

# Celebrating Military Families

*Annex to A positive approach to a parenting:  
Part 2 of the Independent Family Review*

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December 2022

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza

Over the recent years, the Armed Forces of the United Kingdom have been tremendously active in keeping us safe and supporting our daily lives. From their Covid efforts, building the Nightingale Hospital in just nine days, to the 5,949 members of the Armed Forces deployed on ceremonial duties following the Queen's death. They have been a pillar of support during some of the darkest moments in recent years and remain a bastion of strength to countries in need of protection across the world.

This year we have also seen the atrocities in Ukraine. The conflict reminds us all of the immense but essential sacrifice service personnel make. Every day the military provides security and protection from those that would destroy this country. Behind the efforts we see of the Armed Forces are their children, parents, and families. What is often missed is the huge sacrifice they make to support members of the armed forces. As I have heard throughout my independent Family Review, everyone draws on their family for strength, and members of the military are no different. I wanted to consider military families within the context of my Family Review so I could ask whether we – both public services and wider society – are doing enough to support military families themselves.

As Children's Commissioner I believe there is a great deal of goodwill towards military families, both amongst children and professionals, but much less awareness of how we can support them. Compared to other groups of children with specific and unique needs, I feel there is less understanding of what is required from public services. This is partly because of the resilience of these children and their families. As the research for this report shows, military children consistently outperform their peers, when we look at the findings controlling for the fact that military children are often moved around to follow their parents' roles. Overall, they are often still at a disadvantage by the demands of being in a military family, and that is why we have to do more.

The Armed Forces Covenant is central to this, which is why it is so important it is now enshrined in legislation. The Covenant makes clear that neither armed forces *nor their families* should be disadvantaged as a result of serving in the military. But vital to the Covenant being properly upheld is public services and wider society understanding the needs of military families. This is where I hope this report can add value. The nature of military life in the UK is changing: there are many more women

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serving than ever before and increasingly children are growing up with two serving parents. The nature of serving is also changing: across each of the forces are an array of different roles, all with different demands. Finally, the nature of life in the military is changing to reflect modern society, with perhaps the biggest change being the move away from living on barracks and into the community.

Nowhere are these changes more apparent than in education, which is why the new analysis my office has conducted is so important. The story in education is one of longstanding challenges – children moving schools when their parents are re-deployed – in a new context – fewer children living in barracks. Traditionally, we would have thought of education for military children being delivered in specialist schools, but my research reveals that:

- The majority of military children are being educated in schools where there are less than 30 children from serving families.
- The majority of schools have no military children in them, but a significant minority – about 1 in 4 schools – are serving small military populations and about 1 in 20 schools have a significant number of military children.

While this research has focused on schools, the same principles apply across the public service, where we need to be making small adjustments to support a dispersed military community. Whether it is GP services, or NHS waiting lists, moving between areas creates issues accessing public services, and we need to address these sensibly. Crucially, we have to make the offer to military families clear and accessible. Military families do not want to, and should not have to, beg for sensible adjustments they are entitled to in law and which the British public want them to have.

However, this is not just about public services. The message I have heard throughout this Review is that social connections, and familial networks (which often include close friends) are vital for all families. Maintaining these is particularly hard for families moving around frequently. There is no easy fix for this. There are some policy changes that I believe would help, but I think it is also beholden on all of us, who benefit from the military's service, to consider what they and their families may need from us and be willing to make these adjustments in our local communities.

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## Executive Summary

This report looks at the unique strengths and needs of military families. Alongside the wider *Independent Family Review* undertaken by the Children's Commissioner it seeks to understand what is important to families, and what helps them succeed. This report on military families fits within the Family Review's work looking at children and families who may have different requirements of services.

Central to this report is new analysis of the school records of military pupils. The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCo) has conducted a range of novel analysis, mostly using data available on the National Pupil Database (NPD), to gain an insight into current issues and to better understand the day-to-day experience of a military family. The analysis focuses on children because they are the only members of a military family we can identify within public service records, but the analysis of children's experiences gives significant insight into the nature of modern family life in the military. This research was backed-up by engagement with a wide range of charities supporting military families, and an extensive review of existing research and literature.

