



Military Coworking Network Evaluation Interim Report



June 2025





Contents



- 5** Executive Summary
- 7** Introduction
- 11** This evaluation
- 14** Interim Findings: MCN Hub Member Impact and Experiences
- 24** Interim Findings: MCN Online Member Impact and Experiences
- 27** Interim Findings: MCN Operations and Processes
- 35** Interim Conclusions and Recommendations
- 40** Appendix: Initial Theory of Change for MCN



Executive Summary

The Military Coworking Network (MCN) supports military partners and spouses in establishing professional lives alongside military life. It offers physical coworking spaces (MCN Hubs) and an online membership (MCN Online). Currently funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, MCN aims to create well-equipped coworking spaces, foster peer networks, and provide online events and resources. MCN is open to military partners, veterans, reservists, and adult children of service personnel.

Nine Hubs are located in England, Scotland, and Cyprus, offering coworking spaces equipped with amenities like Wi-Fi, hot drink facilities, and printers. Membership costs £30 annually for up to 900 hours of use. Some Hubs also provide private rooms for confidential meetings and breakout spaces for social interaction. MCN Online offers free membership, regular events, and resources for professional and personal support.

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust has commissioned The Charity Spark to evaluate MCN's impact, focusing on elements funded by a continuation grant that is running from 2024 to 2026. MCN's aims for this grant include enhancing operational effectiveness, increasing Hub usage, expanding the Hub network, and exploring sustainability strategies.

At this interim stage of the evaluation, we have found that MCN Hubs play a crucial role in supporting military partners, offering significant personal, family, and professional benefits. The evaluation highlights the need for strategic improvements to maximise MCN's impact and sustainability.

MCN Hub membership delivers significant positive impacts for military partners and spouses. Feedback from Hub users is overwhelmingly positive, highlighting reduced feelings of loneliness, improved mental health, and a stronger sense of community.

9

coworking Hubs
are located in
England, Scotland,
and Cyprus

£30 individual
membership for

900

hours of use

- **Personal and Family Impacts:** Hub membership alleviates loneliness and isolation, enhances mental health, and reduces stress on family life. The latter allows serving partners to focus more on their careers.
- **Professional and Career Impacts:** Hubs offer a professional environment for career progression. They enable a healthier work-life balance and increased productivity.
- **Community and Connection Impacts:** Hubs foster a sense of community, providing inclusive spaces that transcend military status barriers and that, unlike many traditional community-building initiatives, are not focused on young children.

MCN Online members benefit from virtual coworking sessions that offer individuals living in locations where there is no Hub a structured session that helps to improve productivity and replicates the community-building and social aspects of Hub use.

Since the continuation grant was awarded, MCN has expanded its Hub network by opening two new Hubs and relocating another to a larger, better-appointed location. However, challenges include sustaining local support and consistent promotion in order to maximise the number of people who benefit from Hubs. The Hub booking system's inflexibility may lead to under reporting of usage.

Continued strategic development and targeted marketing efforts are essential for MCN's future growth and optimal impact. Interim recommendations include:

Strategic level recommendations

- Develop and implement a clear strategic plan and key performance indicators (KPIs) for Hub expansion and increased member engagement. Explore strategies for sustainability and future planning with key partners to ensure MCN's longevity and relevance.

Operational level recommendations

- Enhance marketing plans and review communication approaches to boost membership and participation in online events. Strengthen local relationships and communications to optimise promotion of promote Hubs. Widen the scope of market research on demand for coworking. Create an affiliate Hub network, which is a stated aim of the continuation grant.

Introduction

The MCN Offer and Delivery Structure

The Military Coworking Network (MCN) exists to support and enable military partners and spouses to establish independent, professional lives alongside military life. The primary objectives of MCN include creating well-equipped coworking spaces, fostering a network of peers, and offering an online community for additional support. The MCN offer can broadly be separated into two distinct parts: the physical coworking spaces (MCN Hubs), located on or near military bases, and the Online offer. As well as supporting military partners, MCN is open to veterans, the partners of veterans, and reservists.

MCN has been made possible by grant funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. Part of the current grant is used to fund an MCN delivery team, employed by the Royal Air Forces Association. Members of this central team collaborate with local points of contact, such as welfare and community support staff, at Hub locations to ensure user needs are being met and to encourage local promotion of the facilities. The central team is also responsible for developing new Hubs, as well as delivery of Online activities and marketing, and promotion of both the Hub and Online offers.



MCN Hubs

There are currently nine MCN Hubs operating in England (six), Scotland (two), and Cyprus (one). Six Hubs are located at Army bases in Blandford, Bovington, Hereford, Leuchars (also has a small RAF presence), Sandhurst, and Tidworth¹. One Navy base (Clyde) has a Hub; there is one Hub at a solely-RAF base (Akrotiri); and one Hub at a base with Navy and RAF presence (Marham). MCN Hub membership costs £30 per year for up to 900 hours' annual use. Hubs vary in size and amenities, but all include:

- Desks – some equipped with screens and keyboards and others without
- Wi-Fi
- Hot drink making facilities
- Printer

Most Hubs also have private rooms or quiet working areas where users can hold confidential meetings, and some have breakout spaces for more social activities. With the exceptions of Akrotiri and Sandhurst, Hubs are located outside the wire and, as far as possible, they are designed to be available for use at all times. Hubs are housed in a variety of buildings owned by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), which are made available to MCN under encroachment licences that authorise temporary use of MOD land and buildings. Locations include community spaces and former Service Family Accommodation (SFA) houses.

MCN Online

MCN Online membership is free, requiring only completion of a simple registration form. The online offer includes regular events delivered by volunteer speakers. Topics covered include business-oriented themes, such as using social media, alongside sessions focused on aspects of wellbeing. There are also weekly virtual coworking sessions and social sessions branded as water cooler chats. The members-only area of the MCN website contains a suite of resources designed to provide professional and personal support to military partners. Members who are self-employed or who own businesses are also able to advertise their services or products in an MCN Business Directory. In addition to the website, MCN has a private members-only community on social media.

¹ Tidworth Hub (called Salisbury Plain to refer to the area from which users are drawn) was located at Bulford until April 2025.





This evaluation

The Armed Forces Covent Fund Trust (AFCFT) has commissioned The Charity Spark to carry out an impact evaluation of MCN, particularly focusing on the elements and activities funded by a continuation grant from the Armed Forces Families Fund's Supporting Partners Programme. This grant, which is funding MCN for two years to March 2026, extended a previous pilot project that had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to impact, we are evaluating process and economic value aspects of MCN.

The broad aims of the continuation grant for MCN are:

- To enhance operational effectiveness, increase Hub usage, and expand the network of Hubs, improve marketing, and outreach, and evaluate the impact of the MCN's services.
 - To open three new Hubs and add seven affiliate Hubs, focusing on areas with a high concentration of military partners.
 - To increase the number of Hub users from 135 (September 2023) to 200.
 - To increase Hub usage/bookings.
 - Embed and drive relationships with a range of Service and Civil Service personnel at all locations to promote Hubs, and work with the MCN delivery team.
- To explore strategies for sustainability and future planning with key partners (notably the MOD and the single Services) to ensure the longevity and relevance of MCN.

