bureaucratic issue of acquiring visas on behalf of non-UK personnel, especially at short notice, some non-UK personnel believed this translated into decisions which excluded them from opportunities.

"Then when it comes to the hassle of getting you the proper paperwork, they shy away from it. Like they wanted to send me to the Falklands… well I was meant to fly to the Falklands today… yeah…and that's been cancelled".
(RAF, Junior Rank, #11, Africa)

The ability to travel unrestricted and hence deploy effectively had linked implications for their career progression. For example, serving personnel felt penalised when it came to promotions for not having acquired as full a career and deployment history as they might have done had they acquired citizenship.

Consequently, acquiring citizenship within service was considered to be an operational necessity if they were to deploy effectively, and hence capitalise on the full range of career opportunities and advancements that were associated with possessing a British passport. Having experienced the disappointment of restricted opportunities in the past, non-UK personnel felt reticent to apply for future deployments on the assumption that they would face similar restrictions, further impeding their career prospects.

"I've never volunteered for anything that's in different countries because the hassle of me volunteering, saying you can go, oh no you can't go because you need a visa. It's too much. So I'm always penalised in the sense that I can't do what I want"
(RAF, Junior Rank, #11, Africa)

Similarly, not being able to progress into roles which required enhanced security clearance proved to be another barrier to those without full citizenship. The following experience is typical of comments we heard in this regard:

"I was selected to go and serve with [redacted] as a Troop commander, and the day after I was selected for that I was told that I couldn't do it because of my nationality. They… weren't willing to put me through the elevated clearance … which was extremely disheartening and subsequently something that actually had a knock-on effect on my career".
(Army, Officer, #54, Africa)

Some personnel reported that they were not aware their intended career paths were conditional upon citizenship until they had already signed up or had applied for promotion to a role for which citizenship was required. Had they been afforded the opportunity to make a more fully informed decision based on the limitations of certain career paths, this may have led to different choices and spared them future disappointment. As one participant put it:

"when we joined up they didn't explain to us that there are certain trades or careers or cap badges you cannot join. So I wanted to join the [redacted] as an environmental health tech. But when I got to [Pirbright] they were like oh sorry this is closed to Commonwealth soldiers".
(Army, Junior Rank, #57, Pacific)

For personnel who were aware that their chosen career path was inaccessible until they could acquire citizenship, some chose to delay joining or signed up for another role, aspiring to transfer to their chosen unit when citizenship was acquired. The consequence of horizontal moves that came with transfers and career delays was that the continued upwards trajectory of their careers was disrupted.

Vertical career advancement was both jeopardised on their current career path and delayed on their ideal one if non-UK personnel needed to move branches or regiments to pursue their original career plan.

"[sergeant] jobs, you have to be in the camp for five years. And I think that's still the case… at the moment at least. Some people who want to do [sergeant] training, you know they're… oh you haven't been here long enough and so can't let you do that"
(Army, Senior Rank, #25, Africa)

Transfers however were not always successful and did not always happen as easily as non-UK personnel had been led to believe when recruited, leading to disappointment and further career setbacks.

"they make it so difficult to transfer as well, it's so hard"
(Army, Junior Rank, #6, the Caribbean)

"[the recruiter] told me that you can always change your cap badge in the training… it's been two years now…they didn't take my transfer seriously and that's quite frustrating and definitely different from what I expected… It took me quite a long time for the transfer, I don't know why. I think the army should do something about it to… to help people to do what they are good at"
(Army, Junior Rank, #36, Asia)

Non-UK family members were found to be experiencing similar careers barriers to those of their UK counterparts, i.e. difficulties in acquiring and maintaining a career with an upward trajectory, due to the frequent moves and disruptions that accompany a mobile military lifestyle.

However, partner underemployment could be of great consequence for non-UK families as dual incomes allowed not only for the costs associated with visa fees to be met more easily. but also served to enable or expediate the family's ability to meet the MIR and hence reunite their families in the UK. Additionally, the lack of extended family support in the UK meant that many non-UK families faced an additional barrier to partner employment due to a lack of available childcare from family members.

That these unique difficulties and challenges regarding non-UK spousal employment appeared to have remained unaccounted for in the visa consultation's decision to exclude family member entitlement to visa fee waivers was a disappointment for some.

"[For] the spouse to have to pay, I think that's unfair because I have to put my career aside to support my husband's career"
(Army spouse, #9, Africa).

One of the main reasons for non-UK personnel wanting to pursue specific career pathways in the armed forces was so they could continue to develop and use skills they had already acquired in their home country.

Deskilling and 'funnelling'

One of the main reasons for non-UK personnel wanting to pursue specific career pathways in the armed forces was so they could continue to develop and use skills they had already acquired in their home country. Joining the armed forces often at a later age than their UK counterparts, meant that non-UK personnel not only had families but had acquired existing skills and years of experience prior to their joining service.

Several participants were bi or multilingual, had undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and were practicing and qualified professionals in a variety of disciplines e.g., law/law enforcement, nursing, teaching and journalism. Many hoped their prior expertise would be recognised through placement in the most appropriate regiment or through officer selection. Instead, 'deskilling' i.e., the process whereby immigrants with foreign-acquired qualifications lose access to occupations previously held in their home country (Bauder 2003), was noted amongst non-UK personnel. As has been observed amongst other non-UK individuals such as overseas nurses in the NHS (Lin 2018), non-UK serving personnel felt that their prior skillset was not always given the consideration that many felt they deserved.

"a lot of us are way more qualified and are way more intellectually inclined to do these jobs even better than the people that are actually doing it. But just because of our nationality, and the fact that we're Commonwealth, we can't do it. Which is kind of unfair"
(Army, Junior Rank, #6, the Caribbean)

The perceived lack of skills and interests matching at recruitment, coupled with the difficulty in obtaining transfers meant that many non-UK personnel often had little opportunity to utilise their prior skillset. The most striking example we heard of this phenomenon was of a qualified nurse who wanted to join a medical unit yet was recruited to artillery. This is where they stayed for a decade before leaving service following a long and demoralising process of being unable to transfer onto a more relevant, medically-oriented career path:

"They invited me to the careers office and somehow managed to get me with the idea of you can do nursing in the artillery. I wanted to do nursing assistant, I wanted to do combat medic, I then wanted to be a team medic. I asked to go on that course, I asked about that course so many times…I was a qualified nurse. They didn't even take that into consideration"
(Army Veteran, #12, Africa)

Deskilling was however not just considered to be detrimental to the individual and their career advancement. non-UK personnel felt that the underutilisation of their skills and interests was of equal detriment to the military itself.

"the Commonwealth community, they bring a lot of qualities, a lot of skills. Which will have been very, very, very beneficial if the army had looked into it and utilised it to their best abilities"
(Army Veteran, #12, Africa)

The transferability of qualifications acquired abroad also posed an additional barrier to family members when attempting to pursue careers in the UK. Some realised, only once in the UK, that their qualifications were not recognised, meaning they were not able to utilise these as they had expected.

We heard from several family members who encountered this issue, which introduced another layer of difficulty to non-UK families' experiences of life in the military community, and UK more generally.