### **The research makes four core findings:**

- Military families are increasingly unlikely to live on a military base. The majority of schools where military children attend have a service personnel of less than 10 children.
- Public services need to adapt to a highly dispersed and often not visible military community. Just 6% of schools are supporting a significant population of military children, and it is likely to be the same for other public services. Within the education system, military children are better identified thanks to the 'Service Pupil Premium'. However, the same processes do not exist in relation to other public services meaning that they often will not realise that they may need to be making adaptations.
- The biggest challenge for military families, both children and parents, is increased mobility. Overall, children of military families are three times more likely to experience two or more school moves during primary school. Moreover, these moves are more likely to be out of the education system or out of country (including to other nations of the UK). This has a significant impact on

education, but also access to other services (for both parents and children), such as mental health care. Overall, when we control for school moves in our research analysis, children of military families outperform their peers.

- Young children within military families tend to move much more frequently than older children. Anecdotally, the Review heard that as children grow up, many families decide to live apart to minimise the impact on children.
- The social and emotional cost of moving can be more significant than the practical challenges. Across the independent Family Review the Children's Commissioner has heard about the importance of extended family networks, and moving area when a serving personnel is deployed makes it harder to development and maintain these networks. Anecdotally, CCo heard that while there are many reasons why families have moved off barracks (often of their own choosing), this can lead to greater social isolation for families and friends.

## Approach and Methodology

This report forms part of the Children's Commissioner's *Independent Family Review*. The Children's Commissioner was asked by Government to undertake an independent review into support for families, following on from a recommendation of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED). In September the Commissioner published *'Family and its Protective Effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review'* (*Family Review: Part 1*). *Family Review: Part 1* used quantitative and qualitative research to paint an unparalleled portrait of modern family in Britain. It demonstrated that family, whatever form it takes, has a huge influence on a child's life changes.

Part 2 of the Review considers how public services need to adapt to better support families, and to work with them to strengthen the protective effect families exert over their members. The Children's Commissioner is considering military families alongside other groups of families whose circumstances mean they have particular needs from public services.

### A strengths-based approach to understanding military families

Military families are a unique group with distinct strengths and needs. The lifestyle demanded by the military, whilst increasingly varied between personnel, requires frequent mobility, long deployments, and an expectation that the service member(s) may spend a lot of time away. The knock-on impact of this career can impact on wider family, like spousal employment, the strain on relationships and problems with provision that arise from frequently moving local authority.

Despite this, many service families express a lot of pride and resilience in belonging to a service family and understand the necessity of many aspects of military life. Yet there are some practical and emotional issues that cannot be avoided. Overseas deployments, for instance, are reported as being uniquely difficult for families, with 43% of army families feeling they did not receive enough information before leaving, 0% of spouses thinking the move was good for their career and 4% of spouses thinking it had a positive impact on their wellbeing and mental health.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, 73% of army families would take another overseas assignment again, understanding the need for the Armed Forces to remain operationally effective even if this involves personal sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>



Children are similarly impacted by their parents' service, with many parents going as far as to consider leaving the military on account of the cost it has on their children's needs. In a 2019 Army Family Federation (AFF) survey 89% of personnel reported that they 'often consider', 'sometimes consider' or 'have decided' to leave the army on account of the impact it was having on their children.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, service children, whilst often feeling lonely and stressed by the dangers of military life, also reportedly become more robust, confident, independent, and tenacious compared to their peers.<sup>4</sup>

## **Focusing on the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant**

The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise made by the UK Government to all personnel in the Armed Forces past and present that their service cannot impede them in life, even if this involves preferential treatment. Specifically, it promises: *'Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether regular or reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.'*<sup>5</sup> It was first used as a term in the 2000 report *Soldiering - The Military Covenant* and, formally recognised by the Government as legislation in May 2011.<sup>6</sup> It is a guide to what military personnel should expect to be provided for them both during and after their service.<sup>7</sup> Lots of work has been done by the Government and others in the upkeeping of the Covenant. Since the financial year 2015/2016 £10 million a year is allocated for the continued upkeep of the Armed Forces Covenant and since 2011 £170 million has been allocated to help fund Covenant commitments across the UK.<sup>8</sup> Organisations that commit to its upkeep are committing to ensuring that serving personnel and their families are not disadvantaged by their service. This report considers what is needed for public services to meet the spirit of this promise.