Methodology

We are using a mixed-methods approach to collect views from a wide array of individuals connected to MCN. So far, these include Hub and Online members, the MCN central team, the MCN founder, and welfare or community staff at Hub locations. Our work to date is summarised below:

Method	Metrics and Description
Co-creation Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hub and Online member volunteers• Providing expertise and lived experience• Helping to shape evaluation methods and Theory of Change
Observational visits to Hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visited six Hubs (Blandford, Bovington, Bulford, Clyde, Hereford, Leuchars) to observe and interview users and local staff• Experienced the Hubs for ourselves• Established relationships with Hub users
MCN Member Interviews etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 39 MCN members inc. users of eight Hubs and Online members• Formally interviewed 28. Informal conversations with five. Feedback discussion with six Akrotiri Hub users
Base/Unit Staff Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Six individuals across five Hubs, mostly Community Support Officers or Welfare staff
MCN Team and others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviewed three members of central delivery team• Spoken to representatives of the MOD, AFCFT, and RAF-FF, and the MCN Founder• Observed an MCN Steering Board meeting (November 2024)

Survey for MCN Members and other partners/spouses

- Launched in February 2025, and promoted via MCN Newsletter
- From May 2025 – direct and wider promotion, and introduced a prize draw incentive

Survey for Serving Personnel

- Launched and promoted from May 2025

Online Events Feedback Forms

- In use from May 2025

MCN Theory of Change

- Drawn on all data sources so far to develop an initial theory of change that maps out what MCN seeks to achieve. (The initial Theory of Change is included in the appendix.)
- Will be tested with the co-creation group and reviewed throughout the evaluation

We will be continuing with these methods and implementing the following throughout the remainder of the grant period:

Interviews with relevant charities and partners: Exploring awareness, understanding, and perceptions of MCN.

Most Significant Change: A specific process to identify a programme's most significant change that we will run with a sample group of MCN members.

Interactive Online Focus Group Workshops: With MCN members, the team, and key partners to validate and review findings from Quarter 3 2025 onwards.

Value for Money: Employ the Value for Investment model (Julian King, 2013²) to explore economic questions, including how value is created and for whom.

All the challenges and learning points identified in this report have already been shared with the MCN team and Steering Board, with the consequence that steps are already being taken to address many of them.

² www.researchgate.net/publication/353757620_Rubrics_A_Method_for_Surfacing_Values_and_Improving_the_Credibility_of_Evaluation

Interim Findings: MCN Hub Member Impact and Experiences

Feedback from Hub users is extremely consistent and unequivocally positive. It clearly demonstrates the high impact of Hub membership, as substantial personal and professional benefits have been reported. In survey responses, most Hub users have reported 'reduced feelings of loneliness/isolation', 'improved mental health and wellbeing', and 'improved sense of community' as benefits of MCN.

Individual and Family Impacts

The most significant personal benefit concerns mental health. Without prompting, Hub users have articulated important mental health benefits in interviews. They have repeatedly described how being a member of a Hub directly reduces feelings



“ Just little things and having that social interaction. Otherwise there would be five days a week stuck at home probably. We've arrived recently... I've been struggling, a bit lonely, and it's really changed my experience. Really, I couldn't talk more highly of it. I love it, and I think it's a great initiative.

MCN Hub Member

“ My new role it was primarily working from home. During the summer holidays, you know, it's quite busy with kids around and stuff happening at home. I heard about the opportunity so I thought it was ideal to sort of get out and to have that more structure for my own mental health as well. Just having more of a routine.

MCN Hub Member

of isolation and loneliness that are characteristic of life as a military partner and mitigates the challenges associated with frequent relocations. By combatting loneliness and isolation, MCN both benefits the wellbeing of individual members and reduces stress on family life, which has consequential impact on serving partners.

Members have consistently explained how loneliness is alleviated by being able to go to a space with others who are in a similar professional or career situation and who understand the challenges of military life. Very often, this comes down to having human contact with other adults who 'get it'.

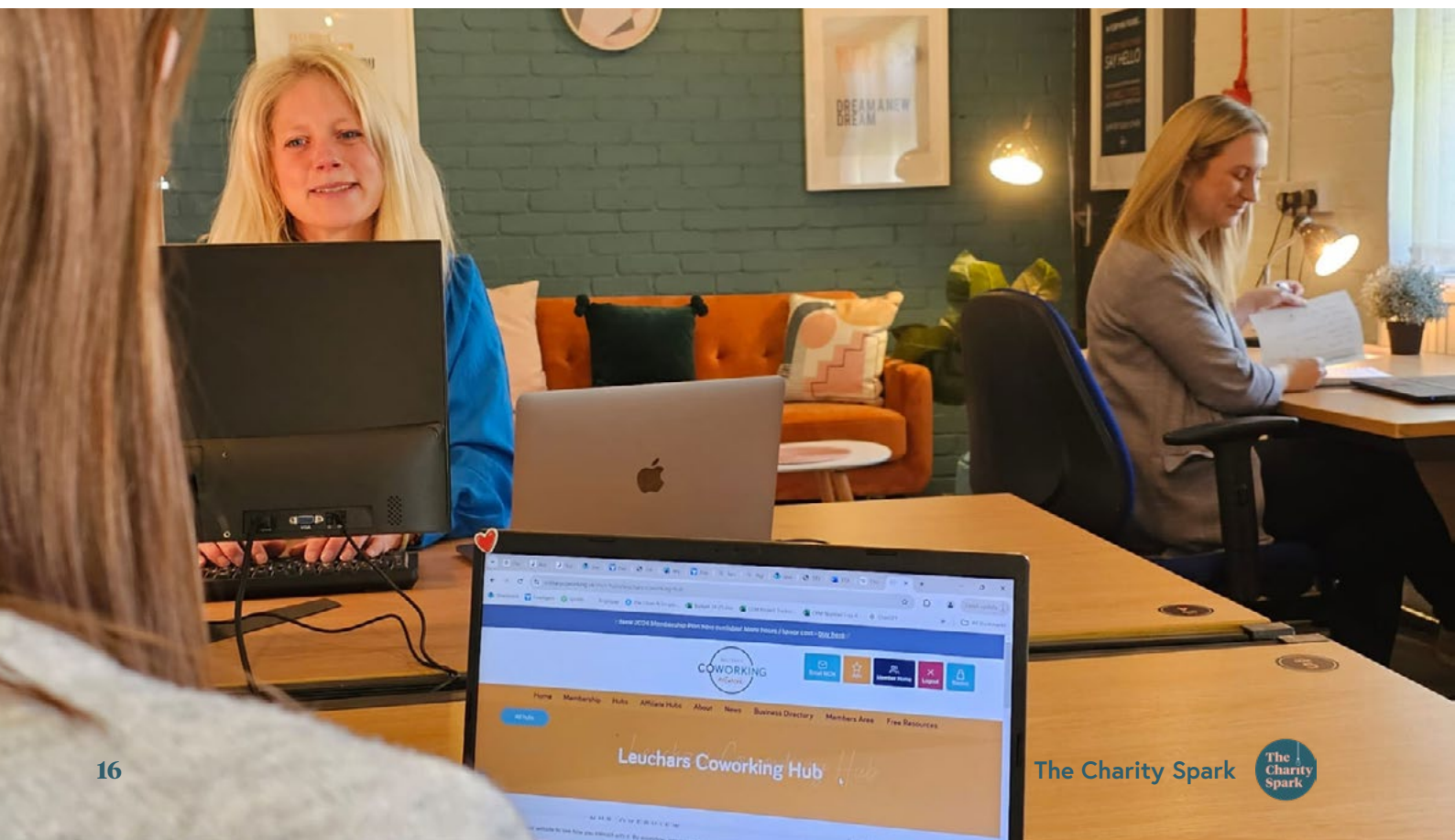
The routine and structure that result from visiting a Hub have also been cited as providing important mental health benefits.