"I wasn't able to work in the field of where I normally work in… like the area that I studied in up until this year to be honest. A lot of women who I had gone to school with or to university with or worked with, they weren't working when they came here. They said it was difficult. So I thought if I study maybe… study in the UK it might help me. It did eventually, but it took a lot of time"
(Army Spouse, #5, Pacific)

Non-UK personnel shared how many of them felt 'funnelled' and assisted into career paths that they did not initially intend or aspire to join at recruitment. Reflecting on the possible reasons for this, non-UK personnel considered the institutional need to fulfil quota for less popular or desirable roles as a potential reason for the limited career choices presented to them on joining. Some however believed that funnelling was partially influenced by assumptions that were made about them based on their ethnicity rather than their aptitude. Common experiences shared with us included the following.

"So I've sent in my application for a specific job role. But then it was a nightmare…we didn't get the choice to choose between where we wanted to go, so you just put us anywhere!"
(Army, Junior Rank, #27, the Caribbean)

"the career manager said that for this year, the quota is filled up. And so he suggest [ed to] me to pick another cap badge which was artillery"
(Army, Junior Rank, #36, Asia)

"When a Commonwealth soldier joins up, I'm talking of black Africans, Caribbeans, or guys from Fiji…when they join a unit, From my time they want to put you in the heavy weapons department. Machine guns, porters…they're channelling you in a way"
(Army, Senior Rank, #8, the Caribbean)

Non-UK personnel shared how many of them felt 'funnelled' and assisted into career paths that they did not initially intend or aspire to join at recruitment.

Communications barriers

In addition to the military 'lingo', British colloquial phrases, and regional accents all non-UK personnel had to learn and adapt to, there were additional communicative challenges for non-UK personnel whose first language wasn't English. For those for whom English was a second language, some felt inhibited by their ability to articulate their thoughts clearly and hence be understood by their colleagues and chain of commands. Likewise, misunderstanding more subtle forms of communication such as sarcasm inhibited the interpretation of their colleagues' conversations. With communicative ability being one of the skills evaluated during promotion reports, a less than perfect grasp of the English language proved to be a barrier for career progression for some.

"The guys from foreign Commonwealth backgrounds, where their English wasn't the strongest…. It seems that they were at a disadvantage compared to a native-born English speaker for things like cultural fluency as well as language fluency obviously. And that I think held a couple of people back and I've seen that happen before"
(Army, Senior Rank, #22, the Caribbean)

Discrimination and bias in promotions system

Non-UK personnel frequently identified elements of the promotions system that they believed contributed to a less than fair appraisal of their skills and abilities. A perceived lack of transparency around promotions criteria, and an overreliance on subjective assessments by chains of commands were viewed as contributing to career delays. Moreover, subjective assessment was deemed liable to the introduction of bias, conscious or otherwise.

"you know you can't really put a finger and say why… it's because you're not… entirely sure how the process works…like the full picture, you don't have the full picture of… how they choose people to be promoted [to the] next rank up"
(Navy, Junior Rank, #74, Africa)

Cultural differences were also considered liable to negative interpretations in existing promotion reporting systems.. However, the cultural 'traits' of non-UK personnel were not believed to be an issue in themselves, but rather how their behaviour was interpreted or misunderstood by their colleagues and chains of command as being at odds with military cultural norms.

For example, cultural norms relating to respect within some cultures such as humility, deference, or not speaking out of turn, could be negatively construed as being 'quiet'. Similarly, being characterised as 'laid back' was understood by some non-UK personnel as a euphemism for laziness, and thus poor character. On the other hand, passionate, expressive, and direct communicative styles were interpreted as 'aggressive' or 'blunt'. Notable examples of how non-UK personnel felt that they had been stereotyped or misunderstood included the following:

"People of my ethnicity…we're not self-adulating. So we don't say oh look at me! … the system is geared towards the Caucasian culture where you do something good and you get that plastered to the whole world"
(RAF, Officer, #2, Africa)

"You need to be a leader, and if you're quiet, you know how… and who are you going to lead? So… but people don't understand that…some people have said… are writing it, I think not knowing what it meant. But you're actually putting someone back…You can have a quiet leader, you don't have to be shouting. You know, you look at football, there's managers that are really good that don't shout"
(Army, Officer, #67, Africa)

"So we're flamboyant people, and we're bubbly people. But it doesn't mean that… we're aggressive which we're often told"
(Navy, Junior Rank, #78, Africa)

Despite the negative connotations associated with labels such as 'quiet' or 'laid back' some non-UK personnel did nonetheless use these labels to describe themselves. However, they defended these as positive qualities indicative of strength, maturity and approachability that were not necessarily at odds with armed forces values or leadership, but assets instead. The main source of frustration for non-UK personnel was when such terms were included on personnel reports in a manner which undermined or overshadowed their achievements and potential.

Specifically, when the labels of 'quiet', 'blunt', 'aggressive' or 'laid back' arose in formally written promotion reports they were perceived as being additionally problematic for promotions prospects. Even if there may not have been deliberate intentions by the report's writer to include words with such negative connotations, there was concern amongst non-UK personnel that this was how they would be interpreted by the report's reader.

Understandably, some non-UK personnel cited instances of requesting their reports be reworded and contextualised on account of this, as the following experiences demonstrate:

"My [report] has always been written that [I'm] quiet…. And I said to him you might not mean it that way, but Glasgow [careers management branch] will be sitting in that board interpreting it in their own way. And I would ask for you to remove that word, or change it in a way to say you're quiet, but…in this way"
(Army, Officer, #65, Pacific)

"But someone else reading my report…and seeing laidback means lazy. So I say if you put laidback in my report, you know what you mean, but the other person doesn't know what you mean. Because they don't work with me around the bases. So… that kind of language has to be eliminated"
(Navy Veteran, #14, the Caribbean)

There appeared to be a growing awareness of the use of labels with negative connotations within reports, not just by non-UK personnel themselves but amongst those who wrote them. A growing awareness in avoiding certain labels however did not always mean they were no longer used. One Naval veteran believed this instead led to new labels with the same negative associations being generated in their place:

"What I've noticed with the promotion reports, they removed that word 'aggressive' and I mean… I've been about for a while now, what I've noticed is that word 'aggressive' is removed and the word 'robust' is applied. It's a play on words, everyone knows what it means because… it's a word I would have seen in many report, my colleagues also. When you sort of read them out, it's why are we always having that word in our reports?"
(Navy Veteran, #14, the Caribbean)

Increasing objectivity, transparency and accountability in the promotions system, criteria and outcomes were therefore considered means of ameliorating some of the issues of bias and stereotyping that were noted within the system in its current form.

There appeared to be a growing awareness of the use of labels with negative connotations within reports, not just by non-UK personnel themselves but amongst those who wrote them.

Working twice as hard

Given the barriers they encountered along the way, non-UK personnel felt they had a much harder journey in their career than the UK colleagues against whom they evaluated their own progression.

In order to surpass these additional hurdles, non-UK personnel felt they had to work harder and perform at a much higher standard if they were to reach the same level of progression as their UK counterparts. The concept of working 'twice as hard' for the same outcome was a commonly relayed statement amongst non-UK personnel.

