



KIN AND COUNTRY

Growing up as an Armed Forces child

JUNE 2018

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Introduction from the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield



The commitment made by the men and women who serve in our Armed Forces often requires great personal sacrifice and has an impact on families as much as those serving. While issues facing service families have been the subject of much research, legislation and guidance over recent years, there has been less attention paid to understanding the lives of children who are growing up in an Armed Forces family.

This report seeks to rectify this. It is the latest in my 'Children's Voices' series – the first-hand accounts we publish to shine a light on the experiences of children whose stories too often go untold. It explores how primary and secondary school children with parents in the Armed Forces feel about moving school or country, how their lives at home and school change with deployment and whether or not they feel they receive the support they need to cope with these transitions.

We spoke to children up and down the country whose parents are currently serving in the Army, Navy or RAF to explore the impact of active service life on their childhoods. We also talked to teachers, parents and members of the Armed Forces to help us to build a clearer picture of where there are gaps in provision for children, and why these gaps exist.

Specifically, the report looks at:

Mobility: What impact does frequently moving home and school have on a child's life? How does it affect their friendships, their family relationships and their school work?

Deployment: How do children cope with a parent, or parents, being deployed? How does it change their experience of home and of school?

Support: What are the successful interventions that children find most helpful? What additional support do children believe would help them to manage better the complex challenges that exist within a military family?

What is clear from our research is the unique nature of childhood in a serving military family. The all-encompassing character of a military lifestyle means service children can experience 'growing-up' quite differently from their peers. The mobile lifestyle of many military families can be tough, with children telling us that multiple school moves leave them feeling unsettled and anxious about achieving good grades. For children with additional needs, moving around can add another layer of complexity, with the need to find suitable schooling and the transfer of support plans often a complicated and frustrating task.

Alongside the impact of mobility, service children described a range of complex emotional responses to the deployment of their parents. Children told us about the impact that parental absence had at home, with changing family dynamics and increased responsibility for siblings and household tasks. For children who had both parents deployed at the same time, these issues were exacerbated by the need to move to stay with another family member for a significant period of time.

Despite the challenges highlighted in this report, service children described a distinct Armed Forces community upon which they drew much comfort and support. Encouraged by friends or teachers, many of the children had developed effective coping strategies. We heard of many fantastic initiatives developed by schools to support children and families through the process of moving and periods of parental

deployment. Whilst this report outlines ways in which support can be improved for service children, especially for teenagers, there is some excellent existing work taking place across the country.

The vast majority of service children we spoke to during this project were happy, resilient and incredibly proud to have a parent serving in the Armed Forces; belonging to a military family was central to their identity and sense of self. Whilst this report shows the need to adopt a child-focused approach to supporting military families, it is clear that the children in our military families should be celebrated.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Longfield". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a short, horizontal black line.

Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England

Growing Up in an Armed Forces Family

“Civilian children, they just don’t get it.” (14yr old boy)

Whether they were aged 8 or 15, it was clear from all the children we spoke with that their parents’ service in the Armed Forces had an all-encompassing influence on their childhoods. Most of the children showed exceptional knowledge about the military and their parent’s roles and responsibilities. This is likely to be because of the impact that their parents’ job has on everyday family life.

“Now my Dad’s a seaman, which is like, the third rank. Pilot’s the highest, but because he’s a seaman, the activity is like a warrant officer ... and that means he has to go to other ships to check if they’re doing the right job.” (10 yr old boy)

Many of the children we spoke with said that being part of a military family is exciting. Children were proud of their parents’ jobs and proud to be part of the Armed Forces community.

“It’s hard when my Dad goes away, but it makes me very, very proud hearing about his job. I like telling people that my Dad’s in the Navy.” (10 yr old girl)

There was also a keen awareness that being part of an Armed Forces family made service children different to other children. A mobile lifestyle and periods of parental deployment meant service children experienced an unusual childhood compared to their non-service peers.

“I’ve moved nearly every two years. I’ve never finished a school! ... I’ve just been moving around a lot with my family, I moved from Germany to Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland to England, so I’ve moved houses so many times.” (12 yr old girl)

All of the children we spoke to were spirited and strong-minded, with many developing their own coping mechanisms to manage moving schools, and to deal with deployment or short/long-term postings. Many were remarkably nonchalant about moving between countries or to different schools. For lots of children, moving was just part of everyday life.

“Most of us here don’t have a drama making friends, you just walk into school and you’d make friends. Whereas civilians, they don’t ... they just flap about it.” (15 yr old boy)

Mobility

Moving house, moving schools and even moving to a different country is an inevitable part of life for many children with parents in the Armed Forces. With jobs pulling families in numerous directions, service children can expect to change schools multiple times during their educational career. Through our conversations with service children, we were keen to explore what impact this mobility has on their emotional wellbeing, experience of education and relationships with others.