Reducing the stress on family life, and a serving partner feeling that their partner or spouse is being supported, have universally been reported to result in serving partners feeling more able to pursue and focus upon their own careers.

“ I'm still not fully settled [here]. Once, I phoned my husband because I'm sad, I'm crying, yeah? And he told me go out to go to the Hub, and that made a big difference. And so if I'm happier and settled, it obviously helps him being able to do his work. Because that day, he came home from work to check on me. Support like this [the Hub] for wives and partners filters down to the active soldiers doing their work. It gives them the headspace to do their work. He can't function in work if he knows I'm crying in in the house.
MCN Hub Member

Welfare and Community Support staff have also recognised the benefits that MCN is having on the serving partners of Hub users.

“ I can share a specific example of a male colleague whose wife's use of the Hub reduced her isolation and improved her social life and, in turn, improved his focus at work.
Base Staff



Professional and Career Impacts

“ So if [the children] were to come home and I'm in the home environment, it would really disturb my work. And having the Hub here has made me be able to extend my work hours. So I'm actually able to work longer hours and earn more money as a family, because I've got the Hub that I can come to. And having dedicated working time means mentally wise, to be able to come out from the home to an office and feel like I'm coming to a workplace every day. I'm more efficient. I'm able to be more productive in my job, achieve better results in my work.

MCN Hub Member

The MCN Hubs offer a professional environment where partners and spouses can work and progress their own careers. Not all SFA houses have space that can be devoted to home working, meaning the dining table is frequently the only option for employed and self-employed home workers. Hubs provide a dedicated space for working that allows for a cleaner separation between work life and home life. This means Hub users can have a healthier work-life balance, which has delivered both professional and mental wellbeing benefits.

Notably, some employers who mandate their employees to work a percentage of their time 'in office' are willing to consider a Hub to be equivalent to office working. For working professionals who choose to accompany their serving partner when deployed, this provides an important level of stability and job security.

“ What will say is I put into my business case the fact that the co working Hub was a place where I could go and work in an office environment and still get that interaction with other people that were working and studying. And you've got the guarantee that there's going to be a proper setup in terms of your workspace, yeah, and, of course, Wi Fi connection. So I would actually say just that because the Hub exists, it strengthened my business case to work remotely.

MCN Hub Member



“ *I'm studying a [...] course, and finding it an escape from home, so I don't need to look at the mess when I'm working. I have to do a certain number of hours of practise in order to get my qualification. The Hub's private space is ideal for this, and if I have an essay to do the main room is really useful. It's much better than being alone.*

MCN Hub Member

Hubs are not the exclusive domain of working professionals. Partners and spouses who are studying can make use of Hubs for course work and completing assignments. In these circumstances, the reported benefits have centred on being able to separate family and study life, which allows individuals to focus properly on both. Often, this has been reported alongside the relief from loneliness and feeling isolated that result from Hub membership.

Community and Connection Impacts

Hub users have frequently described how MCN provides a sense of community and connection that addresses loneliness and affords an opportunity to develop a social network that is not centred around children, and where all forms of status (regiment, marital status, children, age, time in military, type of work, connection to military) are irrelevant. The Hubs' open and inclusive environment has been praised by all types of members, but is reported to be especially valuable for individuals from non-traditional families, or those who feel they have fewer social opportunities. These groups include people without children or who have older children and individuals whose serving partners are in non-core units.

“ *The Hub is really important. It fills an important gap for someone like me who doesn't have children and doesn't have that access to community through knowledge about children. There's no gatekeeping like the patch WhatsApp group that you can only join if you have children.*

MCN Hub Member

“ *It's a tangible thing the MOD are doing to support wives and spouses generally. They talk a big talk about supporting families, and, you know, it not just being about the serving person. And this is, this is one way in which I feel they do actually do that. And I don't have a huge number of those.*

MCN Hub Member

We have repeatedly heard that most military family support and community-building activities (like coffee mornings) are not felt to be geared to modern life, which is characterised by complexities that increase isolation. Reported examples of modern-life complexity include: two incomes necessary, blended families, being in long-term relationships not married, older when coming into service life, same-sex partnerships/marriages, male partner of female serving personnel, multi-

Service bases, home-schooling, and mixed civilian/military housing. Notably, MCN has been highlighted as being rare in supporting modern family life in a military context.

Another widespread view is that much of the provision aimed at supporting military partners specifically caters for families with children, particularly young children, and there is limited provision for partners and spouses who do not have children. The MCN Hubs are targeted at military partners, regardless of whether or not they have children, which has enabled communities that are not centred on children to develop. In addition, even for partners who have children, MCN has been praised for supporting partners throughout the entirety of their service life. This is in contrast to child-focused provision, which supports for only a relatively short time.

“ *There's a huge amount of family provision but you only need that for a small chunk of your life. It's 2024 and spouses need to be able to work. The welfare provision for family is essentially a by-phrase for "stuff for young children." That sort of provision is only needed for a few years, whereas provision specifically for spouses is naturally needed for a significantly longer period of time if the serving partner remains within the armed forces.*

MCN Hub Member

“ So I've met people through it that I wouldn't otherwise have done, and I think that's something that's really important. Because that rank thing is you know, it's there, and it's the way the thing works. But we are all a community in the Hub and all professionals in our own right. So it's good I meet other professionals that I wouldn't anywhere else here.
MCN Hub Member

A core element of the MCN Hubs Code of Conduct is 'the military is left at the door'. This ensures that all Hub users feel they are equal and included. The relatively low cost of Hub membership adds to accessibility and equality. Members have commented that it is notable how MCN Hubs enable connections to form amongst people who share professional situations, but who might not otherwise meet, due to their serving partners having different ranks or roles.

MCN Hub Member Highlights

Members have highlighted several features that deem to be success factors for the MCN Hub offer:

Professional working environment:

- An attractive alternative to where home space is limited and expensive to heat (UK) or not air-conditioned (Cyprus). Hubs are regarded as 'in office' by some employers.

