



## Executive Summary

# Bereaved Military Children from the UK Armed Forces:

An analysis of families seeking support from Scotty's Little Soldiers



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Scotty's Little Soldiers is a British charity, founded in 2010, with the aim of supporting children who have experienced the death of a parent who served in the UK Armed Forces. It was founded by Nikki Scott, following the death of her husband Corporal Lee Scott in Afghanistan, and the bereavement of their two young children. Months after the death, family members persuaded Nikki to accompany them on a holiday. Watching her son laughing for the first time since his dad died, inspired Nikki to create the charity, beginning with purchasing a lodge at a holiday resort for the exclusive use of bereaved military families.

In the proceeding fifteen years, Scotty's Little Soldiers has grown to support nearly 800 children and young people each year. Scotty's has developed a holistic programme designed to address known risks for bereaved children;

- Social isolation and loneliness (Holmes et al., 2013)(McLaughlin et al., 2019).
- Education and employment (Parsons, 2011).
- Emotional and mental health (Holmes et al., 2013)(McLaughlin et al., 2019).

Scotty's owns six holiday lodges across five holiday resorts in England, sending over a hundred families every year on respite breaks. They offer a range of educational grants including the Scotty Allowance, an annual contribution towards extracurricular activities, school trips and other educational needs. They also provide 1:1 bereavement support, a talk based therapeutic space for children who are struggling to cope. Scotty's also provides opportunities for bereaved children to meet each other through social events, send gifts and cards at difficult times of the year, provides advocacy for families across a range of issues including school, housing, and finance, and develops training and resources for schools and colleges.

When a serving person dies, the military assigns the family a Visiting Officer (VO) and families receive the 'Purple Pack' – a book with guidance and support produced on behalf of the Ministry of Defence. Both Visiting Officers and the Purple Pack direct families with children to Scotty's. When a veteran dies, there is no equivalent of the VO and the 'Grey Pack' (the Purple Pack for the Veteran community) is yet to be developed. So, Scotty's relies on word of mouth, marketing and professional referrals to reach the veteran community. The children of veterans who have died, or serving personnel who have died, are eligible to join regardless of cause of death or length of service.

Scotty's utilises a free membership model; once a child joins Scotty's they are a 'member' and can access any of the services until their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. This provides a unique opportunity for longitudinal data analysis of bereaved military children (and their families) from the point they join Scotty's through to age 25 and provides valuable insight into the needs of the bereaved military community.

This report, utilising descriptive data and analytic data, seeks to:

- 1. Understand who the charity is reaching, and which bereaved military families seek out support from the charity following a death.**
- 2. Understand how families engage with different services provided by the charity and to identify any trends or commonalities amongst families.**

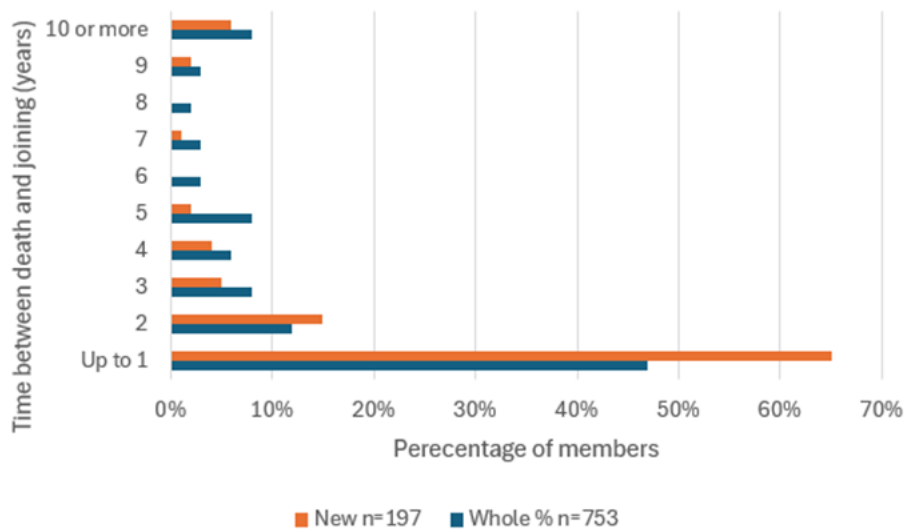
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The report draws on a dataset of 753 children who experienced the death of a parent who served in the UK Armed Forces, and whose families approached Scotty's Little Soldiers for support following the bereavement. The findings indicate that:

### **The charity quickly and equitably reaches bereaved military families following a death.**

- Bereaved military families are finding Scotty's very quickly following a death, with nearly half of all members (47%) joining in the first year following parental death and 65% of newer members (who joined between 2022 and 2024) joining within one year of death.
- Scotty's, despite the veteran community being less visible and therefore harder to reach, is also reaching veteran families quickly following a death, with only a slight lag compared to in-service deaths. Both families bereaved in-service and veteran families are requesting help from Scotty's. Families joining in recent years (2022-2024) are broadly equally split between in-service deaths and veteran deaths.
- Families approaching Scotty's for help are broadly representational of the UK Armed Forces in terms of branch of service, and the charity's services are utilised equitably by families from across different military ranks.
- The children represented by the charity are equally split by gender and the charity has an equitable representation of children with SEND compared to national averages.

## Comparing the overall cohort (n=753) with new cohort (n=197) on time since death and joining Scotty's (%)



### Military families bereaved by suicide are most likely to seek help from the charity.

- Families bereaved by suicide are more likely to join the charity than other causes of death, and in particular veteran Army families bereaved by suicide. This finding is important as children bereaved by parental suicide are at greater risk of suicidal ideation than children bereaved by other causes of death and so it is particularly important to have readily accessible, long-term support available. As a cohort, families bereaved by suicide also are at greater risk of stigmatisation than other causes of death and within the military space families report feeling a 'hierarchy of death' where killed in action is at the 'top' and those who die by suicide are at the 'bottom'.
- Amongst the minority of children with more acute needs who require to access specialist 1:1 support, children bereaved by suicide are notably over-represented. Children bereaved by suicide were substantially more likely than any other cause of death to access 1:1 support.

### Bereaved military families need long term support.

- Respite breaks is one of the most highly utilised services offered by the charity, with 92% of children accessing at least one break and 88% of children accessing multiple respite breaks. The consistently high uptake across all ranks shows these breaks offer something deeper than "just a holiday": protected time for families to reconnect, talk, and heal in a supported environment. The high demand for breaks is maintained across many years. This may indicate the non-linear nature of grief and the longevity of need for bereaved military families joining the charity. This is counter to assumptions that 'time heals all'. While it may be true for some families, the data suggests that many bereaved families find their

bereavement impacting their family throughout childhood and adolescence. This has important implications for adequately resourcing for long term support.

**Bereaved military children who struggle to cope with their grief need support to manage anger issues, self-harm and access to education.**

- Amongst children accessing 1:1 support, the majority of children (59%) reported having problems with anger, with boys being even more likely to report the issue than girls (although over half of the girls in the programme reported struggling with anger).
- Over a quarter of children accessing 1:1 support said they were self-harming or had thoughts of suicide. Girls were more likely to report self-harm and suicidal thoughts than boys.
- The proportion of children accessing 1:1 support who raised the negative impact their grief was having on their education (50%) is important. Disengagement from school, school absenteeism, and inability to concentrate in lessons can lead to lower academic achievement and can have an impact on employment in later life.

**The report also raises a number of areas that require further research. This includes research to:**

- Understand the participation rate in extra-curricular activities amongst bereaved military children. This is important as extra-curricular activities is associated with improved educational and employment outcomes for all children, but for bereaved children it can also play an important role in grief support.
- Understand the emotional and mental health needs of bereaved military children under the age of 10 years old, who are underrepresented in accessing 1:1 support from the charity.
- Learn more about families accessing services by looking at additional variables (including the age, gender and ethnicity of the parent who died), and through multivariate analysis of the data to control for key factors.
- Understand the growing proportion of veteran Army families bereaved by suicide approaching the charity for support by having access to baseline national data. National data on the military branch and rank amongst veterans who die by suicide, and national data on the rank of in-service suicides would help the charity understand its own reach and the needs of bereaved military families.

The full report can be downloaded [HERE](#)