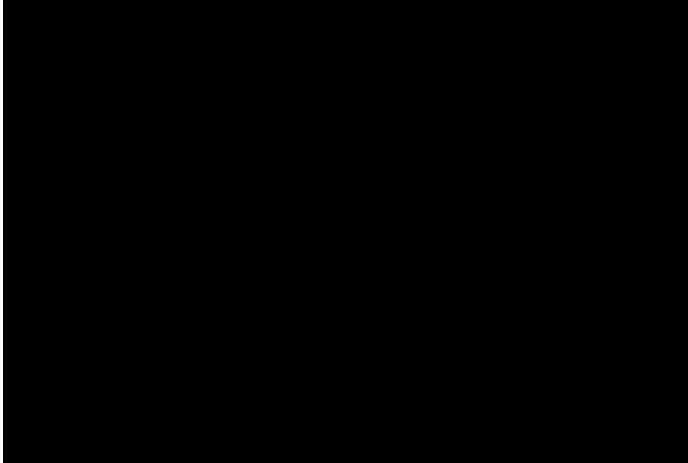
Research indicates slightly different mobility patterns across the Armed Services, with children in the Navy least likely to experience moves, but more likely to experience long periods of parental separation¹. Our research mirrors these findings, with children from Navy families experiencing fewer moves than those in the Army or RAF. However, even within this group, the majority of children we spoke to had experienced at least one house/school/country move in the last 5 years.

“My Dad has to visit other ships to make sure they’re working ok. So he’s away from home all week... he comes home at the weekend. But we only moved to this school last year, to be nearer all the other ships.” (10 yr old boy)

Children with parents in the Army or RAF described a highly mobile lifestyle, with multiple school, house and country moves, taking place throughout their entire lives.

“I’ve been in 12 different houses. This is my tenth school.” (14 yr old girl)

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“But I’ve moved house four times because I had to be with my family, and I’ve moved country three times.” (15 yr old boy)

“I’ve only been in England to live for four years, and the rest I was just all over. I was born in Canada, went to Germany and spent most of my life in Germany, and then moved to Cyprus and spent quite a while there, then we moved down south when I moved here.” (14 yr old boy)

Children used coloured stickers to indicate their experience of mobility

Moving to a new house or moving to a different country was an experience that many of the service children we spoke to found challenging. Leaving friends and family behind, being surrounded by a new language or even getting used to a new climate could leave some young people feeling unsettled.

“Because I don’t know if anybody’s going to be mean to me ... if I’m going to know anyone there.” (9 yr old girl)

“I didn’t want to go because all my friends ... I stayed with them for a long time and we used to play outside all together every time.” (8 yr old boy)

“I had so many friends that used to live near me, my next-door neighbour was my best friend, it was really sad.” (10 yr old boy)

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/540808/Tri-Service_Families_Continuous_Attitude_Survey_2016_Main_Report.pdf

However, it was the process of moving school that most significantly affected the lives of the children we spoke to. For younger children, the difficulty manifested itself through anxiety about leaving friends behind and getting to know new classmates. For many, building new relationships in a new environment was scary and a sense of uncertainty and insecurity typified younger children's emotional responses.

"When I go into a new school I normally just stay quiet and just bite my jumper because I, I don't know why, it's just a habit." (10 yr old girl)

"I get anxious really easily and when I move schools that just gets, it's just worse because I feel like people won't like me because of my personality because I know I'm annoying, I can be annoying at times." (11 yr old girl)

For some, the feeling of uncertainty is intensified by the knowledge that the family may be required to move again, relatively quickly.

"I can't even finish a whole school, I can't go through a school. I've just been moving around a lot with my family, I moved from Germany to Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland to England, so I've moved houses so many times."(10 yr old girl)

Ministry of Defence (MoD) statistics suggest children are more likely to experience multiple school moves whilst in primary school². This was confirmed anecdotally by the secondary school pupils we spoke to, who described many years of a highly mobile lifestyle, which then settled down during their teenage years. However, this was not true of all of the teenagers we spoke to, several of whom were anticipating future moves that would take place during GCSE courses. There was an acknowledgement amongst this group that moving school becomes much more difficult as they become older.

"Because you've got heavier, stronger bonds with friends ... because you understand what's going on more but when you're young, you're like, oh, we're moving house, this is going to be fun." (12 yr old girl)

"For me, when you're older it's not so much about making new friends, it's about the potential for messing up your life...like ... will I have to change my [GCSE] options, will I get to go to the 6th form I want?" (15 yr old boy)

Attainment

MoD analysis for the year 2014/15 shows there is little difference between the attainment of service children and non-service children at Key Stage 2, with 82.3% and 82.9% respectively achieving the expected standard of level 4 or above in reading, maths and writing. The picture is seemingly even brighter for KS4 service children, with 64.9% achieving the expected standard of five or more A*-C GCSEs including Maths and English compared to 63.0% of non-service children³.

Once a child's mobile lifestyle is taken into account, though, the picture changes. MoD figures show that service children are more likely to move school than non-service children. Attainment for both groups of children are affected by mobility, with 46.7% and 25.9% of service and non-service children (respectively) achieving the expected standard when attending 4 or more secondary schools. While attainment for service

²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575582/20161208-Adhoc_Statistical_Bulletin-Service_children_educational_attainment_in_England.pdf

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575582/20161208-Adhoc_Statistical_Bulletin-Service_children_educational_attainment_in_England.pdf

children drops less when moving school than for their non-service counterparts, the fact that a greater proportion of service children make multiple moves means that the negative impact of this is noteworthy⁴.