Accessibility:

- Most Hubs are available to use outside regular working hours, which is particularly important for those working for global employers or international clients.



- Where Hubs are located close to amenities, such as schools, community centres, shops etc., this allows users to combine Hub sessions with other activities, such as collecting children from school.
 - Clyde is in the same building as a creche
 - Hereford is opposite a nursery
 - Marham is close to a shop and library
- Parking is important for access and makes it easier to combine Hub visits with other activities, like school drop-offs and pick-ups.
- Hub membership is open to veterans and their partners, UKBC, reservists, and adult children of serving personnel.

Value for money:

- An annual fee of £30 for up to 900 hours access compares very favourably to commercial alternatives. Based on a seven-and-a-half-hour working day, 900 hours equates to 120 days per year, or 24 weeks.

MCN central team Hub-facing staff:

- These individuals are highly valued by Hub users for their active engagement and responsive support, addressing issues wherever they can.

MCN central team relationships with some bases:

- Where these relationships are strong, they help increase both local awareness of MCN and the speed with which local issues that are outside the team's control (e.g. heating or buildings maintenance) can be addressed.



MCN Hub Member Suggestions

As a learning partner, we have already shared with the MCN team suggestions from members that could increase the impact and usability of MCN. These include:

Adopt a more flexible booking system:

- Initiate functionality to enable users to book multiple or repeat sessions in a single booking.
- Allows members to see (anonymously) when others have booked so they can choose busier times to benefit from networking connections and being part of a community.
- Accept bookings for different time periods. Currently, a desk must be booked in a three-hour block (meaning one seven-and-a-half-hour working day = three bookings), which is inconvenient for members and may result in an inaccurate picture of Hub usage. It also means that a user would be more likely to reach their annual allowance limit.

Grow Hub membership

- Increasing the number of Hub members (153 active Hub members at end February 2025) would alleviate members' concerns about possible closures due to a perceived lack of need.

Increase local support for Hubs

- Greater awareness and a stronger sense of permanence could be achieved by ensuring Hubs are featured in 'moving-in' packs; sustaining promotional activities after initial openings; and giving greater priority to basic maintenance of buildings where Hubs are located.

Reinforce lone-working procedures

- Lone working presents a safety risk that can be mitigated by greater clarity and enforcement around MCN Hub lone-working policies.

Standardise access

- Access is not always straightforward, even for Hubs located outside the wire. A standardised fob entry system would be ideal, but is not possible in every location due to variation in the spaces made available to MCN.

Interim Findings: MCN Online Member Impact and Experiences

The MCN Online offerings provide support for partners and spouses who do not have access to a Hub or other coworking facilities. There are minimal barriers to entry as MCN Online membership is free and requires only internet access, unlike several competitors that are paywalled. Its reach is c.1,700 registered MCN Online members, as of April 2025.

c.1,700

MCN Online
members
(April 2025)

“ *Otherwise, the biggest benefit for me has been realising I am not alone in needing to find a new career path for myself as a military spouse. The next biggest benefit has been access to incredible workshops and webinars that have broadened my knowledge of how to get started and where to look regarding new jobs and skills.*

MCN Online Member

MCN Online runs a programme of events, often delivered by MCN members. These offer insights into new careers and can support members to expand their skillset, although attendance has been falling.

Event topics vary, but are typically designed to support and upskill individuals who are self-employed or business owners, with many topics focused on business promotion and entrepreneurship. The MCN Online business directory also promotes businesses that military partners own or are involved with.

Consequently, employed individuals and MCN members who are studying have reported feelings that MCN Online is of limited relevance to them.

“ *I haven't really used the online offer as I find it's more focused on people who are running their own business.*

MCN Online Member

Members who attend MCN virtual coworking sessions have cited the format and weekly regularity as improving productivity and facilitating networking. However, these sessions also have a low attendance rate, with a core group of attendees who have become familiar with one another.

“ *We need personal connections. So what's really lovely about the online coworking is, you know, we just leave our cameras on, and get on with work. We'll stop what we're doing to have a quick chat when we start a break. So you kind of get those much more like being in office 10 minutes, where you might have a bit of a chat, but the rest of the time you're getting on with things. And actually, I found it even more useful I'm not very good at sitting still and doing admin. So I find it really helps on a Tuesday morning when I know I'm going to sit down for three hours and I'm going to do admin.*

MCN Online Member

“ *And occasionally I get ideas of, like, tools that I could choose in the business, or somebody like, I had a problem with my laptop a week or two ago, and people gave me suggestions or things that I could try or what might be wrong with it. And we've also had conversations about, like productivity tools that people use and things like that.*

MCN Online Member

Some members who participate in the coworking sessions have benefitted from professional networking, such as meeting potential clients or obtaining advice..

Low attendance limits the opportunities for networking and increases the risk of events becoming a clique. Members have suggested improving promotional communications around the events and the coworking and watercooler sessions to give them specific focus and greater prominence in marketing outputs, with a view to attracting more participants.

Future MCN Events

The image displays three event cards for 'Future MCN Events'. Each card features a header with the event title and a brief description, a central image, the location, the event title in bold, the date and time, and a 'View Event' button.

- Virtual Coworking:** 'Cowork with your peers online'. Location: Virtual Coworking. Date: 27 May 2025, 09:30–12:00 BST.
- Water Cooler Chat:** 'Your weekly natter with members'. Location: Virtual Event. Date: 28 May 2025, 10:30–11:00 BST.
- All about Facebook:** 'with Rebecca Thompson'. Location: Virtual event. Date: 28 May 2025, 12:00–13:00 BST.

Feedback has emphasised how facilitation of all online events and sessions regardless of format, needs to be as welcoming and inclusive as possible to all members. It has also suggested that events could benefit from signposting attendees to further networking or development opportunities, such as formal training courses.

The resources held on MCN Online extend beyond purely professional benefits. Resources on topics relating to wellbeing are included to provide a more holistic support package. As yet, we have not received any feedback relating to this aspect of the MCN offer. We have been informed of ad-hoc instances of the business directory resulting in new clients and customers.

Historically, feedback has not been collected for MCN Online events and coworking sessions. We have developed tools for this purpose to inform MCN planning and for reporting in the later stages of the evaluation.

“ I think that there's one thing it might be useful. So they every now and again, they do, they do social media posts or whatever, that reminds people that Coworking is on. But if I don't get that and register in that moment, there's a good chance I'm going to forget so you need to get specific reminders, not just something in amongst loads of other news items. Once you've got people signed-up and in that sort of email loop, there's more chance that they're going to turn up, I suppose.
MCN Online Member

Interim Findings: MCN Operations and Processes

To date, our evaluation of operations and processes has focused on strategic direction, Hub growth and development, and the promotion and marketing of MCN. Our findings in each area are summarised here as strengths, challenges, and opportunities.

Strategic Direction and Management

Strengths

- MCN is delivered by a small team, who all have a connection to the armed forces. This lived experience enables them to make decisions that benefit members. Hub members clearly think very highly of the MCN staff who work directly with them.
- Where the MCN team have good relationships with base staff, these staff demonstrably value and support the MCN Hub offer.
- Hosting by the RAF Association and funding from the AFCFT give formal recognition to MCN, which adds credibility to the offer.