## **Methodology**

The CCo has conducted a range of novel statistical analysis, mostly using data available on the National Pupil Database (NPD), to gain an insight into current issues and to better understand the day-to-day experience of a military family. This data has been chosen because it is the only public service records where we can consistently identify the family of serving personnel, but the data analysis gives significant insight into the lives of parents as well as children.

This is supported by a wide-ranging literature review and analysis of data collected by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The MoD conducts a yearly survey focusing on current defence personnel and on military families. These are known respectively as the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS) and the Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FamCAS). In addition, researchers from the Children's Commissioner's Office have met with many of the organisations working most closely with military families and advocating on their behalf. This includes Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP), the Royal Air Force Family Federation (RAFFF), the Navy Family Federation (NFF) and the Army Family Federation (AFF). Work by all these organisations has been used in the writing of this report. In 2020 the Ministry of Defence published an independent report undertaken by Andrew Selous MP '*Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the Needs of Armed forces Families* (LiOS)'.<sup>9</sup> This was a comprehensive overview of how to better meet the needs of military families. This report has substantively informed this report, and researchers from the Children's Commissioner's Office have met with LiOS authors.

## 1. Children of military families in their own words

Children's voices are at the heart of the Children's Commissioner's work. Children's views and opinions shape the office's policy recommendations and have an impact on which issues the office shines a light on. The beginning of this report shares how children of military families describe their own experience.<sup>10</sup> This provides the backdrop to the report to illustrate the needs of military families.

### 1.1 The unique nature of military life

Children themselves perceive of growing up as a military child as a unique lifestyle which is different from other children's experiences. As one 14-year-old boy said: 'Civilian children, they just don't get it.'

One 9-year-old girl, also implied this mentioning how she would use language to speak about her life that others would not necessarily understand:

*'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.'*

This uniqueness is something service children use to define themselves yet at the same time, made it difficult for children to be able to speak to someone who they felt would understand their lived experiences:

*'I'd want to speak to someone in the actual Army...not a teacher at school' – Boy, 14.*

*'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' – Girl 10.*

Children also said they would hold back speaking about certain experiences, especially when something worried them, as they felt others couldn't connect with these emotions:

*'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'* – Boy, 15.

## **1.2 Children's worries and anxieties**

Children did tell CCo about some of the worries and anxieties they have about moving often and their parents going away.

*'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'* – Girl, 10.

*'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'* – Girl, 11.

*'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'* – Girl, 9.

*'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'* – Girl, 14.

In *The Big Ask*, the largest-ever survey of children, when asked specifically 'What do you think stops children in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up?' two children responded with reference to being a member of a military family:<sup>11</sup>

*'Parents going away if they are in the army navy or air force'* – Girl, 9, *The Big Ask*.

*'My dad could see me more when he is in the army maybe'* – Girl, no age given, *The Big Ask*.

One young person in the more recent 2020 MoD commissioned report *Living in Our Shoes* said it would be helpful to understand more about the parents' deployment:<sup>12</sup>

*'I would like to know more about the deployment, so that I could understand what my father was going to be doing.'*

## **1.3 Pride and resilience**

A lot of the literature on military families talks about how resilient and proud service children are. It is clear that being a military child, even if it does come with challenges, is by no means a negative experience. Whilst expressing some of their worries as above, these sentiments are repeated in what children have told the CCo.

*'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'* – Girl, 10.