Despite the generally positive picture in terms of educational outcomes, the impact of mobility demonstrates the effect that growing up in an Armed Forces family can have on a child. This is further highlighted in research by The Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance, which indicates that service children are less likely to go to University than the general population⁵.

Coping with moving

Despite the variety of challenges involved with moving house, school or country, the service children we spoke to showed a mature attitude towards the changes taking place in their lives. A spirited determination and readiness to 'get on with it' characterised the outlook of the majority of children we spoke to.

"You get used to making new friends ... It's a built in thing." (15 yr old boy)

For the primary school children in our research, resilience presented itself in the form of a positive mind-set - they were able actively to identify the benefits that can come with a mobile lifestyle. Although moving around could create anxiety and uncertainty, the younger children told us they quickly settled into a new routine, enjoying the sense of adventure and opportunity that a mobile lifestyle offered. As sad as they were to be leaving friends behind, they said moving to a different country or school could be fun.

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"Normally when I move, I'm feeling quite sad because I'm leaving all my friends behind and the house and things like that, but then feel quite happy, just, a new place and discovering new things." (10 yr old boy)

"I always kind of enjoy it because when I move to a new school, I enjoy starting again ... I'm always happy to start again." (10 yr old girl)

The secondary school pupil's attitudes towards moving school, home or country had developed over a number of years. To many of the teenagers, developing new relationships and making new friends had become second nature. Their mobile lifestyle was normal - the challenges involved now a part of everyday life.

"Because we've been brought up to move, so you're here, then you move, then you get used to it ... I don't want to move, just do it, and then you get used to it." (15 yr old boy)

"My Dad always told me to just stop thinking about the last one [school] and just move on, get on with it." (14 yr old girl)

⁴ It should be noted that comparing school moves between service children and non-service children can be problematic as the latter will include excluded and repeatedly excluded children.

⁵https://www.scipalliance.org/assets/files/UoW-research-paper_Further-and-Higher-Progression-for-Service-Children.pdf

The practical problems with mobility

Whilst the service children we spoke to were resilient, spirited and well able to deal with the turmoil of a mobile lifestyle, attending multiple schools produced a number of practical difficulties for them. The repetition of the curriculum was a particular concern for teenagers. Many secondary school pupils told us of their frustration at having to study curriculum topics numerous times.

“I repeat maths, I repeat PE and I've repeated a bit of English, or I've not learned English, or when I moved here they carried on from the year before and I was just stuck in the middle, like I don't know what I'm doing.”(15 yr old girl)

This lack of continuity between schools left children feeling behind, unable to get involved in lessons and to maintain levels of academic progress. Many of the teachers we spoke to identified particular issues with Maths. Filling the gaps in children's mathematical subject knowledge was challenging. With each topic building on a previously established understanding, deficiencies in basic skills proved a real problem. Teachers were therefore tasked with identifying what each pupil did not know, in order to move forward.

The British Legion's best practice guide 'Supporting Service Children in School in England'⁶ highlights some of the difficulties service families may face in finding and securing school places. Many of the children we spoke to had experienced challenges relating to admissions, particularly in securing spaces at preferred schools. A number of children we spoke to had trouble attending the same school as their siblings when resettling in a new area. Whilst brothers or sisters in different year groups managed to secure a place in a preferred school, this was often not possible for the whole family. This often meant that some siblings had to attend a different school for a period of time whilst they were waiting for a place. This further complicated children's experiences of moving school. They were encouraged to settle in one school setting, before being moved to join siblings when a space in the preferred school became available.

Children with additional needs had faced particular problems. Moving school was a challenge for this group of children and for one of the teenagers we spoke to, the inability to find a suitable school place for his younger brother meant his family remained split 180 miles across the country.

“He [Dad] is currently in Edinburgh. Yeah, we stayed here because of my brother - he's in a special school so we couldn't go up to Edinburgh, so he only comes here.” (13 yr old boy)

A serving member of the Armed Forces reiterated these concerns when we visited his Army Garrison. Not only was he concerned about the difficulty in moving children between specialist schools, he identified the struggle in getting Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) successfully transferred to new local authorities for service children with identified needs. This had been a particular problem for service children in his area, with several families forced to move back into the area due to unsatisfactory school support arrangements. In the National Audit Office's 2013 study into the education of service children, 73% of respondents who had children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) reported difficulties related to their children's special educational needs⁷.