Challenges

- Each MCN team member is each responsible for a slightly varying part of the whole offer, and all roles are operational. This means that they have their own assumptions, biases, and beliefs about the delivery and future direction of MCN. Stronger strategic leadership and clear direction for the future of MCN would be a major benefit to them individually and enhance the operational effectiveness of the team as a whole. It would also ensure activities are prioritised to align with the aims of the grant.
- To date, monitoring and reporting have been skewed to the MCN Hub offer and focused on outputs rather than outcomes. Monitoring could be more aligned to the grant aims, and reporting should be clearer about how any challenges or issues are being addressed, e.g. when a Hub is classified as 'poor' or 'fail', or member complaints are received.



Opportunities

- Reviewing and, if necessary, revising KPIs and targets would provide a framework for the different team functions to be more closely aligned with each other. It would also be appropriate to review the feasibility of the current KPIs, recognising Hub desk capacity and the realistic number of partners who are potential Hub users and online members, i.e. working in jobs where working from home is possible or studying. Aligning KPIs with the aims of the AFCFT grant would help to provide clearer strategic direction.
- The recent resignations of two team members have afforded an opportunity to develop a more cohesive and consistent approach to delivery and communications. Greater consistency would ensure that the different functions of the central team are better integrated and coordinated towards achieving the same overall aim.
- There is an opportunity to expand the team's tri-Service experience and understanding through new appointments.
- The incoming MCN Advisory Board and MCN Specialist Panel can provide strategic oversight and expertise that are lacking in the current structure. Participants can be selected to offer an independent voice that complements internal knowledge, e.g. have coworking or relationship marketing expertise, and can be drawn from outside the military community to provide complementary knowledge.
- Optimising monitoring tools and processes to make them more useful and effective should be considered. If improvements are introduced, it will be important to ensure the data captured are updated regularly and used as the basis for all strategic and operational planning.

Maximising Hub Usage

Strengths

- The centralised booking system allows the MCN team to record occupancy and booking levels, enabling them to monitor usage for both individual locations and across the entire Hub network.
- Understanding occupancy levels allows the team to initiate ad hoc engagement activities and campaigns targeted at registered members who are not using their local Hub. Examples of this have included drop-in lunches and fun competitions.
- Promoting that 'the military is left at the door' in Hubs means that ranks are ignored, making MCN Hubs open equally to users from all backgrounds and situations, e.g. partners, veterans, veteran spouses.

Challenges

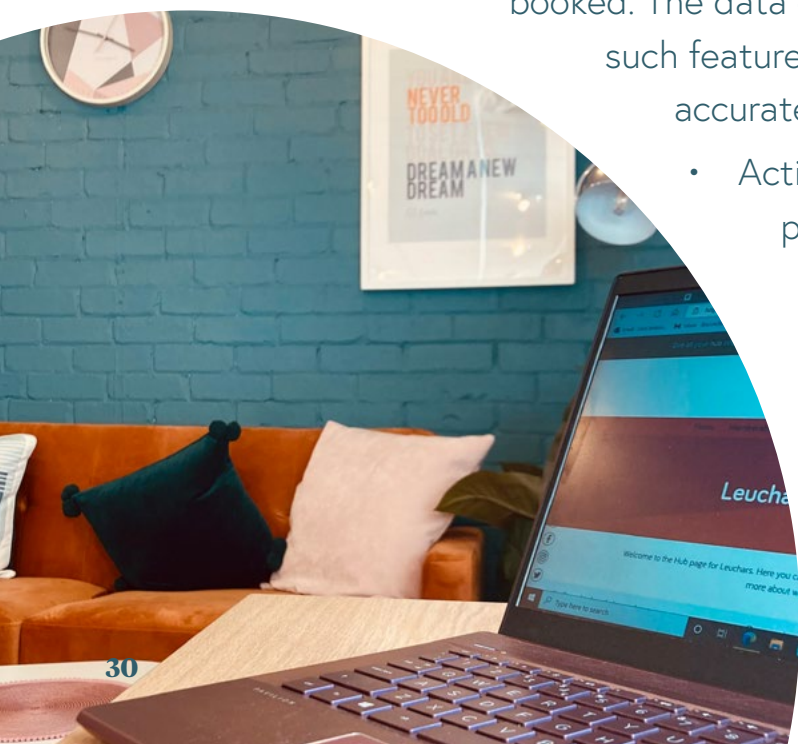
- The most substantial challenge for Hubs is low usage. At present, only two Hubs are approaching their booking capacity. Hub occupancy in many cases is significantly lower than the industry average, despite the low price point. There are various possible various reasons for this, although a local lack of awareness of a Hub's existence is a fundamental barrier.
- Strong initial marketing of Hubs is difficult to sustain at a local level. Ongoing local promotion is mostly not specific to the Hub, e.g. appearing in lengthy emails about a multitude of community offerings, meaning messaging is diluted. In all locations, membership growth in the longer term is generated by word of mouth, including local social media channels, e.g. patch Facebook pages, where these are permitted.
- There is potential for local misunderstanding about 'who the Hubs are for', which can limit membership. This is particularly significant because local promotion relies on word of mouth. In one example, someone married to an officer was advised to not use the Hub as 'it's for those who really need it.' In another case, the low price point has been questioned by a base when a user works for a large corporation and is perceived to be in a position to pay more.
- There is a risk of bookings being under-reported. The current desk booking system is set up to allow only for blocks of three hours to be booked. To book a full working day, three bookings need to be made. Frequent users who are concerned about exceeding their annual limit may 'under-book'. Additionally,

frustration at not being able to book multiple blocks in a single booking could also lead to under-booking.

- Members who want to use a Hub when they know someone else will be there are not able to see if others are booked in and consequently may choose not to book. Members like to visit Hubs at the same times as other users to benefit from the community connections that reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. They do not need to know the name of anyone else who has booked.

Opportunities

- Developing stronger relationships with bases would improve local marketing and promotion of Hubs. Ensuring MCN is embedded in local moving in packs should be an aim not just wherever Hubs are located, but at all bases to promote the Online offer and the Hub Register of Interest form on the MCN website.
- Allocating Hub champions with responsibility for local promotion and to standardise inductions. This could increase awareness and provide the central MCN team with valuable local market intelligence. Such a role would need to be accountable and have clear remit and management.
- Using locally focused physical marketing materials, like poster and flyers, would support social media methods of promotion and increase local awareness of MCN Hubs, their purpose, and their benefits to as broad an audience as possible.
- Adopting a more flexible booking system would address members' wishes for a platform where they can book multiple sessions in one 'click', book sessions of flexible duration that match actual usage, and see when others have booked. The data captured through a system that has such features would provide the team with a more accurate picture of usage levels.
 - Actively promoting Hubs as spaces to pursue further study or professional development, as well as to work, could increase usage. This is especially applicable to individuals who are overseas and unable to work but still want to pursue their career development.