Many children speak about several aspects of their lives positively – in particular, about the positives of the actual setting of the camps they live in.

*'I love where I live because we can play out, we've got open space and, where it's all surrounded by a wall'* – Girl, 10.

*'You can run free in camp because you don't have to be worried about anybody'* – Girl, 10.

Thinking positively about the living environment also translated to moving from their living environments into new ones. Children spoke about how they adapt to where they move and see the positives in being able to gain new experiences in new settings. *'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'* – Boy, 10.

*'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'* – Girl, 10.

Some also had developed their own 'coping mechanisms', or ways to think about moving places. As one 14-year-old girl said:

*'My Dad always told me to just stop thinking about the last one [school] and just move on, get on with it.'*

Similarly, children spoke about their 'coping mechanisms' for when their parents went away.

*'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' – Girl, 10.*

*'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' – Boy, 9.*

## **1.4 Education and mobility**

Mobility is a huge part of the military lifestyle, affecting every branch, role, and rank. Whilst children spoke about moving generally positively as above, it can come at a cost. A large part of children's concerns surround specifics in their education, like worries about repeating classes and exams. As we heard from children:

*'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' – Girl, 12.*

*'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?' – Boy, 15.*

*'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' – Girl, 15.*

These sentiments were also shared in Living in Our Shoes. As one young person is quoted saying:

*'I've learned about the Romans five times now in history, but maths is a problem because I have missed bits out.'*

## 2. Key Statistical findings

### 2.1. Number of service children

As it stands there is no accurate figure for the number of service children in the UK though the 2011 census did report that there were over 200,000 children in England and Wales aged 0-15 who reported they lived with a member of the Armed Forces.<sup>13</sup> Following on from this the *UK Armed Forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021* reported that there are 1.7 million (7% of all households) with one or more persons who have served in the Armed Forces.<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this report, CCo has chosen however to focus on service children in England as the records of these children are all stored on the National Pupil Database (NPD).

As of the summer 2022, there were 71,800 pupils in England who were indicated as service children in the school census via the inclusion of the Service Pupil Premium in the NPD. The SCiP alliance argues that the use of Service Pupil Premium (SPP) as an indicator therefore implies too narrow of a definition of service child, instead considering any child whose parents served in the military in the first 25 years of the child's lives to be a service child.<sup>15</sup> Whilst using SPP is not a perfect metric, this means service children represent at least 0.8% of the 8.9 million pupil population in England.

### 2.2. Make up of military families

*Family Review: Part 1* highlighted a few key characteristics regarding the demographics of modern families in Britain. 37% of families with children in the UK were not married, with 14% cohabiting and 23% headed by a lone parent. Since 2001 there has been a slight decrease in the number of couples with children who are married (65% in 2001 to 63% in 2021) and a slight increase in the number of couples with children who are co-habiting (11% in 2001 to 14% in 2021). 44% of children born 2000-2001 did not live with their biological parents for all their childhood. Additionally, there has been an increase in the number of mothers working from 2002 to 2021, rising from 67% to 76%.<sup>16</sup>

In 2022, it was estimated that 47% of defence personnel were married or in civil partnerships. Of this group 78% had children - 33% of which had a child under the age of 5.<sup>17</sup> An estimated 25% of personnel are in a long-term relationship<sup>18</sup>. 49% of personnel were financially responsible for at least one child fails