For those children moving back to the UK from a MoD school abroad, the transfer process can be equally complex. During our research, we heard of families struggling to have MoD SCANS (Service Children's Assessment of Needs) recognised by new UK local authorities. Rather than assessing the needs of service children as set out in the SCAN, families are sometimes required by local authorities to restart EHCP applications to obtain support. This is often a lengthy process, during which a family may be required to move again. Service children can also encounter transfer problems when moving between the devolved

⁶ https://media.britishlegion.org.uk/Media/10334/rbl_education_guide_a5_web.pdf?_ga=2.175142306.1233596309.1528897433-1182345399.1525775087&_gac=1.16565762.1528111542.EA1aIQobChMIjv-59vK52wIVQTobCh2H0ggeEAAYASAAEgLy6vD_BwE

⁷ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/10145-001-The-Education-of-Service-Children.pdf>

nations. The different processes for assessing and providing special educational needs support can see a child with SEND unable to access support for a considerable length of time when moving between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Service children had very different experiences of mobility depending on the circumstances of the move. Whilst some of the service children moved to a new school individually, or with a small group of other service children, others were part of a very large group of children relocating to a new area as part of a 'unit move'. It became clear through our research that the challenges for schools when admitting service children could be very different. Some schools we visited had developed a live 'tally system', which counted pupils 'in and out' of school places, while others were planning the redevelopment and extension of their entire school to accommodate a fluctuation in service children numbers during a re-basing.

"Well I came from Germany with my whole class. It was just the teachers and the school building we had to get used to really."(11 yr old boy)

"I recognised a few people from schools I'd been to before, but I didn't really know anybody else ... apart from my sister."(10 yr old boy)

Teachers told us that initiatives introduced to assist service children can be significantly affected by the make-up of the school. Service pupil premium can be used very differently if an intake of 30 children arrive together, compared to a drip feed of service children throughout the year.

What became clear, regardless of the numbers in which children arrived at a new school, was the value of the shared experience of service children in a school setting. The mobile lifestyle of the children we spoke to meant they faced a set of challenges largely unfamiliar to the settled community. Being part of a group of children experiencing these challenges together was important. Attending a school with other service children helped to develop an environment in which young people felt confident expressing their feelings and seeking support. Being the 'only service child' in the school, or attending a school with a very small number of service children, was challenging for many we spoke to.

"It felt really different because like there was no-one you could relate to or talk to about what was happening, because if you talked to a teacher about it they would have no clue. They don't know how the children feel because they only know what children that don't have their parents in the services really feel." (10 yr old girl)

"People understand it a lot easier, that's all, you don't have to explain why you're moving, they understand your Dad is in the Army or there's a very high chance your Dad or Mum is in the Army, so they just accept that as a fact and just move on quickly so you don't have to think about it." (14 yr old boy)

Identity

The importance of a community of service children further highlighted the distinct nature of Armed Forces family life for many of the service children in our research. The all-encompassing manner of their parent's job meant that many of the service children we spoke to had developed a sense of identity based significantly on their experience in an Armed Forces family. The extent to which service children's own lives had been shaped by the military fostered the notion that, in many ways, they should also be considered as members of the Armed Forces.

The majority of children that took part in our research, revealed a remarkable degree of knowledge and awareness about their parent's jobs and position in the Forces. They were well-informed members of the Armed Forces community. This was even true of the very youngest children we spoke to.

“A lot of the time, he’s out in some city, or he goes off to another country for a day or so and he keeps different price on different materials they need to use the money provided by the South Sudanese government. With the ban going on, there’s not much, he needs to go and see and what materials they can actually afford.” (11 yr old boy)

The ease with which many used Armed Forces terminology, self-identifying as ‘service children’, showed how proud they were to be part of a serving military family, and many felt as part of the Armed Forces as their serving parent.

“I live in married quarters ... you don’t know what that is do you? It’s Navy language for the houses that we live in. You can only live there if you’re a Navy child.” (9 yr old girl)

The importance of the Armed Forces to the lives of service children shone through when the children spoke of where they lived. Whilst many service children were frustrated by the impersonal nature of Armed Forces housing, there were also many benefits to living in an Armed Forces community. Living in Forces accommodation helped children to develop close relationships with the children of other service personnel. It was seen as a safe and secure environment in which children could play and explore.

“I love where I live because we can play out, we’ve got open space and, where it’s all surrounded by a wall.” (10 yr old girl)

This was particularly true for the service children living on base. Living and attending school ‘behind the wire’ enabled children to live in an exclusive service community. For many, this meant total freedom to explore their surroundings.

“You can run free in camp because you don’t have to be worried about anybody. But when you’re in a village it’s a bit...” (8 yr old girl)

“We’ve also got RAF police, so we don’t have to worry about calling anybody else. We can just call straight into the guardroom.”(8 yr old boy)

However, there were also some concerns expressed by teachers that children living ‘behind the wire’ could often live sheltered lives, with limited experience of life outside the base.