"I've seen how people treat non-UK… and it's always an issue… you always feel like you have to work extra hard as compared to everyone else. we need to do 110% otherwise you would never be recognised"
(Army, Junior Rank, #62, Africa)

"I think some people… as in… in the battalion has a Commonwealth or a black soldier, you need to be doing three times the amount of work that an ordinary person is doing just to get noticed and I think it's wrong"
(Army, Senior Rank, #21, Africa)

The perception that non-UK personnel not only needed to work harder, but also longer or less favourable shift patterns was noted by some participants. Being allocated unfavourable shifts by their chain of command was believed as being partially based on assumptions around how they spent their free time as a member of the non-UK AFC.

Non-UK personnel felt that being allocated these shifts disproportionately to their UK colleagues was partially grounded on a belief that they had fewer family and social commitments in the UK, and hence their free time was of less worth. As one of our respondents put it:

"Because Commonwealth we are often seen as naval orphans, so when it comes to duties, weekend duties and stuff like that, we'll get stitched [up]."
(Navy, Junior Rank, #78, Africa)

The unfavourable shifts performed by non-UK personnel however were not always performed involuntarily. For the non-UK personnel who did have fewer family and social connections in the UK, the undertaking of undesirable shifts was advantageous as leave could be saved up and used towards a visit to their home country.

Given the barriers they encountered along the way, non-UK personnel felt they had a much harder journey in their career than the UK colleagues against whom they evaluated their own progression.

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Working twice as hard was also viewed as a response to having their actions and behaviours being subjected to much higher scrutiny than their UK colleagues. Non-UK personnel felt they carried additional responsibility to be a positive representative of their country and nationality, as their actions were much more susceptible to being conflated with those of others from their country.

"That's an extra bit of stress, you want to do well because you don't want to be that… oh there you go, here's a black officer and he's shit. You know you don't want to be the guy who lets the side down"
(Army, Officer, #51, the Caribbean)

Feeling as if existing rules and policies were being applied more judiciously to non-UK personnel than they were to their UK counterparts, was also expressed by some participants.

"It's a trivial mistake. And in your case, it tends to be almost blown out of proportion whereas…the individual who is from here makes a similar error of some sort, it kind of gets downplayed".
(Army, Junior Rank, #28, Africa)

The additional scrutiny on their work contributed to the sense that non-UK personnel had to work harder and longer compared to their UK colleagues.

A tendency to complain less and place fewer demands on their working practices amongst non-UK personnel on account of this additional scrutiny, was also thought to be a reason for non-UK personnel to continue working harder, longer hours.

So we complain less and again that's why you end up doing more work as well. You know if you're given a job, you just… whereas the UK… is I'm not going to do this and then come up with an excuse. We see it a lot where last minute [they] will have their wives to call the work and say… you don't find Commonwealth wives who do that"
(Army, Junior Rank, #17, the Caribbean)

Not only did non-UK personnel feel they had to work twice as hard as their non-UK counterparts, but they felt their actions and behaviours were subject to higher scrutiny.

Career
Key findings

- Non-UK personnel felt held back in their careers due to more formalised barriers (e.g. policies and visa legislation) and bias and discrimination which were believed to influence their chances of promotion

- Some non-UK personnel believed their actions were subjected to a higher level of scrutiny and judgement, which came with additional pressure to be a positive representative of their race/ nationality

- In order to progress at the same rate as their UK colleagues, non-UK personnel often felt they had to work twice as hard in order to prove themselves

- Bias and discrimination within promotions systems was often thought to manifest via stereotypes, labels and euphemisms in written reports

- Non-UK personnel were not always aware that their desired career pathway was prohibited by quotas or restrictions on those without British Citizenship or five years residency in the UK

- Some non-UK personnel felt they had been overpromised certain career paths at the point of recruitment

- For some, having a non-UK nationality was only discovered to be a barrier to their careers when they had expected to take up a certain role/deployment yet were prevented from doing so on account of this restriction

- A lack of recognition and utilisation of skills acquired in their country of origin was frequently cited amongst non-UK personnel. Limited transferability of professional qualifications was also noted amongst family members

- Barriers which prevented access to certain roles had implications for career progression by either inhibiting upwards progression and/or driving mid-career horizontal transfers

- Delayed career progression can impact on family re-unification, as salary stasis impedes one's ability to reach the Minimum Income Requirement

- Receiving incomplete information on careers and visas, and how these intersect, inhibited a truly informed decision being made at the point of joining service.

SECTION 3

Culture and belonging

Simultaneously arriving in the UK and joining the armed forces revealed cultural differences between the non-UK AFC and the UK armed forces.

Understanding and navigating cultural differences improved over time, yet cultural differences were nonetheless viewed as impediments to belonging for personnel and their family members.

Racism and discrimination within service was not only seen as affecting career progression but impacted on the individual's sense of belonging to their unit and the broader armed forces. Experiencing racism in the civilian world also led to a questioned sense of belonging to the UK and its military. The form of racism experienced by participants ranged from violence and threats of violence to subtle, less tangible instances which were harder to pinpoint and hence act upon. Dialogue between non-UK personnel and their UK counterparts, within and outside of official Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) programmes, was considered an effective means of dispelling negative attitudes, prejudice, and cultural misunderstandings.

Cultural differences

From the time they arrived in the UK, non-UK personnel were exposed to situations which revealed the cultural differences between their home country and those of the British armed forces and the UK more generally. Many described a degree of 'culture shock' they had not anticipated, or been prepared for, prior to their arrival.

"it was a culture shock for us…especially to be away from your comfort zone, your family, your surroundings… It's a big… transition for us"
(Army, Veteran, #9, Pacific)

"I remember…going through the army officer's selection process and thinking, do I really want to do this? Culturally I don't feel like I fit in"
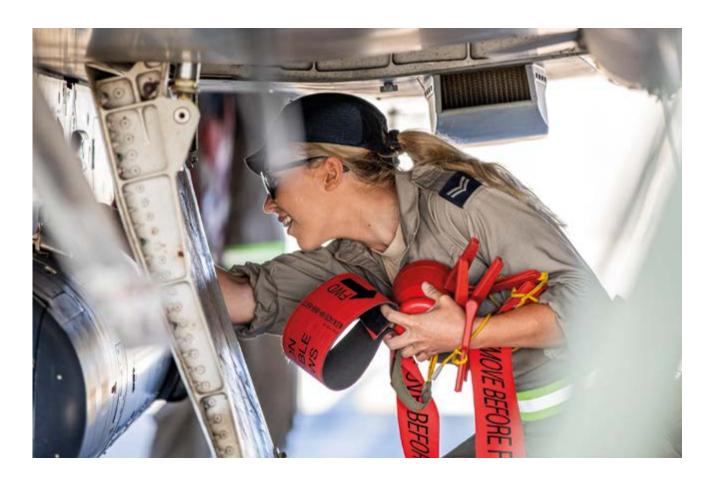(Army, Officer, #54, Africa)

Tensions were spoken of by non-UK personnel, especially early on in their careers, in how best to approach values that sometimes were found to be at odds with their own. Assimilation i.e., the process of adopting the receiving culture's (military or UK) norms whilst discarding one's own (Schwartz et al 2010) was neither desired nor achieved by most non-UK personnel. Instead, integration or biculturalism (Bierwiaczonek and Kunst 2021) typified by engagement with both the dominant military culture and one's own heritage culture was a more common, and seemingly beneficial path to take. The skilful navigation of two cultures however required an astute awareness of each culture and how their values differed, and pragmatism in knowing what situations required certain cultural traits to be brought to the fore, processes which often refined over time.