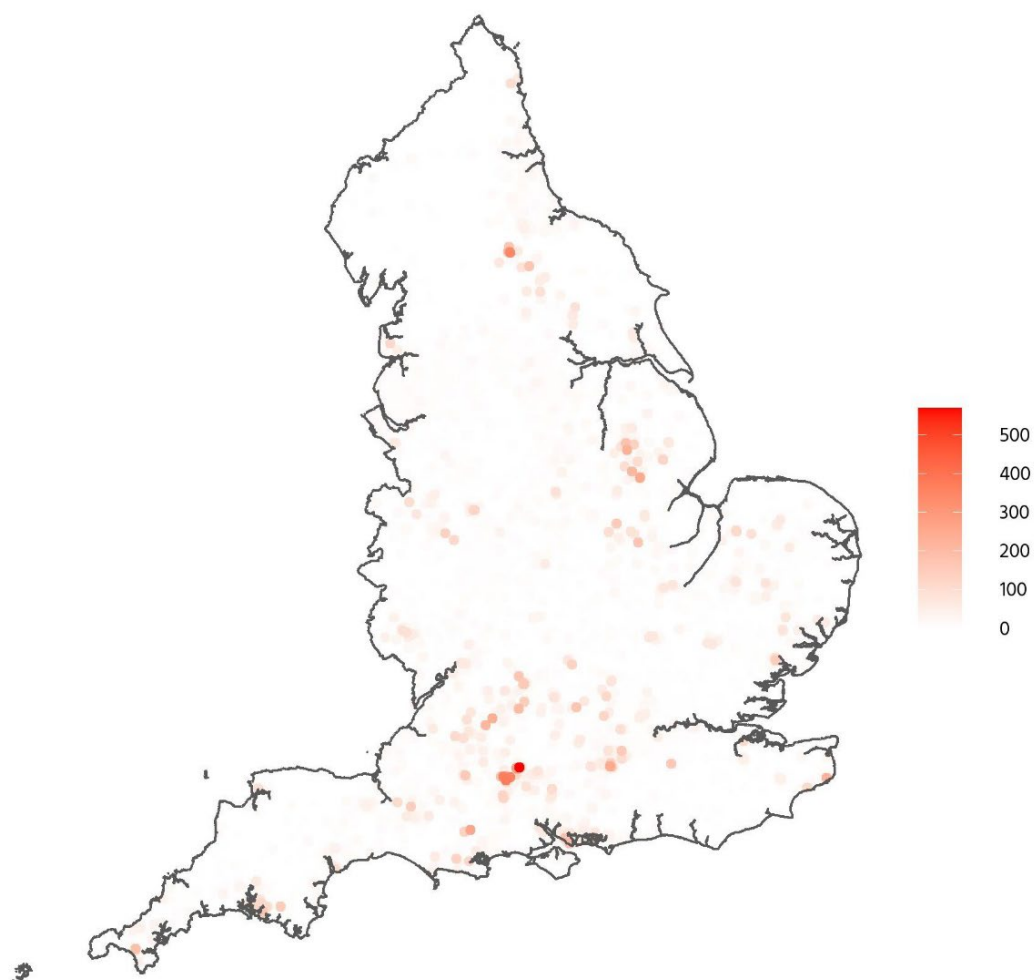
to indicate what percentage of this is from dual-serving parents.<sup>19</sup> There are an increasing number of employed spouses with some of them often being the higher-earner.<sup>20 21</sup> 78% of spouses are employed with 46% of spouses being educated to at least an undergraduate level of education.<sup>22</sup> Spouses being educated to an undergraduate level differs by rank, with 71% of Officer spouses being educated to an undergraduate level and 36% of other ranks spouses being educated to an undergraduate level.<sup>23</sup>

## **2.3. Distribution of service children across schools**

The majority of children of military families (54%) are attending a school where less than 30 other children are also in the military. As of summer 2022, 56% of schools had no service children, 39% had at least one but less than 10 service children and 6% had 10 or more service children in their school. This shows there is a significant minority of schools (39%) who have a small number of service children for whom they need to make special adjustments.