Deployment and Posting

Experiencing parental separation, through either deployment or short- or long-term postings, is one of the most significant challenges of military family life. Both for children and the remaining adult, a parent working and living away from home – especially in areas of conflict – can have a range of impacts:

- > Emotional: Isolation/worry/breakdown of relationship between remaining parent and child/increased sibling arguments/missing their absent parent
- > Practical: Fewer people to help/more responsibility for chores and/or other siblings/no car

All of the children we spoke to had experienced their parent(s) living away from home for short or long periods of time:

“My Dad was away for three years, when I was two to five.” (7 yr old girl)

“My Mum went, I think it was 2016, my Mum went away for six months.” (8 yr old girl)

“My Dad's been away for two years once and he went to Afghanistan as well and it was only me and my Mum before my brother came and my brother was born while my Dad was still away. So he didn't have a Dad for six months until he came back.”(14 yr old boy)

Impact of deployment on different age groups

For the majority of the service children we spoke to, the period of parental deployment affected every part of their everyday lives. Many children demonstrated an incredibly detailed understanding of where parents were and when they would return.

“My Mum's currently in Qatar, it's only 20 days to go. She's been away for three other months so far and this is the last month.” (9 yr old boy)

“Well for the moment it's just three weeks that he's been away, but in a couple of weeks' time he'll be going back again for 9 months. The longest he's been away was for 11 months. That was quite hard.”(8 yr old girl)

There were interesting differences in how younger and older children reacted emotionally to parental deployment. For primary school children, short term and long term parental deployment caused sadness, worry and general unease. It seemed that the physical absence of parents contributed most significantly to creating this distress. The fact that parents were away and not part of family life was upsetting.

“Not having Mum there, not having to talk, not talking to her lots. Because Mums are usually the person that you talk to when you've gone back from school and you've had a really rubbish day.” (9 yr old girl)

“On Wednesday it's normally Dad who takes me swimming ... when he's away, Laura's Dad takes me, but I always wish it was my Dad.” (7 yr old girl)

As well as missing a parent's 'everyday' presence, younger children found periods of family celebration such as Christmas and birthdays particularly difficult.

“I always ask my Mum to tell her boss that she doesn't have to go anywhere, she should stay home for my birthday.” (10 yr old girl)

“My Dad went away to the Falklands and he went away for a year. And I missed him like every second because I knew how long he was going away for... And the thing that I didn't like about that is because he missed Father's Day, Mother's Day, my birthday, my Mum's birthday.” (9 yr old boy)

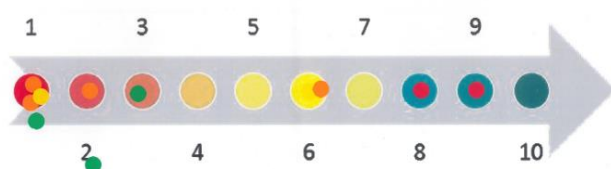
For older service children, parental absence was also a concern and they found important family events equally challenging. However, it became clear that many of the teenagers we spoke to were also dealing with real anxiety about the welfare of their parent who was on deployment. For many of these young people, there existed an intense fear about what could, or might, happen to their Mum or Dad. These children had vivid memories of parents serving in the Afghanistan/Iraq conflict and had a realistic understanding of the potential danger their parent may be in.

“Yeah, there's always the thought that you're never going to see them again, that's always the thought that's in my head all the time. So that's the only one that I ever get.”(15 yr old boy)

“When you're older you know that in reality in war, obviously I've seen stuff, people getting shot and stuff like that and then you go, my Dad could be watching his friends get shot to pieces and all that. And then you just think... you can't stop thinking about him and if he's OK, if he's dead or not and then seeing him in a funeral coming out of a plane, it's just, that's what you always think about, that's what I always think about.” (14 yr old girl)

Practical challenges and changes in the home

We asked service children to identify on a numbered scale how they felt during periods of parental deployment when at home and when at school.



This ranged from 0-10 with 0 representing feelings of real sadness and upset, and 10 total emotional security. Although children gave a range of responses, it became clear across the groups that most felt it was easier to manage at school than at home.

Whilst at school, children felt they had the opportunity to escape the worries and concerns that preoccupied them throughout the deployment period. Seeking comfort from other service children and teachers, many were able to forget about a parental absence and get on with schoolwork.

“I put an eight for school [on the emotional scale], actually a nine for school because you can discuss it with your friends and they help you and I put 1 for home, because you see the pictures of your parents everywhere and it makes you sad.” (8 yr old boy)

“You don't think about it when you're at school because you're doing work, and I miss him a lot, but I don't think about it, try not to when I'm at school doing work and then the one is at home, when it's really sad.”(10 yr old girl)

For many children, parental absence in the home significantly altered familial dynamics, leading to arguments between siblings as well as between parents and children. This was particularly noticeable with boys in both primary and secondary schools when their Dad was away.

“Me and my Mum just argue constantly. Because obviously she's upset that my Dad's gone and I'm upset and we've ended up just arguing for a full six months and then it just, we're still always arguing now, it's just never stopped, I don't know why though.” (13 yr old boy)

For many children, it also meant increased responsibility; both older and younger children described changed expectations around the completion of household tasks and looking after brothers and sisters.

“It’s really hard now when he’s away for quite a few weeks because I’ve got my little sisters. My Mum wants me to do loads of things for them, so I have to get up really early in the morning to make them breakfast and I have to take them out and I have to help my Mum clean the house and everything.” (12 yr old boy)

Some service children spoke of the practical difficulties they faced when remaining parents were unwell, or unable to care for themselves properly. Illness, pregnancy and younger siblings placed an additional burden of responsibility on children during the deployment phase. This may be exacerbated by the fact that those left at home rarely live near to extended family members to whom they can turn for practical support.