Developing the Hub Network

Strengths

- Based on past experiences, the MCN central team have developed a set of suitability criteria that need to be met before a Hub can be opened. These are:
 - I. Interest from individuals in that location
 - II. Support from the base
 - III. Provision of an appropriate space for a Hub
- The closure of unsuccessful Hubs shows the central team are prepared to make difficult decisions.

Challenges

- MCN has closed former Hubs at Valley and Chivenor. The underlying reasons for these closures were specific to each location. Applying the above suitability criteria could reduce the likelihood of future closures.
- The Hub Register of Interest, which is used to determine demand at prospective Hub locations, collects information through a form located on the MCN website, meaning its reach is limited only to those who visit the website and find it. As such, it is not outward facing and is likely to underestimate demand.
- Regarding base support for a Hub, changes in command can lead to changes in priorities about how spaces and buildings are allocated. As base command changes every few years, this is likely to remain an ongoing challenge for MCN, unless Hubs become part of the standard MOD offer for all bases.
- Lack of a suitable space is a frequent barrier to establishing a new Hub. The MCN team can advise on the suitability of a space, but the final decision falls to the base. This means there is a degree of variation in the facilities available within Hubs that is, in part, beyond the control of the MCN central team. Additionally, as newer Hubs open based on the suitability criteria, they may be better resourced than older Hubs and contribute to inter-Hub variations.
- It appears that varying levels of effort have been put into the establishment of new MCN Hubs, depending on factors such as proximity to MCN team members. Having an effective tool for recording Hub opening decisions (positive or negative) that is constantly updated would confirm or counter this. It would

also serve as a record for reporting decision outcomes, as well as act as an information resource if a previously considered location is revisited in future.

- Some bases host non-MCN coworking facilities, which are free to use in certain cases, such as Dhekelia and Episkopi in Cyprus. These facilities provide direct competition to MCN Hubs, but it should be acknowledged that their existence provides evidence of the need to provide coworking spaces for military partners.
- For legal reasons, partners at overseas bases that are not in Sovereign Base Areas are limited or prevented from working, which makes it difficult to establish Hubs at these locations.

Opportunities

- Conduct outward-focused market research into demand for Hubs. This should extend beyond the register of interest, which only reaches individuals who already know about the MCN.
- Increase the number of Hubs and expand the tri-Service reach. The current MCN Hub offer is heavily weighted towards Army bases. The Hub Register of Interest data show there is demand at some Royal Navy and RAF bases, most notably RAF Lossiemouth, HMNB Devonport, HMNB Portsmouth, and RNAS Yeovilton.
- In line with the aims of the continuation grant, develop an affiliate Hub network to which potential users can be referred in locations where there is no MCN Hub. Monitoring these referrals and reciprocal signposting arrangements will help evidence demand for the MCN's offer. Potential affiliates include former MCN Hubs, non-MCN facilities at Dhekelia and Episkopi in Cyprus, and Windsor and Catterick in the UK.
- Consider Area Hubs that are appropriately branded and cover multiple locations. To avoid the perception that a such a Hub is only for partners and spouses from a single base, these Hubs should be named to encompass the multiple bases they serve, e.g. the new Hub at Tidworth has been branded Salisbury Plain, which is in line with feedback that we reported to the MCN team.
- Explore the potential of more overseas Hubs to combat extreme isolation of partners and spouses who accompany their serving partner on overseas postings. Overseas opportunities need to be offset against considerations

around issues like partners' working status when overseas, which may mean demand is likely to be more focused on space to study or for continuing professional development.

- Reaching out to AFCFT, who can connect MCN to supportive individuals, would help the MCN team to build and strengthen their local connections, which should help overcome some barriers to growth.

Marketing Communications and Online

Strengths

- The online membership register of c.1,700 provides an existing mailing list for all MCN communications and internal market research.
- Representation of tri-Service families federations and MOD on the MCN Steering Board provide access to relevant promotional channels and opportunities for closer relationship building with key partners.
- The MCN archive of member case studies can inform the development of member profiles, which can be used to develop marketing messages and identify promotional channels.
- Communications, including social media posts, have been published on a consistent schedule which helps to optimise engagement.

Challenges

- At present, MCN marketing communications are not achieving significant growth in either Hub membership or active Online participation.
- The MCN Newsletter is too lengthy and not specific to particular Hubs or locations, which makes it hard for members to identify topics of direct relevance or interest to their personal situation.
- There does not appear to be a clear strategy for promotion and relationship building with key partners, such as military charities, families federations etc.
- Marketing capacity has been reduced by recent resignations, although interim support is being provided on a pro bono basis.



Opportunities

- Recruit a marketing lead with expertise in relationship building and membership development.
- Develop a marketing plan based on member profiles and incorporating a set of clear priority messages for members, potential members, and existing and potential partners.
- Strengthen local relationships and communications to enhance local promotion of Hubs.
- Identify opportunities to cross-promote Online and Hub offers. For example, improve awareness of virtual coworking sessions for Hub users who could benefit if working alone in a Hub or wanting to focus on administrative-type tasks. Conversely, promoting Hub activities to Online members could lead to increased membership and facilitate idea sharing between different Hubs.
- Targeted promotion of MCN Online towards partners in dispersed families, who live remotely from bases, would give the benefits of a community to individuals who cannot easily access traditional base-centred community-building activities.

Interim Conclusions

In this section, we firstly review MCN's progress against the targets for the continuation grant. We then draw some general conclusions.

To enhance operational effectiveness, increase Hub usage and expand the network of Hubs, improve marketing and outreach, and evaluate the impact of the MCN's services.

Operational effectiveness has been enhanced with regards to having clear criteria for selecting new Hub locations. However, the effectiveness of the MCN central team has been limited by a lack of leadership, which has meant individual roles have lacked coordination and lessened the team's focus on the aims of the grant. The recruitment of new posts and introduction of an Advisory Board provide opportunities to address these limitations. Hub usage and network expansion are the subject of specific targets that are addressed below.

There is scope to improve marketing and outreach. To date, marketing has not resulted in the intended membership growth rate or increased participation in online events or sessions. The Hub Register of Interest is an example where wider reach could be achieved beyond existing MCN membership. New marketing and outreach approaches can be tested in the coming year, and the Specialist Panel and Advisory Board could provide a source of ideas for new approaches.

Open three new Hubs and add seven affiliate Hubs, focusing on areas with a high concentration of military partners.

Progress has been made with regards to opening new MCN Hubs. Hereford and Marham Hubs were opened in 2024. A Salisbury Plain Hub was opened at Tidworth in April 2025, which incorporates the former Bulford Hub that closed in the same month. Considerable efforts have been made to establish a Hub at Colchester, which looks likely to come to fruition later in 2025. Although an affiliate Hub programme has not yet been pursued, it has been included in plans for the remainder of the grant funding period.

Increase number of Hub users from 135 (September 2023) to 200.