Schools which had a high number of service children were clustered around military regional hubs. These include Army garrisons such as Tidworth in Wiltshire and Catterick in North Yorkshire as well as RAF bases in Lincolnshire, but there are a substantial number of bases across the country. There are significant numbers of defence personnel who are 'weekending', meaning the school their children go to is not necessarily near a base at all. Figure 1 highlights the spread of service children across England.<sup>24</sup>

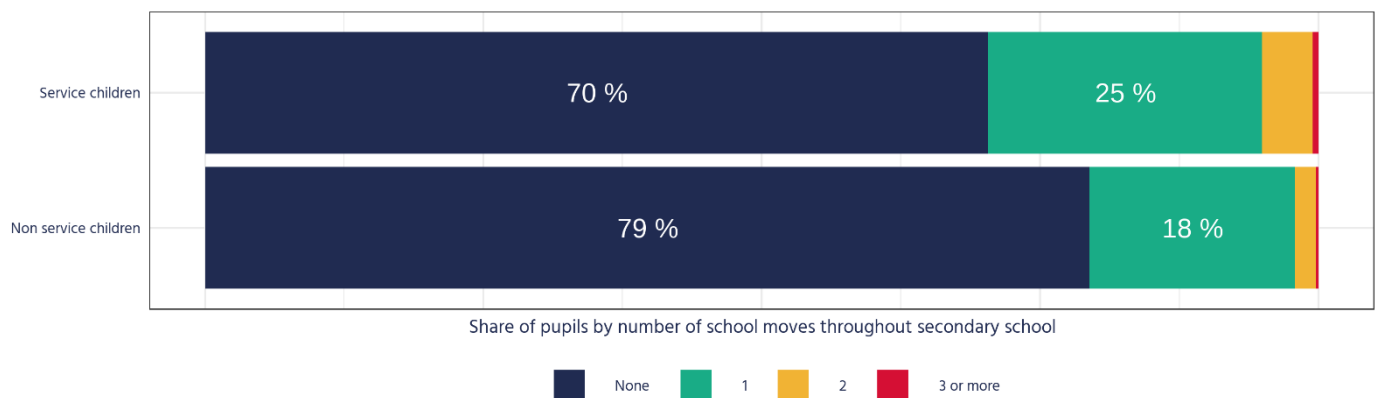
**Figure 1: Number of Service Children per school**



## **2.4. Number of school moves experienced by school children**

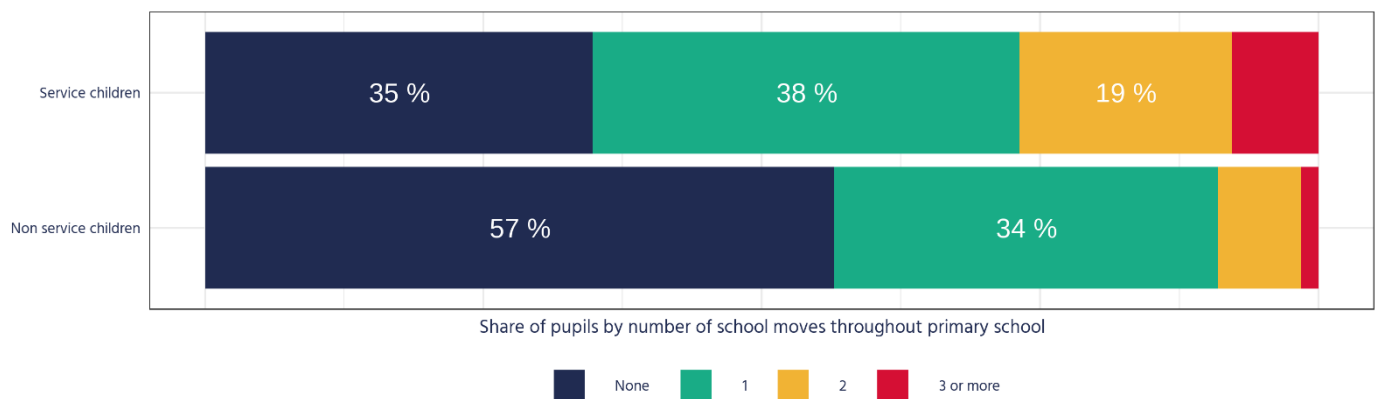
Amongst the 2021-22 Year 11 cohort, 30% of service children, identified by the SPP, had experienced one or more school move during secondary school compared to 20% of non-service children. Additionally, figure 2 shows that 5% of service children experienced at least two school moves in secondary school compared to just 2% of non-service children.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Year 11 pupils by number of secondary school moves and service child status**



Moving schools is more common among primary school pupils. As shown in Figure 3, 27% of service children experienced at least two moves in primary school compared to 9% of non-service children.