Research looking at the experience of service children as young carers highlights the lack of data on either the prevalence of young carers who are service children or their needs⁸. Whilst the children we spoke to could not be classified as young carers, the significant change in their responsibilities around the home was obvious.

When both parents are away

We met a significant number of children with both parents in the Armed Forces. Some of these children had experienced the deployment of both parents at the same time. These children faced disruption to family life that went far beyond the experience of other service children.

“It was bad this year, because they were both away for Christmas ... it would have been good if one of them could of come home.” (9 yr old boy)

Alongside the emotional impact of both parents working away for significant periods, there were practical implications of dual parental deployment that caused concerns. Teachers described children moving great distances away to stay with extended family members during the deployment period. This could mean long journeys to and from school, with pupils moving out of the family home for months at a time.

“When Mum and Dad go away I have to live with my gran. She makes nice dinners, but it takes me ages to get to school every day.” (8 yr old boy)

We were informed anecdotally by teachers of instances where the lack of appropriate childcare meant a child had been taken into foster care over the period of dual parental deployment. Additionally, teachers reported recent cases where private fostering arrangements had been made for children to stay with family friends or friends of parents. Schools were concerned about such arrangements, describing cases where service children had been taken out of school for months at a time to be relocated back to the family home and original school at the end of deployment, with children therefore experiencing 2 school moves in the absence of parental support. For these children, the deployment of both their parents meant significant upheaval in their own lives.

⁸ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/young-carers-armed-forces-families.pdf>

Keeping in touch

An important issue highlighted in our research was the need of service children to feel connected and close to parents serving away. Social media was a popular way of keeping in touch. Indeed, whether through 'E – Blueys' (email), WhatsApp, Skype/Facetime or Facebook messenger, most children were able to maintain regular contact during the deployment period. What's more, the instant and direct nature of this communication allowed children to learn about the types of environments in which their parents were living and working. Developing an understanding of where parents were and what they were doing was very important – for some children it helped allay their fears about what was happening to their Mum or Dad, and for others it shortened the distance between their home and their parent's foreign base.

However, it was not always possible for children to maintain regular contact with a parent, with availability dependent upon where a parent had been posted and their access to the internet.



“Once we didn't know the services were down, so like every day I would send like messages. I sent ten emails in like five days - which is one in the day and one at night...and then he didn't respond for a whole week... and then on Monday he finally emailed back, he was like 'sorry, pal', the services were down and he couldn't communicate with us and tell us.” (10 yr old boy)

“If they're in the middle of Afghanistan, they're not allowed to use comms, civvy comms, they have to use military radios so they won't be able to get in contact with you. If they're in Bastion or something they only have a certain amount on a phone because there's loads of lads who want to call, so if you have a call you only have a certain time limit to actually get to speak to them, so you hardly get any time anyway.” (15 yr old boy)

For children with parents in these 'hard to reach' environments, instant forms of communication could be problematic. If children had attempted to get in touch with their Mum or Dad through social media, waiting for a response could cause anxiety.

“What I'd do is every time I'd wake up I'd go onto, I would check Mum's iPad, every time I get home from school onto Mum's iPad, it was so infuriating...The day before we got answered I started to think maybe he wouldn't reply...” (10 yr old girl)

“It's tense because it's like... when will he text me? Will he text me in school when I don't have my phone? Will he text me when it's dead or when I'm out somewhere with no signal?” (10 yr old boy)

One teenager we spoke to had made the active decision not to contact her Dad through the internet because it was more likely to cause her unhappiness than to reassure.

Alongside the more modern techniques of communication, children had a number of traditional methods of keeping in touch with their parents. There was great enthusiasm for sending parcels and gift packages to those abroad.

“I sent a box of stuff to my Dad, and I sent the sewing of my name and I sent it to him and he called me back the next day and he told me he loved it.” (8 yr old girl)

“We send all his favourite food over and the things that he misses because he wouldn't get much in Afghan and that. Christmas we sent him presents over and his birthday.”(12 yr old girl)

Finally, families had developed a number of creative communication methods to complement electronic messaging or parcel sending.

“I used to have this special Help for Heroes Build a Bear and my Dad would record a message on it... so when you go to the bedroom, you press its hand and it's like, ‘Night night gorgeous, love you loads’, but in his voice, and it's so nice and reassuring. It's like him being there, it's lovely.”(10 yr old girl)

“Every night before bed I had this CD of my favourite book ... my Dad recorded a message on it where he'd be telling the story and every night before bed I'd put that on.” (9 yr old boy)

Support

The children we spoke with had a range of coping mechanisms to support themselves through periods of deployment or moving school. Often these were creative, inventive and focussed on dealing with emotional stress.