"I'm more happy with my skin sort of… I'm in a foreign land, different culture, different army. I have been very uncomfortable under my skin for a very long time. And I realise why was I so hard on myself? Why was I thinking I was never going to be good because my English wasn't good enough or I didn't understand their culture? Since coming here… well all the self-doubts, they were so pointless"
(Army, Senior Rank, #43, Asia)

"I guess what I found difficult initially was I remember very explicitly being called in to a warrant officer's office, and it was just the Commonwealth soldiers in that particular regiment, and we were basically told to kind of 'be seen' more by our bosses… I guess in Fijian culture, you're a collective, a community, no one really stands out because if you do it's almost seen as well, you're not for the community, you're not for the collective… I still struggle with [that]. But it's understanding when to be seen, if that makes sense?"
 (Army, Senior Rank, #10, Pacific)

Non-UK personnel frequently shared how their attitudes towards alcohol and socialising served as a point of divergence between UK and non-UK personnel. Religious and cultural attitudes to alcohol, as well as cultural norms around socialising with family instead of colleagues, were factors which limited the time non-UK personnel spent outside of work hours with their colleagues. Despite alcohol being considered to play a less prominent role in the social activities of serving personnel in recent years, it nevertheless remains an important component of socialising amongst serving personnel.

Consequently, non-UK personnel who didn't drink for cultural or religious reasons felt less inclined to socialise when alcohol was a central component of social activities, and less included when they were in attendance as a non-drinker. Not participating in social events with alcohol was considered to put them at a disadvantage compared to others, for example, being considered as 'anti-social', not a 'team-player' and hence an outsider.

> **"If you don't smoke and drink… like them, it's like an issue like you're in a void. You do not feel like one of us, you're not trying to be one. But… you're not drinking either so… it's a bit of an issue"**
> (Army, Junior Rank, #17, the Caribbean)

Not participating also meant that opportunities to build bonds, establish belonging within their unit, raise their profile and hence and be seen favourably amongst their chain of command were sacrificed. With visibility, or lack thereof, being cited by some of the participants as a reason for failing to reach promotion, individuals understandably drew the conclusion that drinking and socialising served as a parallel, albeit unofficial promotions track, to which they had limited access on account of cultural differences.

Non-UK personnel frequently shared how their attitudes towards alcohol and socialising served as a point of divergence between UK and non-UK personnel.

> **"promotion is shit because you don't get recognised unless you talk, and not everyone is just out there drinking [with] everybody"**
> (Army, Junior Rank, #6, the Caribbean)

Financial barriers also existed amongst non-UK personnel who wanted to socialise more with their colleagues but were unable to do so. As previously noted, it was common for non-UK personnel to bear additional financial pressures and responsibilities that were unlikely to be experienced by their UK colleagues.

These included remittance payments to friends and family abroad, a need to save significant amounts of their salaries to put towards visa and citizenship fees, and second jobs in civvy street – taken as a means of achieving the Minimum Income Requirement.

Even when non-UK personnel would have liked to engage more with social activities, their ability to do so was hindered by these additional time pressures and financial responsibilities.

Racism and discrimination

Non-UK personnel with many years' service believed they had observed progress in tackling racism - and better treatment of non-UK serving personnel generally – since the start of their careers. As one of our respondents commented, for example,

"I've gone twenty-two years now and there has been a lot of change. Yeah, there's been change in the right direction, but…yeah twenty-two years is a lifetime".
(Army, Senior Rank, #66, Pacific)

Nevertheless, despite the feeling of positive travel within the Armed forces towards tackling racism and discrimination, numerous instances were reported to us by participants in this study. Our findings strongly suggest that these are not 'historical' examples, but rather, exemplary of attitudes and approaches still encountered by non-UK personnel who are serving today. Whilst the perpetrators were often believed by participants to constitute a small minority, the impact of their actions on non-UK, and especially Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) non-UK, serving personnel was significant.

"There were definitely elements within the army that just aren't right, hated foreigners, they just… they don't like [them], [they] made it clear of that. And I know some people actually had their career opportunities hampered, some guys left because of it. But I don't want to tar everyone with the same brush"
(Army, Veteran, #7, Africa)

"the majority of those around you makes you feel welcome… when that minority percentage comes along, it is so bad it wipes out the other 99%. You forget that there's 99% of people out there that's good"
(Army, Senior Rank, #14, the Caribbean)

Some instances of racism experienced by non-UK personnel appeared to be related to nationality, and to an anti-migrant sentiment in particular. As one of our participants described such attitudes:

"I've always think [of] it this way, I moved into someone's house, are they going to be happy with me? No, they try to kick me because I'm in their house, I'm taking their space. One of the guys tried to talk along those lines…I was born and brought up in a jungle, now I'm working with you same job, same ship, eating the same food…You have to look at yourself mate, and think twice. I think I've done very well. Because you will think you're better than me, but we are doing the same job, same ship, same things. So I think I've done better"
(Navy, Junior Rank, #73, Africa)

Whether separately or as part of the same nationality-based attitudes toward difference, many non-UK personnel experienced racism and discrimination in connection with their ethnicity. Black non-UK personnel cited multiple examples of this, suggesting that such issues may also affect UK-born black personnel in a similar manner.

"not my nationality, but I think my ethnicity has made a difference"
(Army, Senior Ranks, #82, the Caribbean)

"I don't want to put colour into it, but I think it has to do with it"
(Army, Junior Rank, #38, Africa)

"There's nobody with my experience, with my qualifications that is not Black that has not been promoted. Not one"
(RAF, Officer, #2, Africa)

'Overt' racism

Racism was experienced in both 'overt' and 'subtle' forms, the difference being whether racist intentions or beliefs were explicitly conveyed by interlocuters through their words or actions, or whether racist attitudes were rather implicit in the course of interactions, decisions, or situations. Instances of overt racist bullying, violence, or threats of violence were reported by some non-UK participants.

"There was one person from my troop of thirty who was sent home because he didn't like my skin colour! They said he was carrying a razor blade to cut me to see if I could bleed!... he was sent home, you know, removed quickly"
(Army, Senior Rank, #50, the Caribbean)

"One of them...[said] I can't swim, they're going to drown me in a pool and all of this kind of stuff"
(Army, Senior Rank, #14, the Caribbean)

Racially motivated violence or threats of violence, both within and outside of service were found to be traumatic, destabilising and often unexpected events for the individual who experienced them. The feelings of powerlessness, fear and humiliation that were associated with these experiences were not just experienced at the time of the incident.

The memory of the incident and the feelings associated with it formed a lasting legacy in the lives of some non-UK personnel, influencing their commitment to serving in the force and/or the country in which these incidents occurred.