Although there has been an increase in active Hub membership, this needs to be accelerated to meet the target specified in the grant. The number of active Hub users at the end of February 2025 was 153, representing an increase of 13.3%. Current membership needs to grow by 30.7% for the target of 200 to be achieved. Growing the number of Hub members should be made a priority for a nominated member of the central team.

Increase Hub usage/bookings.

At this stage, it is not possible to draw a firm conclusion on Hub bookings due to changes in reporting and alterations in the number of Hubs.

Embed and drive relationships with a range of Service and Civil Service personnel at all locations to promote Hubs and work with the MCN delivery team.

The picture here is uneven, as the central team has strong links at some Hub locations but not others. At each location, multiple relationships need to be established with, for example, base command, welfare, and community teams, as well as local support initiatives. Any that have been made are due to individual relationships, and a more strategic approach would be beneficial.

To explore strategies for sustainability and future planning with key partners (notably the MOD and the single Services) to ensure the longevity and relevance of MCN.

We are going to explore this aim in the next stage of the evaluation. The MCN benefits from strong support from organisations such as the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust and the RAF Association, which can be used as a platform to develop strategic connections that can help to ensure wider recognition of the benefits and relevance of MCN.

At a general level, we have found compelling evidence that MCN Hub membership has a very positive impact on the partners and spouses of serving personnel. This impact takes the form of benefits on individuals' mental health, family life, and chosen careers. These benefits have been reported by employed and self-employed Hub users, plus individuals who are studying. Certain aspects of the Online offer, such as the virtual coworking sessions, have also been reported to deliver positive personal and professional outcomes for participants.

The MCN Hubs provide a valuable solution to tackling loneliness and isolation in military partners and spouses. They also provide places to meet and connect with new people and to create a health work-life separation. Significantly, members feel supported by the military because of the MCN.

By their very nature, which is limited by desk capacity and availability of suitable facilities, Hubs in their present form have a finite reach. However, any limitations in reach must be considered in the context of the depth and significance of the personal, family, and professional benefits that have been described to us by members who use the Hubs.

Currently, Hubs are predominantly used by the spouses and partners of serving personnel, who are intended to be the primary beneficiaries of the MCN. Hub Membership is open to other groups, such as veterans and reservists, who could boost user numbers. However, we have directly encountered only one example of a Hub user in these groups, and their use of a Hub is subject to the

agreement of other members. The MCN central team does not have easy access to these groups, and promotion to them falls mainly to local bases.

The team also needs to consider any potential negative effect of partners and spouses no longer feeling that Hubs are for them, which is a possible risk if the numbers of other types of users were to grow significantly.



We are aware that the MOD is interested in the impact of the MCN on retention of serving personnel. We have captured evidence of individual examples of positive impacts in the form of serving personnel being more able to focus on their jobs due to the partners being a member of the MCN. However, it should be noted that multiple factors influence the decision to leave or stay in. These include, for example: pay, job satisfaction, accommodation, location, progression opportunities, impact on children's education, career opportunities outside the military, and socio-political climate. We have developed a survey (launched in May 2025) for serving personnel to obtain their direct feedback about how the MCN may impact on their retention and job satisfaction.

The existence of non-MCN coworking facilities on military bases in the UK and overseas supports our finding that there is demand for coworking facilities on military bases. They also provide a ready source of potential MCN affiliate Hubs. However, these facilities, particularly when free, could also be considered a competitive threat to the MCN. The fact that, like MCN, some of these coworking facilities are funded by the MOD (Dhekelia and Episkopi through British Forces Cyprus), is a potential source of confusion for both Bases and MCN members.

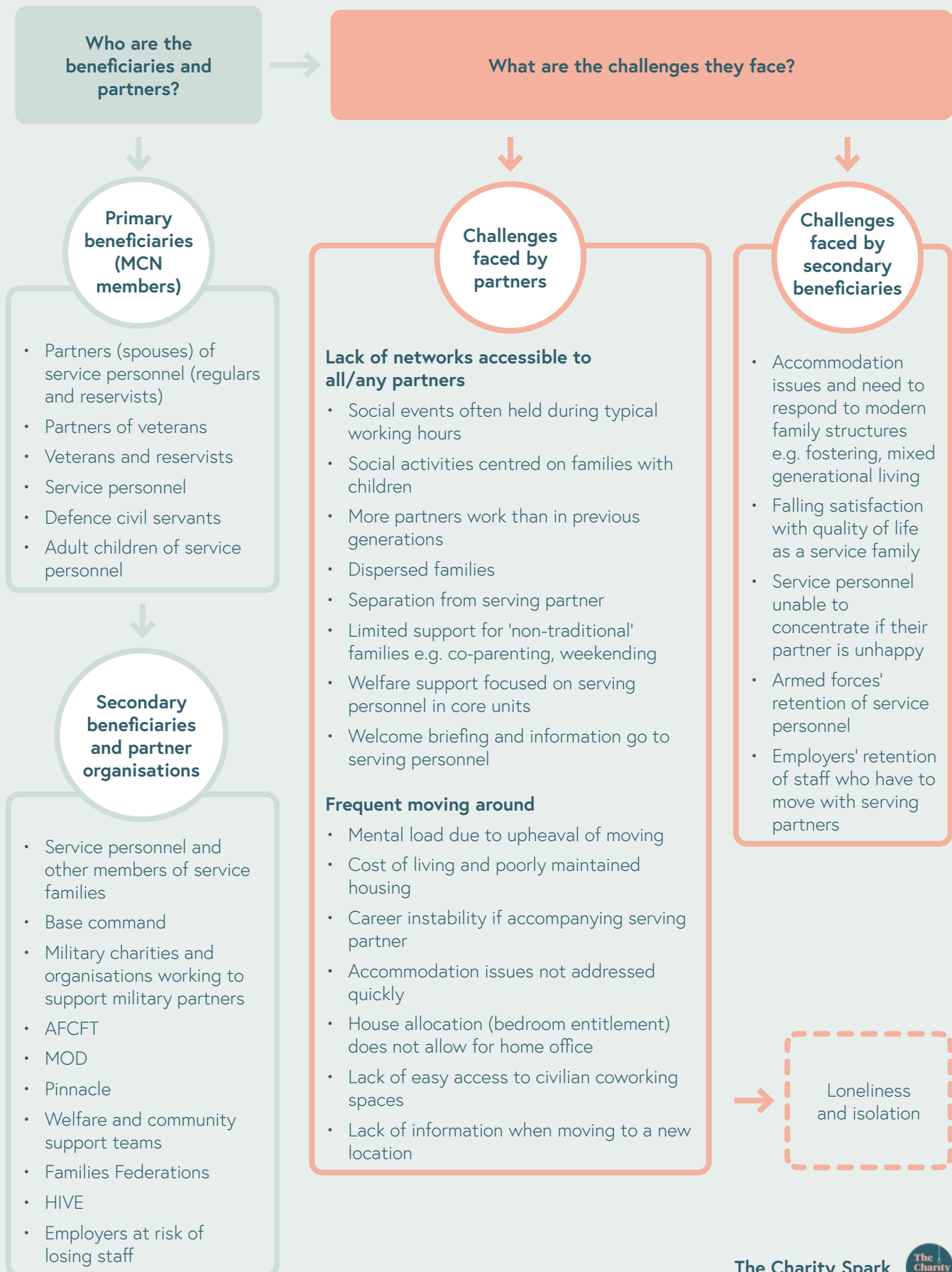
At this interim stage of the evaluation, it is possible to conclude that the MCN, and the Hubs in particular, play an important role in supporting military partners and spouses who are seeking to pursue their own careers or further study. Significantly, this includes groups who feel less supported by more traditional community-building offerings. The evaluation has also highlighted some learning points and opportunities to grow and strengthen the MCN and thus enhance its overall impact. Based on these learning points and opportunities, plus the stated aims of the current AFCFT grant, we presented some recommendations to the MCN team in early April 2025. Reassuringly, the team responded positively and proactively and have developed an action plan based on the evaluation findings.