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“Whenever Dad goes away, I sometimes write in my book and then last year Mum got me some worry dolls because she found out I was getting a bit stressed and we'd talk to them and tell them what I'm worried about I talk to a certain doll.” (10 yr old girl)

“I find it good to let my emotions flow towards my dog about it, and then afterwards I always give him a big hug and then he just lathers me in licks.”(10 yr old boy)

“So basically, I write down the thing I'm upset about and then basically I'll just tear it, I'll write it and I'll tear it up, scrunch it up so everything I can, I might chew it, whatever...”(8 yr old girl)

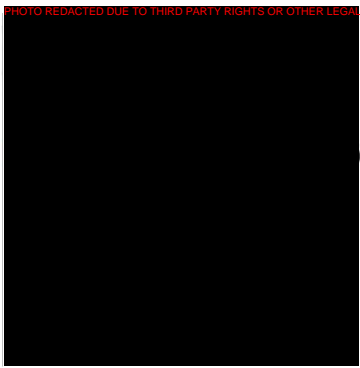
Support from school

The majority of the children we spoke to were able to point to specific support in school available to them, ranging from after school clubs to drop-in centres. Although some children had accessed support in the community, such as the RAF youth group we attended, the majority of provision centred in and around the school.

Support was particularly effective when delivered by a named member of staff with specific responsibility for the wellbeing of service children. Being able to identify a trusted member of staff, available in times of need, was important to the children we spoke to.

The majority of service children in primary schools were easily able to identify different sources of support and had experienced positive relationships with staff dedicated to the needs of service children.

Interestingly, children who spoke most passionately about the support available were those who did not attend schools with 90%-100% service child intake. In schools with a distinct group of service children, support was clear, explicit and structured, and children enjoyed engaging with this kind of provision.



“Because Miss is always, she’s always about ... because the teachers are all really busy and like they’re all, they’re always like teaching or planning something 24/7.”

“We have our Heroes Club, we will have a show and tell time where children can share with the other Service children about deployments. So, at the beginning of a term we’ll say who’s just, whose parents are back, whose parents are going away, so we can give each other advice.” (9 yr old girl)

For service children in secondary school, support was less obvious. The teenagers we spoke to were generally more reluctant to engage with any of the available support.

Some of the children we spoke to felt they did not require explicit support. These were young people who were well practiced at dealing with life in an Armed Forces family and the challenges associated with mobility and deployment. Many secondary school service children were unwilling to engage in the support provided by school, regarding it as basic and unhelpful. A number of teenagers wanted support directly from the Armed Services but did not know how to access it.

“Because if you try to say then, Miss, I’m proper worried about my Dad because he might get shot, they’ve never had to think about their Dad getting shot or getting blown up or, so they don’t know how to deal with it. It’s like someone dying and you’ve never had to experience it, you don’t know how to act with them, you don’t know what to say, what’s the drama with it.” (15 yr old boy)

“Yeah, because I think if I wanted to speak to someone now, I don’t have a clue who to go to really... I wouldn’t go to school.” (14 yr old girl)

“I’d want to speak to someone in the actual Army though, not a teacher at school.” (14 yr old boy)

Many of the teachers involved with our research highlighted the difficulty in supporting service children through deployment periods and moving schools. A lack of information sharing was an issue raised at every school we attended. Without a mechanism in place to inform schools about the deployment of parents, teachers were often left in the dark about what was happening to children at home. It was routine for teachers to discover parental deployment long after the event or part way through an unaccompanied posting.

This problem also applied to service children’s mobility plans. For example, it was only through a conversation as part of this research project that a pupil disclosed his family’s plans to move to France at the end of the year. With this information, the school could put in place a programme of work to support the child with the upcoming move. If the support teacher had not been present to overhear the conversation, it is not clear how or when they would have found out. Whilst some children we spoke to enjoyed discussing upcoming parental deployment with their teachers, others considered it a private and personal matter to keep to themselves.

“Just when he’s on tour, when he went on the second tour I didn’t want to talk to anyone about it, I’d rather just keep it to myself, I’m upset, I’d rather just be on my own.”

Methodology

We wanted to hear the first-hand views and experiences of children growing up in an Armed Forces family. Our research involved interviewing 40 children in nine focus groups across the country. These focus groups took place in the following formats:

- > 1 group of 8-9 year olds
- > 2 groups of 10-11 year olds
- > 2 groups of 11-12 year olds
- > 2 groups of 14-15 year olds
- > 2 groups of children who were mixed in age: one group with a range of children from 8 to 11 years old and one group with a range of children from 13 to 15 year olds.

The children who took part in the study were primarily accessed through their school, with the exception of the older, mixed group, which was interviewed as part of an RAF-sponsored youth group. The children were selected to take part by teachers or a youth worker.

The locations and schools were selected with the support of Forces link workers at Local Authority level. This enabled the research team to speak to children in families from a range of backgrounds i.e. Army, RAF and Navy.

Researchers then interviewed the children through discussion groups within a school or youth group setting about their own experiences, as well as those of their family and friends.

We also talked to teachers, support workers and members of the Armed Forces we met carrying out our research.