"I've been racially assaulted in Civvy Street... outlining why I feel less welcome in this country...now"
(Army, Officer, #51, the Caribbean)

"Because I've been through traumatic experiences that breaks me, makes me cry, makes me not to want to speak to my mother because I'm just scared that I'll just break down, and I don't want her to worry because she's still back home"
(Army, Senior Rank, #14, the Caribbean)

Whilst some of the within-service instances of overt racism were seen as adequately addressed by chains of command, some felt let down by the lack of actions by bystanders in these situations, especially those in leadership roles. Many of our respondents also lacked faith in the official procedures for reporting racism and discrimination. This was evident amongst those who had used them as well as those who had not.

For those who had reported instances of racist abuse, outcomes were either perceived as falling short of their expectations or as causing further issues such as retaliation, leading to reticence about reporting future instances. A fear of repercussions was also noted amongst those who had not used reporting channels as a reason for their lack of engagement with these systems.

"the Commonwealth guys... they don't want to raise the issues up because they know that it won't be taken care of. You know, they're all like basically it won't go nowhere... you ask them whether they would like to complain, they don't. For when they do... they are coerced to the point where they will either drop it or they will be told...I'm not going to say incentivised to say oh you know... drop this "
(Army, Senior Rank, #46, Africa)

"If you try to challenge it then you're stamped down because the one thing that they can do is destroy your career"
(Army, Senior Rank, #14, the Caribbean)

Children of non-UK personnel had encountered racism in different forms during their time in the UK. Adult child participants reported experiencing multiple forms of racism at school, 'on the patch' and throughout life. This ranged from off-hand comments, verbal abuse to overt violence such as spitting. Children of non-UK personnel described feeling isolated in military life due to being in a small minority of Black or Brown people.

Being stereotyped by British military families, e.g. being treated as a 'bad influence' on their own children was also noted. These participants also described a lack of understanding and differentiation by UK individuals between people from different ethnic and racial origins, leading to assumptions and stereotypes being ascribed to them.

"A version of Black that they weren't familiar with so I had to like… oh you're not really black are you?.
(Adult child, Army, #7, Pacific)

Racially motivated violence or threats of violence, both within and outside of service were found to be traumatic, destabilising and often unexpected events for the individual who experienced them.

'Subtle' racism

Subtle and indirect manifestations of racism and discrimination were considered more common occurrences than the overt racism described above. In this sense, racism and discrimination were described as pervasive, yet simultaneously difficult to identity, making addressing them much more difficult.

"It's like mist almost, it's there, but you just can't grasp it, if that makes sense"
(Army, Junior Rank, #27, the Caribbean)

Difficulty in clearly identifying, articulating, and hence confronting instances of racism and discrimination led some individuals to question themselves, and if their upset was in fact justified. This challenge was compounded in instances when the offending actions and remarks either came directly from, or were said in the presence of, senior staff. For the non-UK personnel we spoke to, this was understood to normalise or legitimate racist attitudes and behaviours.

"I remember one day, one time we were going to an exercise and I didn't have any [camouflage] cream on my face and… one of my staff sergeant went past and said 'Take the cam cream off your face!' And I didn't understand it, coming from Fiji, I didn't understand what it meant. But the Scottish guy on the left, he said 'You… so did you hear what he said?' And I didn't understand, I said 'Umm, no!' He [said] 'That's a racial remark', my Scottish friend tried to explain that for me, but we were both what the army called 'sprogs'. We were both privates, but at that time and I said 'Just…you know sweep it under the carpets, that's nothing"
(Army Veteran, #9, Pacific)

Family members also described multiple instances of subtle racism and discrimination in both 'civilian' and 'military' contexts.

"But there were senior officers there, and theynever said anything! So… you know you… you kind of like… should I say something? Because it's like you sort of question someone, like 'Yo! Surely this is offensive?' But then when you have senior officers not saying anything, keeping their head straight, it's like oh… but they're not even addressing it"
(Navy Veteran, #14, the Caribbean)

Family members also described multiple instances of subtle racism and discrimination in both 'civilian' and 'military' contexts. Some stated that they would almost prefer a lack of pretence as opposed to a thinly veiled subtext of racist undertones that underpinned interactions.

For example, treatment of non-UK spouses and families by unit staff and Welfare Officers was not always helpful or pleasant. Family members were sometimes given the clear impression that they should not be asking for allowances or other entitlements even though these were legitimate requests. There was a sense that they should not be 'making a fuss'.

"But the unit welfare really made me feel like I was an absolute… you know like I was nothing, like I shouldn't be going after that, it's not something I'm entitled to"
(Army Spouse #6, Pacific)

Belonging

Many non-UK personnel spoke of their pride and achievements within service, speaking positively of their attachment and commitment to the institution and to the crown. Indeed, this sense of duty and commitment was a motivating factor for joining amongst some. However, non-UK personnel also described how their commitment and sense of belonging within the institution sometimes wavered on account of multiple factors and circumstances throughout their career.

The process of passing through borders with a different citizenship to UK colleagues led to separation from their unit at passport control, serving as a stark reminder of difference to their colleagues. In these instances, non-UK personnel felt they were being assigned to outsider groups such as interpreters or illegal immigrants, instead of with their UK armed forces colleagues. This was upsetting for those for whom this came as a surprise, having up until that point felt a strong cohesion and sense of belonging with their unit.

"when we were in Iraq, we came back, got at the airport and had to queue with our interpreters. And that was really something that really took me back…when I stood there knowing I'd been and seen what I'd seen in those six months… when I was on ops, I felt like I was in a team, you know we were so close-knit…it felt as if you were in a family. The moment you come back to the UK, all that reality sort of comes back at you"
(Army, Senior Rank, #66, Pacific)

"if you've not got a British passport you see all your British colleagues go through and you…get stopped by immigration. And that really got into me because sometimes they would joke around and say oh where's the police, take [them] to jail! But I would smile, but for me…it hurt me because I've been working for so many years… I felt like… an illegal immigrant"
(Army, Officer, #65, Pacific)

This difference in belonging between the battlefield and everyday military life was described in more acute terms by another participant. For them, a tour or exercise was a period of intense unity and belonging amongst personnel whereby difference was temporarily dissolved. The sense of feeling less welcome by UK colleagues returned however on resumption of usual duties.

"So if I could sit next to you or having a firefight next to you…from Africa, from Barnsley, I don't care! You know I'm just the same…at the battlefield…exercises. As soon as all these things… finish and over, you are the same Black John* (*pseudonym) from the Caribbean"
(Army, Senior Rank, #8, the Caribbean)

Border and battlefields were not the only trigger points where belonging was questioned. Citizenship and the symbolic manifestation of this in the form of a passport, were intricately tied with belonging for some non-UK personnel. Citizenship, and a passport, served as an externally validated sense of belonging to a country and its military, a connection that was suggested as being better acknowledged by the US.

"I remembered one of my cousins went through the US Marines and then he got citizenship, he did three/four years of service, got… his whole family got citizenship as a result of him you know signing on the dotted line. That is… the army or say the Americans saying you belong"
(Army, Senior Rank, #66, Pacific)

A more subtle form of separation or 'othering' to that which was being enforced at borders was also noted as occurring within service. A process whereby UK personnel would seem to gravitate away from non-UK BAME individuals when in group formation was noted by non-UK personnel. As one respondent described:

"And we'll be in a circle like that, and if a second black person comes there, you see the circle is changing. We notice it, the circle will be changing and then they'll cut you up and the two of you will be standing there just like that"
(Army, Junior Rank, #62, Africa)

Subtle forms of separation and distancing between colleagues also affected feelings of belonging within the armed forces.

