



Greetings all,

We have already sent a couple of updates to tell you what has been happening to *Reading Force* during lockdown. So now, as restrictions are being slightly eased, here is our latest news.

How COVID-19 has impacted Forces families

It's now clear the pandemic has been a significant additional burden for Forces families. Covid-19-related duties (e.g. helping build Nightingale Centres, establishing mobile testing centres, delivering supplies to outlying regions) have been added to existing duties and many deployments have been extended. And with both pre- and post-tour isolation, Forces families face ongoing uncertainty:

‘My husband has been on a seven-month deployment in Afghanistan since last October. Since the Covid-19 crisis, I have been solo parenting, and we still do not have a confirmation date for when he is coming home. These are anxious times.’ DM

There are of course so many essential workers who are rightly celebrated for their role in the pandemic, but we hope the part played by our Forces will not be forgotten.

Usefulness of *Reading Force* during this time

In this difficult situation, many Forces families have turned to *Reading Force* as a means of keeping in touch. Already set up online, from the outset we were able to send materials directly to families.

We have seen a huge increase in demand – at pandemic-height, requests were up 900%. Now, as completed scrapbooks are returned to us for feedback, a free book and a certificate of participation, we are noting with real pleasure the benefits that have been experienced:

‘We love reading force. Currently working through another scrapbook with my eldest. Always thought it's such a wonderful idea and even more so now we are all isolated!!’

‘Our pack arrived the day after daddy left for a while and we didn't know when he would be coming back because of the coronavirus. We were all a bit grumpy until our books and scrapbooks arrived. We don't know when we will speak to daddy next but we will read him our new books when we do.’

‘During this lockdown because of covid-19 this book brought us laughter, quality time spent together and a fun activity to do at home. We are very grateful to be part of Reading Force. Thank you!’

If you would like to see images of families' scrapbooks you can look at our Instagram page, and there are also updates of family input on our Facebook page (all offered with permission). An **RAF family has made a video for Sky Children's programme FYI** – we'll let you know when it's to be aired.

What we have learned in the process

From those getting in touch to ask for *Reading Force* materials, we have learned a lot about how the project is used, and how people benefit. In particular, we have noted:

1. More requests from veterans

Veterans have been a group we have long been trying to reach, and Fiona (RF Scottish ambassador) has been particularly focussed on this work. So it's been good to see our efforts breaking through.

‘It means so much to know that veterans are cared about and included in *Reading Force*. I can’t put into words how much my spirits were lifted last week when our first parcel arrived. We felt like we mattered to someone.’

2. More contact from men

Particularly those who are separated from their children, whether through deployment or relationship breakdown. *Reading Force* enables meaningful contact to be maintained even when getting together is impossible.

3. More contact from teenagers

The majority of families taking part in *Reading Force* are those with younger children, although older children, from babies to age 10, although older children have joined in a family activity that includes everyone, or to help encourage their siblings’ literacy.

During lockdown we have seen increasing numbers of ages 11-17 getting in touch, and sharing what they are reading with their friends and siblings. For example:

‘I read this book by myself, however my parents would check in and ask how the reading is going and what had happened and what page we were on. Me and my sister talked about it together. I liked reading the book because it provided entertainment and it was a safe way to read a new book as we can’t go to the library. Also the book was fun to read and it provided an escape from the world we are currently in.’ Mike aged 14

This chimes with a project we were actively developing with the Army Welfare Service, to produce *Reading Force* resources specifically for this older age group – for them to use with their friends as well as their siblings. If you would like to be part of this work, either to comment or trial materials in your schools, then do get in touch alison@readingforce.org.uk

4. Working with other charities and welfare organisations

We have always sought to work with other agencies seeking to benefit the Forces community, believing that in the process our costs can be reduced and the message of support delivered gain further reach.

During the pandemic we found other organisations, who lacked an online presence, benefitted from receiving our materials. In the process, we reach more of those who can benefit and other organisations come to learn more about what we do. Literacy is a core life skill. The more we can collaborate to promote a joy in reading, and its active enjoyment, the better.

As a reminder, here is a message that can be shared:

Our FREE initiative is available to those serving, reservist, veteran, injured – as well as the divorced/separated partners and children of Forces personnel. As we deliver books and scrapbooks directly to the homes of families who request them, we have been able to give military families a constructive activity throughout lockdown. As restrictions ease, you can still use our materials to keep in touch with a deployed parent and wider family.

Please include within your online communication and newsletters information that *Reading Force* is available to them, whether their children are staying at home or returning to school. We have had a really big increase in participants and lots of feedback that Forces families have found it very helpful to take part in *Reading Force* during this challenging time. Anyone with a Forces connection can register to join our fun shared-reading scheme at www.readingforce.org.uk

Thank you for reading this and we send out good wishes for your health and wellbeing,
Alison, Hattie, Elaine and Fiona, The Reading Force Team