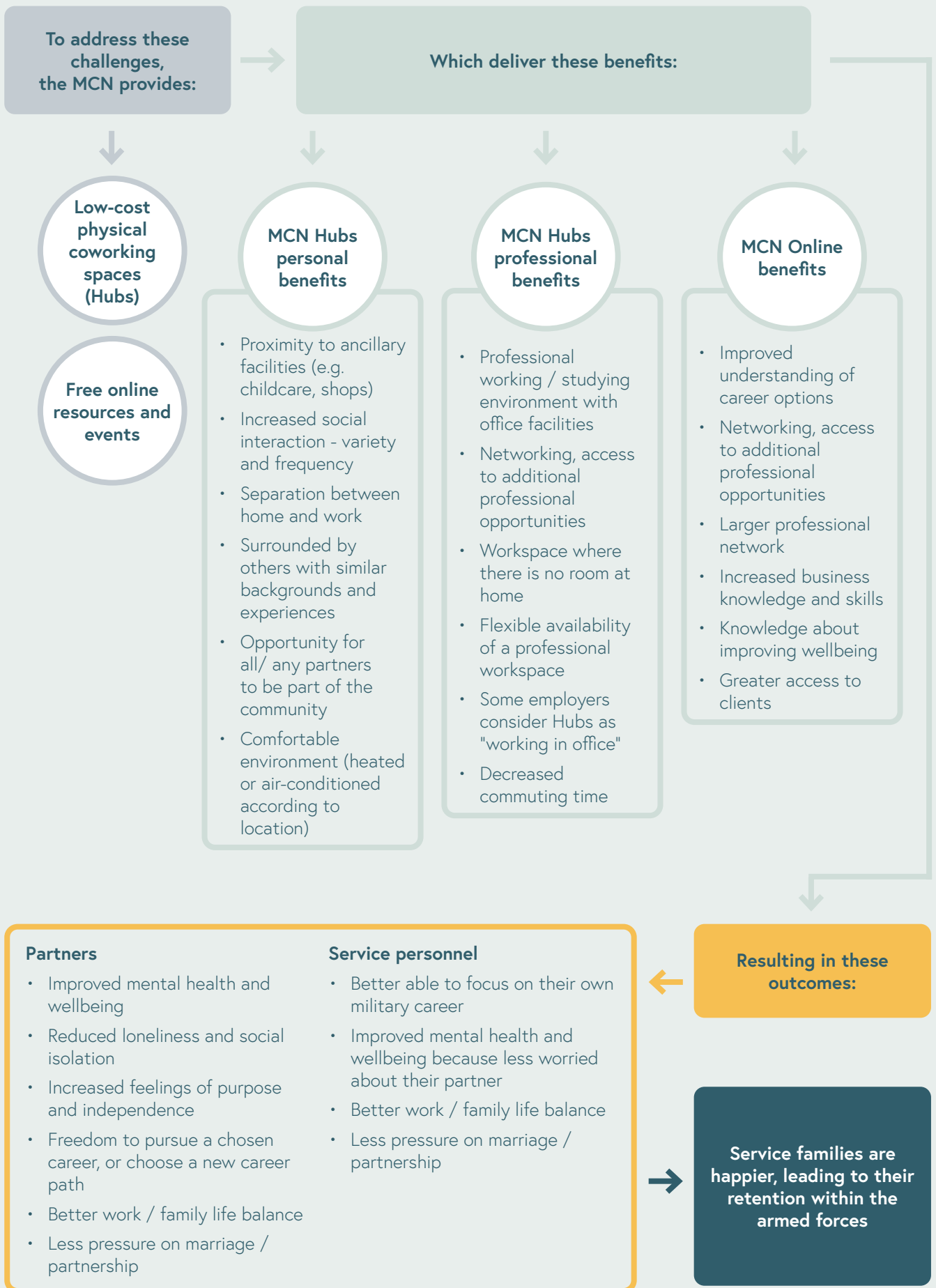


Interim Recommendations for the MCN Team

- Review the MCN team skillset needs and recruit accordingly, e.g. marketing and communications expertise in membership development and relationship building.
- Seek to bring in professional coworking management and marketing experience (on a consultancy or pro-bono basis).
- Review the Steering Board, Advisory Board, and Specialist Panel Terms of Reference, including an accountability structure.
- Review the MCN objectives and expectations to ensure alignment between MCN, MOD, and AFCFT.
- Revisit and, if needed, revise KPIs, and agree them with AFCFT and MOD as appropriate.
- Develop, agree, and implement a clear strategy for the next 12, 24, and 36 months, including:
 - identifying priority locations for new Hubs
 - revisiting minimum suitability criteria for opening a Hub
 - reviewing Hub access and security procedures
 - aligning Hub and Online offers to ensure that both cater fully for all current and prospective members (employed, self-employed and studying)
- Develop an affiliate Hub strategy and implement it in the next six months, seeking how the MCN can work in partnership with other coworking facilities on military bases.
- Review the Hub booking system to make it as user friendly as possible and to ensure it presents the most accurate representation of Hub usage.
- Develop, agree, and implement a marketing plan aligned to the strategy and including:
 - enhancing local physical and online promotion, and increasing network building for Hubs
 - systematically communicating and building relationships with local and central key partners
 - monitoring and reporting engagement and use for MCN Online resources

Appendix: Initial Theory of Change for MCN







Who are The Charity Spark?

The Charity Spark (trading name for R Denny Consulting Limited) is an evaluation and research agency established in 2019.

We are an agile team of five staff, including three specialist evaluator researchers. Our expertise lies in supporting charities and non-profits with independent evaluations, impact frameworks and insight-led strategic development. We take a tailored approach to every evaluation, considering the needs of the project and ensuring that the voice of the beneficiary is elevated throughout our work.

Our UK non-profit sector expertise is broad. We have particular experience and interest in partnering with health and social welfare charities, particularly those involved in community engagement.

The team working on this evaluation are:

Rebecca Denny (Director)

Sarah Jenkins (Research and Evaluation Officer)

Daniel Pledger (Research and Evaluation Officer)



**The
Charity
Spark**

www.thecharityspark.co.uk



www.thecharityspark.co.uk