"there was no belonging because for you to belong, you have to feel part of a family. For you to feel part of a family, you have to be understood"
(Army, Officer, #67, Africa)

Other more subtle forms of exclusion from their group or unit were also noted as affecting non-UK personnel. Less direct instances of racism and discrimination also manifested through comments and language, and assumptions around their culture or religion.

A feeling of disrespect, and hence exclusion, was felt by non-UK personnel who described how their colleagues did not only misunderstand their cultures, values and differences, but sometimes attempted to undermine and belittle them.

"one thing that… that gripes me is the not learning names….Some British people go oh well that's… that's too long for me to say, can you give me another name? I don't have another name! That's my only name! There's a guy from Pakistan and they used to call him Stan…the guys like 'that's not my name'"
(Army, Officer, #67, Africa)

Family members too experienced feelings of difference and distance from other armed forces families. White British spouses were felt by some non-UK spouses to be unapproachable, mixing within their own circles and not always welcoming to non-UK spouses.

The process of passing through borders with a different citizenship to UK colleagues led to separation from their unit at passport control, serving as a stark reminder of difference to their colleagues.

"We do have British army wives, like you know, who are not Gurkhas and we do go to like coffee… before Covid, we used to go to like you know stay and play sessions with the kids and stuff like that. But they always feel like there's this divide!"
(Army Spouse, #4, Asia)

This was a common view which heightened the sense of feeling different and separate to British spouses. To this end, non-UK families tended to socialise within their own communities rather than with their British counterparts. One Nepali spouse added that the British families tend to move every two years whereas the Gurkhas tend to work together more and therefore stick together.

She stressed that they mixed more with the African military community than the British as they were felt to be more approachable and more similar.

"They're very similar in a sense that they're a foreigner in the country as well"
(Army Spouse, #4, Asia)

Non-UK partners were acutely aware of the distinct military hierarchy that can permeate into the family life of serving personnel. Non-UK spouses observed how rank and status were replicated and subtly enforced amongst UK partners who 'wore their husband's rank on their shoulders' (Army, Spouse, #9, Pacific). Being treated unfavourably due to their position in the strict social hierarchy on account of their husband's rank was considered by one non-UK spouse to be a more distinct barrier to belonging than their nationality or ethnicity.

"the status here is your professional status, it's not about race"
(Army Spouse #8, Pacific)

As is the case for the family of UK personnel, non-UK families shared concerns about how a mobile military lifestyle could thwart connection and belonging to social groups within and outside of the military. To a degree, families had adapted to a transient way of life, yet had concerns around living apart, regiments moving without warning impacting education and the long-term impact this had on their children.

For non-UK families, however, the experience of disruption due to mobility was heightened by the additional problems they were found to face – distance from 'home', adapting to an alien culture and a lack of family and support in the UK. Some family members were also unhappy about how a prior sense of belonging to the armed forces was acutely severed amongst serving personnel and their families because of how they experienced transition.

"Come to the UK, come serve our British army… oh wow you're amazing! And then the moment their service is over, it's like a big massive….bugger off"
(Army Spouse #12, Africa)

Strategies used to address racism and discrimination

Participants reported varied attitudes towards the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies and the ongoing cultural transformation efforts (e.g. the Army's 'Op Teamwork') that were being increasingly embedded within service life. Whilst some pragmatically welcomed their introduction as a step in the right direction, others questioned their ability to effect change. Scepticism towards the motivation for engaging in D&I policy and activity was also shared by participants who believed D&I to be 'lip-service', finding a mismatch between the espoused claims and purported intentions of D&I policies and their lived experiences.

"We speak about this equality and diversity, we say it, we read it, we work… we do tests on it. Yeah, on the surface. But behind the scenes…"
(Army, Junior Rank, #62, Africa)

A wider discrepancy whereby armed forces policies espoused support and respect for non-UK armed forces personnel, whilst policies from other branches of government i.e. the Home Office were simultaneously seen as failing to afford them the same treatment was also noted by participants.

"when they're saying all this, but then on the other hands it's oh thank you very much, but you know… when you leave… when your time's up, you've got to pay the Home Office to be able to stay legally"
(Army, Senior Rank, #10, Pacific)

Some participants also shared concerns that mandatory and 'top-down' approaches to D&I initiatives may produce the opposite of their intended effects. The 'forcing' of these initiatives from above was suggested by one participant as barrier to a more genuine understanding of non-UK personnel. The potential for compulsory D&I initiatives to create, rather than ameliorate, division by overemphasising differences and encouraging disempowering narratives was a further concern shared by some non-UK

participants. Despite some of their reservations about the programme, many of the non-UK personnel who had participated in the Army's cultural transformation programme/ OP Teamwork, 'All Stop Day' spoke positively of the activity itself, welcoming further and more frequent opportunities to replicate these types of activities in the future.

"I'm glad that we're continuing to do [Op Teamwork]. And hopefully people like me will be able to chip away at these sort of ideas and ideologies and eventually and hopefully… even though they don't admit to my face then and there, but when they go home at night and they're sat in front of the telly and they're sat… it will resonate in their brain and hopefully we will see changes"
(Army, Officer, #51, the Caribbean)

What made these days so valuable was their ability to facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding between colleagues. Conversations not only served to educate and inform UK personnel of issues that they may not have been aware of, but also offered the opportunity to dispel any misconceptions about non-UK personnel, and their cultures that may have been held. Indeed, addressing misconceptions and behaviours, expanding mindsets and encouraging critical appraisal of existing viewpoints through one-to-one dialogue were seen as effective means of tackling prejudice, both within and outside of official D&I programmes.

"whether I've been met with aggression, abuse, racism, whatever the scenario is… if you just approach that situation with kindness, I think it heals not only you, but the situation. And some people that have been racist to me have ended up my really best friends because of the difference in how I've handled the situation. Obviously there has been hurt in that process, it's not an easy journey. But once you get past that hurdle, like people will die for you!"
(Navy, Senior Rank, #71, Africa)

Culture and belonging
Key findings

- 'Culture shock' was experienced by Non-UK personnel upon arriving to the UK when faced with aspects of British or military culture they were previously unfamiliar with

- Developing a mutual understanding and awareness of the values held by the military/British culture and different national cultures not only helped Non-UK personnel adapt to and navigate their new environment successfully but also helped to dispel negative assumptions held by some UK colleagues

- Scepticism towards the ability of top-down D&I initiatives to effect meaningful cultural change was noted

- Informal dialogue between non-UK personnel and their UK colleagues around perceived differences and existing commonalities was seen as one of the most effective strategies for developing understanding, within and outside of D&I efforts

- A sense of belonging between non-UK personnel and their colleagues was thought to be strengthened during operations, yet challenged in instances where separation occurred and differences were made apparent. Points of separation and difference were often related to travel, deployment and border crossings

- Separation between non-UK and UK personnel was also noted as occurring unconsciously in informal group arrangements and social activities, including amongst spouses and children

- Cultural differences around attitudes to alcohol and socialising was seen as a barrier to belonging for some.