Overview of Current Policy Work

Over recent years, successive Governments have made efforts to improve support for service families, including the introduction of the Armed Forces Covenant. This document acts as a promise from the nation that those who have served or who are serving in the Armed Forces are treated fairly. Initiatives specifically aimed at supporting service children and families include Service Pupil Premium (SPP) funding for schools when parents declare their Armed Forces status. This now covers children whose parent(s) left the Armed Forces within the last 6 years, or whose parents have divorced, or those children with a parent killed in action. Under SPP, schools currently receive £300 per year, per service child⁹.

Alongside SPP, a Pupil Information Profile (PIP) was introduced in 2014 to ensure a comprehensive transfer of information between schools for mobile service children. Whilst recommended and referred to in the SEND Code of Practice, the use of this transfer document is not mandatory.

The special circumstances of service children are also recognised in parts of the school admissions code, specifically relating to the priority of school place. For instance, for in-year moves, admissions authorities can make an exception to the KS1 class size rule of 30 in offering places to Service Pupils¹⁰.

In addition, since 2011, a £6m (2011-2013) and then £9M (2014-17) per year Education Support Fund has been available to state-funded schools across the UK to bid for in an attempt to mitigate the negative impact of deployment and exceptional mobility on service children's education.

However, there remain significant problems with how these initiatives work in practice. Research has highlighted the limited nature of many of the programmes and the difficulty in securing collaboration across the sector. For example:

- > There is no specific SPP toolkit for schools to understand how this group's specific needs can be met. SPP does not extend to pre-school age or post-16 children despite them facing the same level of disruption.
- > A more detailed Common Transfer Form (CTF) from September 2018 will include improved information on service children changing schools. Providing teachers with the opportunity to detail concerns over mobility, deployment and separation will enable schools to provide tailored support for new pupils. This should aid the effective transfer of information, improving concerns over the use of the PIP, which are not routinely used. Often, schools do not have processes in place to complete or receive them, and they are filled in inadequately or are significantly delayed.
- > The MoD Education Support fund to support schools with service children ended in 2017, which means that schools previously in receipt of funding will struggle to continue with existing programmes.

Currently, because it is not mandatory for serving personnel to 'declare' their children, we do not know the exact number of service children in education. MoD personnel records and other sources of data have identified anywhere between 38,000 and 175,000 dependants of military personnel in education¹¹. In 2009, 'The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict' report from The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund gave

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-service-pupil-premium/service-pupil-premium-what-you-need-to-know>

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389388/School_Admissions_Code_2014_-_19_Dec.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.rnrmchildrensfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Children-in-Service-families.pdf>

a figure of 174,341 service children, derived from a question in a MOD survey¹². There is a 'service child' indicator in the School Census, primarily in order to accurately allocate the Service Pupil Premium, and in 2016, it included 68,771 pupils¹³. Some discrepancy is to be expected as not all service children are in the state education system.

We recommend:

The majority of service children we spoke to were happy, resilient and proud that their parents were serving in the Armed Forces. However, it is clear that a number of changes should be made to help children growing up in service families with the unique challenges they face.

Mobility

- > **While the Ministry of Defence (MoD) have a range of policies to minimise disruption to family life, we found confusion as to how they operate in practice. The MoD need to increase awareness of these policies amongst parents and senior staff, particularly around the procedures in place to minimise educational disruption (such as avoiding moves in a GCSE year). This should include improved advice to parents about informing their children's school when they are deployed.**
- > **It is vital that children do not lose additional support when they move between areas, whether that be SEND support, health treatment including CAMHS, or support from children's services. These services need to move with the child. Service children should not experience disruption to their support due to MoD relocation (including their place on a waiting list). Greater action is, therefore, needed on the transfer of support when children move between local authorities and devolved nations.**
- > **Schools should be supported to manage the timely transfer of children's information through the new Common Transfer Framework and other methods. This is needed to improve the continuity of education, particularly when children move between the devolved nations or abroad.**
- > **Broadly, service children are prioritised within the schools admission code, yet we found children not placed in the most appropriate school with siblings, causing further and unnecessary instability. The MoD/Department for Education (DfE) should work with Local Authorities and Regional Schools Commissioners on this matter.**

Deployment

- > **Service children's interests should be taken into account when making deployment decisions.**
- > **When both parents are serving personnel and subject to overseas deployment, every effort must be made by the MoD to ensure both parents are not deployed at the same time. Both parents should not be deployed unless suitable care and accommodation is secured for their child/children at home.**

¹² http://rnmchildrensfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/overlooked_casualties_of_conflict_report.pdf

¹³ https://www.winchester.ac.uk/media/content-assets/documents/UoW-research-paper_Further-and-Higher-Progression-for-Service-Children.pdf

Support

- > **MoD play and youth work strategy should be developed to ensure effective emotional support is provided for children from service families. This is particularly important for teenagers, who are often unwilling to seek support from home or school.**
- > **The MoD and DfE should improve their data collection around service pupils. They must establish a clearer understanding of the numbers of service children in schools and their patterns of mobility and parental deployment. This should include a better identification of service children who may not be declared under the current reporting systems – such as children with unmarried parents, separated parents or stepparents in the Forces.**

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