- Socialising with colleagues was also perceived by serving personnel as part of an informal promotion track, which provided opportunities to increase one's 'visibility' amongst senior colleagues. Cultural differences to alcohol and socialising were therefore perceived to impact negatively on career advancement by acting as a barrier to these opportunities.

- Instances of racism and discrimination were experienced by non-UK personnel, veterans, and their family members in military and civilian environments

- Overt instances of racism such as threats or acts of physical violence were experienced by serving personnel, veterans and their family members, as well as more subtle comments which were perceived as upsetting, more pervasive, and yet more difficult to confront

- Serving personnel who had reported racism and discrimination through the existing complaints system found the process to be lacking and would think twice about using it again. A lack of faith in the efficacy of reporting systems was also noted amongst those who had not used them, who also cited potential repercussions as a reason for avoiding their use.

SECTION 3

Discussion

Overwhelmingly, the non-UK personnel, veterans, and families who took part in this research spoke of their pride at being part of the British armed forces, and of their gratitude for the opportunities they had taken up through service to the UK.

None believed that they were due special treatment. They did, however, expect to be able to work in an inclusive and equal-opportunity environment, and believed that more work was needed to make such an environment a reality. Our findings are based on detailed analysis and synthesis of highly in-depth reporting from over 100 members of the non-UK AFC. The issues we have identified, and which are reported above are systematically driven by the responses of those who took part in the research. The data formed a consistent block of evidence converging around three dominant areas: **visas and citizenship**, **careers**, and **culture & belonging**.

On **visas and citizenship**, we found that the vast majority of our respondents were choosing to acquire citizenship while still serving. When new recruits enter the armed forces, they typically do so with an exemption from immigration control, which lasts for the duration of their service. After the qualifying period of 5 years' service, personnel are then eligible to apply for citizenship, or they can remain 'exempt' until they discharge. Reasons given for acquiring citizenship – rather than retaining exempt status

at no personal financial cost – clustered around personal security, and career opportunity or necessity. Our respondents believed that their status and right to live and work in the UK would be more secure if they were British citizens and viewed this status as a protection against the consequences of an unexpected discharge from military service. Many also reported that citizenship was necessary for them to access certain roles or careers within service or to assist with their ability to travel and/or deploy effectively.

The current MoD/UK Government position is that acquisition of citizenship remains an individual choice and responsibility, and must be paid for at the service person's expense. Inasmuch as a lack of citizenship became an impediment to deployment or to career progression for non-UK personnel, the views of our respondents thus differed from this position. As stated earlier in our report, many within the non-UK AFC and their supporters viewed the recent policy change to enable discharging personnel to receive cost-free Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) as progress toward better supporting this cohort.

Aside from issues concerning the cost of visas and citizenship applications, accessibility of information was consistently reported as a concern.

However, this change is unlikely to resolve issues that personnel continue to face due to lack of citizenship. Among those who had not acquired citizenship despite qualifying, cost was cited as the main barrier. Some also held the view that being asked to pay for citizenship after having provided military service to the UK was unfair and had declined, on principle, to naturalise as citizens. Even amongst those who had acquired citizenship, the cost of having done so was considered burdensome and unwelcome.

Moreover, meeting the cost of visa and citizenship applications for family members was considered an additional challenge that few could afford without having to make significant personal sacrifices, including prolonged periods of family separation. The findings of our report resonate with evidence presented by the House of Lords (HoL) in a recent report into the impact of mainstream route visa policies on family life and migration. The report, "All families matter: An inquiry into family migration" recommended that "Application fees should be reduced [and] fees should not be so prohibitive as to interfere with people's right to respect for family life" (HoL 2023 pg.67), reflecting a similar position held by our participants. Despite the widespread dissatisfaction noted amongst non-UK AFC participants regarding fees, and the HoL (2023) report's recommendations to reduce them, visa and citizenship fees have nonetheless been subject to another significant increase (i.e. 17-20%) in October 2023 (UK V&I 2023).

The recommendation of the HoL (2023) report to reduce fees therefore remains even more relevant to the non-UK AFC in the light of this recent increase, and is hence supported by the recommendations proposed by this research.

Aside from issues concerning the cost of visas and citizenship applications, accessibility of information was consistently reported as a concern. The laws and procedures surrounding immigration, including for family members, are complex. The MoD and Single Service recruitment websites now contain clear guidance around these laws and procedures. However, the overwhelming consensus from our respondents was that they had at one time or another had inadequate access to information that would have helped them make decisions about their career in the British armed forces, and about theirs and their families lives in the UK. Part of the challenge in providing accurate and helpful information derives from different citizenships policies adopted by non-UK personnel's home countries. For example, some Commonwealth countries do not permit dual-citizenship, or prevent citizens of other nations from land ownership or accessing inheritance rights. To enable informed-decision making with regards to citizenship and career choices, immigration information also needs to include country-specific guidance for applicants from the various nations from which the UK recruits its personnel.

On **careers**, we found that non-UK personnel reported feeling 'held back', particularly when they compared their progression to that of their UK-born counterparts. Similarly, there was a belief among non-UK personnel that they had to work 'twice as hard' as UK Service Personnel in order to be recognised and rewarded for their successes within service. Some felt there needed to be more objectivity and transparency in the reporting and promotions system, which they believed was prone to unconscious bias and subjective interpretations of their culture and characteristics. Others felt that the effects of 'deskilling' – having been denied entry onto their desired career path – or of needing to undertake a 'sideways' career move to obtain their desired path, had slowed their progression. Implicit career restrictions such as deskilling, cultural adjustments and discrimination are not unique

among armed forces personnel and have been noted among other public sector migrant workers such as overseas nurses in the NHS (Gillin and Smith 2021, Bond 2020). As part of this report's recommendations, we suggest an MoD-wide review of career progression for non-UK personnel, which would allow for comparisons to be made between non-UK and UK personnel (including comparisons between non-UK BAME and UK-born BAME cohorts). For example, average time to first promotion and/or average number of promotions achieved over average length of service.

Average length of time to first promotion amongst non-UK personnel could also provide a more accurate indication of the prospects for meeting the Minimum Income Requirement and family visa costs, which may in turn assist prospective recruits in making informed decisions regarding family living arrangements. Additionally, information regarding roles which are subject to quotas, recruitment freezes or restrictions for non-UK personnel should be made accessible to potential applicants prior to the point when they have made definite commitments to leave their country of origin for the UK.

On **culture and belonging**, we found that cultural differences and misunderstandings were thought to pose a barrier, not just to career progression, but to belonging amongst the non-UK AFC. Participants as a whole believed that there had in recent years been a positive direction of travel toward creating a more inclusive, less discriminatory working environment within the UK armed forces. However, they also believed that progress was "too slow", and that greater effort and further action were needed to tackle overt forms of racism as well as more subtle, ingrained forms of 'institutional' racism.

Our findings do not suggest that racism within the UK armed forces is any more or less prevalent than in other sectors of employment or UK society as a whole. Indeed, racism and discrimination are society-wide challenges and it might perhaps have been surprising not to encounter such challenges within an institution of this size. What our findings do strongly suggest is that for the MoD to deliver on its Diversity and Inclusivity (D&I) obligations (MoD 2018) will require sustained and ongoing efforts to improve the institutional culture through renewed commitments to tackling tackling racism, racial bias and cultural misunderstanding. This applies both to ethnicity-based discrimination as well as nationality-based discrimination experienced by white non-UK personnel. Indeed, 'ethnic minorities' like the non-UK AFC are a highly diverse cohort, and within-group nuances were highlighted by some of our participants. Echoing findings from NHS-based research by Likupe and Archibong (2013), who found that Black African and Caribbean nurses felt subjected to greater degrees of racism and discrimination compared to migrant nurses from other countries, Black members of the non-UK AFC also considered themselves to face additional challenges relating to their ethnicity which not all members of the non-UK AFC were likely to face.

In addition to nationality-based issues, a 'double disadvantage' was thus potentially perceived by ethnic minority non-UK AFC members, in comparison to those who held only one of these identities (Greene 2016).

Each of our three core groups of findings were relevant in various ways for non-UK veterans and family members who took part in this research. For **non-UK veterans**, we identified specific issues relating to those who had returned – sometimes involuntarily – to their country of origin. Involuntary return was caused by not having the correct immigration status upon discharge from the UK armed forces.

Failing to regularise immigration status had in some cases resulted from being unaware, unprepared, or misinformed about the process and requirements to maintain the right to reside in the UK following discharge from service. In addition, it is worth noting that those 'returned' veterans in our sample had served many years prior to the recent changes enabling personnel to benefit from free ILR upon discharge and are unable to apply retrospectively. We do not know how many non-UK veterans of the British armed forces there are currently residing involuntarily outside the UK. This is because neither UK census data, nor data held by the Ministry of Defence, are able to quantify the size of this cohort.

Among those we spoke to, some were facing challenges with service-connected mental and physical health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder, for which they were unable to access appropriate medical care due to lack of provision in their home country.

This predicament exposed the tension and competing commitments between two government policies - the Armed Forces Covenant which commits to ensuring parity of access to services between the armed forces community (of whom non-UK veterans are a part) and UK citizens (AFC 2023), and the NHS's residency-dependent system of care provision. Development of a specific 'returned veterans policy' by HM Government which seeks to address and rectify this apparent contradiction and unaddressed responsibility is therefore recommended so these veterans and their families can access the care and treatment they would be eligible for had they been successful in acquiring the correct visa within the specified time frame.

Although issues such as family separation and career barriers amongst armed forces partners are not exclusive to **non-UK family members**, these issues were found to be manifesting differently, with additional complexity, in the non-UK AFC. Not only did non-UK family members need to contend with the realities of mobility and family separation that came with a military lifestyle, they also experienced extended periods of transnational family separation caused by the restrictions placed on their family lives by visa legislation and associated financial requirements (I.e., Minimum Income Requirement and visa costs). The nature of military life is known to place barriers on the careers of partners of serving personnel (Caddick et al 2018), however non-UK partners were found to be experiencing additional barriers on this front. A lack of recognition of their overseas-acquired professional credentials by UK employers resulted in 'deskilling' and an underutilisation of their professional skills in the UK. Their employment prospects were also susceptible to the same barriers faced by their serving partners, and migrant spouses more broadly, such as language difficulties.

These barriers however were juxtaposed with the additional pressures and motivators for partner employment within the non-UK AFC. For example, the additional financial costs and pressures of visas and citizenship needed to be met by non-UK families, as did their additional remittance outlays, for which an additional income could help contribute to. Spousal employment may provide an additional means of reaching of the MIR and visa costs, and hence reunite families in the UK, making it especially important for the non-UK AFC. Given the multiple competing pressures, drivers and barriers surrounding non-UK spousal employment identified in this report, a more in-depth exploration of this issue is warranted as part of any commitment to improving support for non-UK personnel, veterans and their families.

On careers, we found that non-UK personnel reported feeling 'held back', particularly when they compared their progression to that of their UK-born counterparts.

Recommendations

Recruitment and transition

1 **Accurate and informed advice regarding career prospects needs to be given at the point of recruitment** and adequate information regarding careers, visas (and how they intersect) should be a compulsory aspect of the non-UK recruitment pathway and not restricted to information provided on recruiting websites alone

2 UK MoD and OVA need to include **specific support for non-UK veterans who have returned to their country of origin** within their policies and provision of support to veterans (e.g., access to medical care, DTS, employment support and training)

Career progression

3 Increase **transparency and objectivity in promotions system**

4 The MoD should carry out a review of career progression for non-UK personnel, with comparisons made against UK-born personnel in general as well as BAME UK-born personnel

5 **Improve data collection** and transparency around career trajectories of non-UK personnel in comparison to UK personnel (broken down by ethnicity)

Visas and citizenship

6 Introduce a **reimbursement policy for citizenship fees** for serving personnel who have acquired citizenship due to operational reasons e.g. if a promoted to a new role and security clearance is needed, or if citizenship is a potential barrier to deployment

OR

Due to the multiple barriers that not having citizenship poses to serving personnel, citizenship should be considered essential to full operational effectiveness of serving personnel – automatically granted at the earliest opportunity, **with fees reimbursed/waived** in alignment with other five-eyes policies for citizenship.

7 Have a **single point of contact, within each service branch and/ or regiment e.g. Regimental Administrative Office**, accessible to serving personnel directly, that has the responsibility for the administrative process associated with visas e.g. assistance in supporting paperwork for the visas/ citizenships as well as the visa processes for deployments.

8 **Confidential, pastoral care for non-UK serving personnel and their families** that does not solely rely on the Unit Welfare Office or equivalent. This person/department would be accessible to individual non-UK serving personnel, and their families, at every stage of their journey, from recruitment to transition.

Culture and belonging

9 An independent **evaluation of the Army's Cultural Transformation Programme /OP TEAMWORK**

10 Increase **transparency around the complaints reporting system**

11 **A better understanding of the experiences of UK BAME serving personnel**

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Appendix

Breakdown of sample by nationality and type of participant (i.e., serving person, veteran, or family member)

26 Countries

Fiji 29
18SP 4V 7F

Zimbabwe 10
6SP 3V 1F

St Vincent and the Grenadines 9
7SP 2V 0F

Nepal 8
5SP 0V 3F

Ghana 6
5SP 0V 1F

St Lucia 6
6SP 0V 0F

South Africa 5
4SP 1V 0F

Kenya 4
4SP 0V 0F

Jamaica 4
4SP 0V 0F

Trinidad and Tobago 4
3SP 0V 1F

Australia 3
3SP 0V 0F

Seychelles 3
2SP 1V 0F

Hong Kong 2
2SP 0V 0F

Nigeria 2
2SP 0V 0F

Malawi 2
1SP 1V 0F

The Gambia 1
1SP 1V 0F

BOT-St Helena 1
1SP 0V 0F

Sierra Leone 1
1SP 0V 0F

UK 1
0SP 0V 1F

Belize 1
1SP 0V 0F

Zambia 1
1SP 0V 0F

Mauritius 1
1SP 0V 0F

Poland 1
1SP 0V 0F

Czechia 1
1SP 0V 0F

New Zealand 1
1SP 0V 0F

Canada 1
0SP 1V 0F

SP = Serving personnel

V = Veterans

F = Family members