**Figure 3: Distribution of Year 6 pupils by number of primary school moves and service child status**

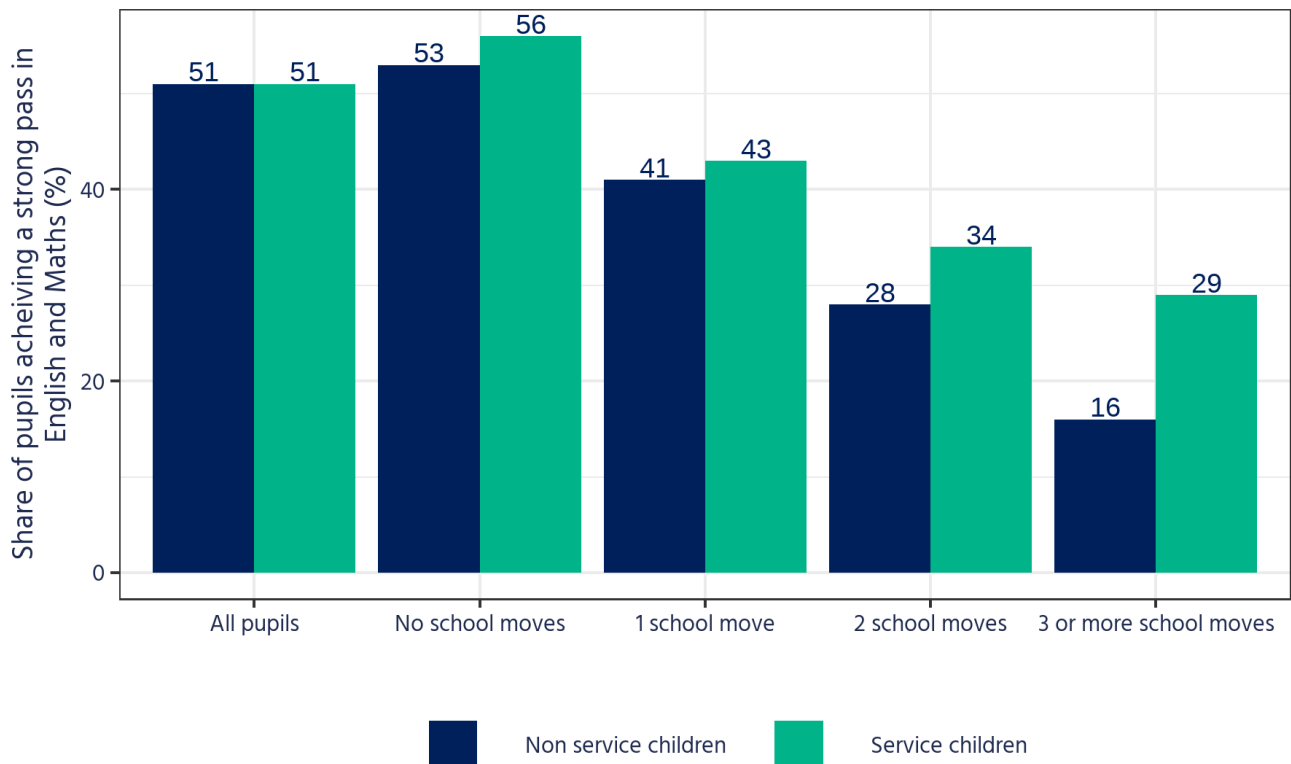


## 2.5. Attainment gap between service children and non-service children

Figure 4 below shows that Year 11 service children outperform non-service children who have moved school the same number of times. However, as shown in figure 2, service children are more likely to experience multiple school moves and the phenomenon of attainment decreasing with additional

school moves still occurs. CCo's analysis confirms that service children do at least as well as non-service children.

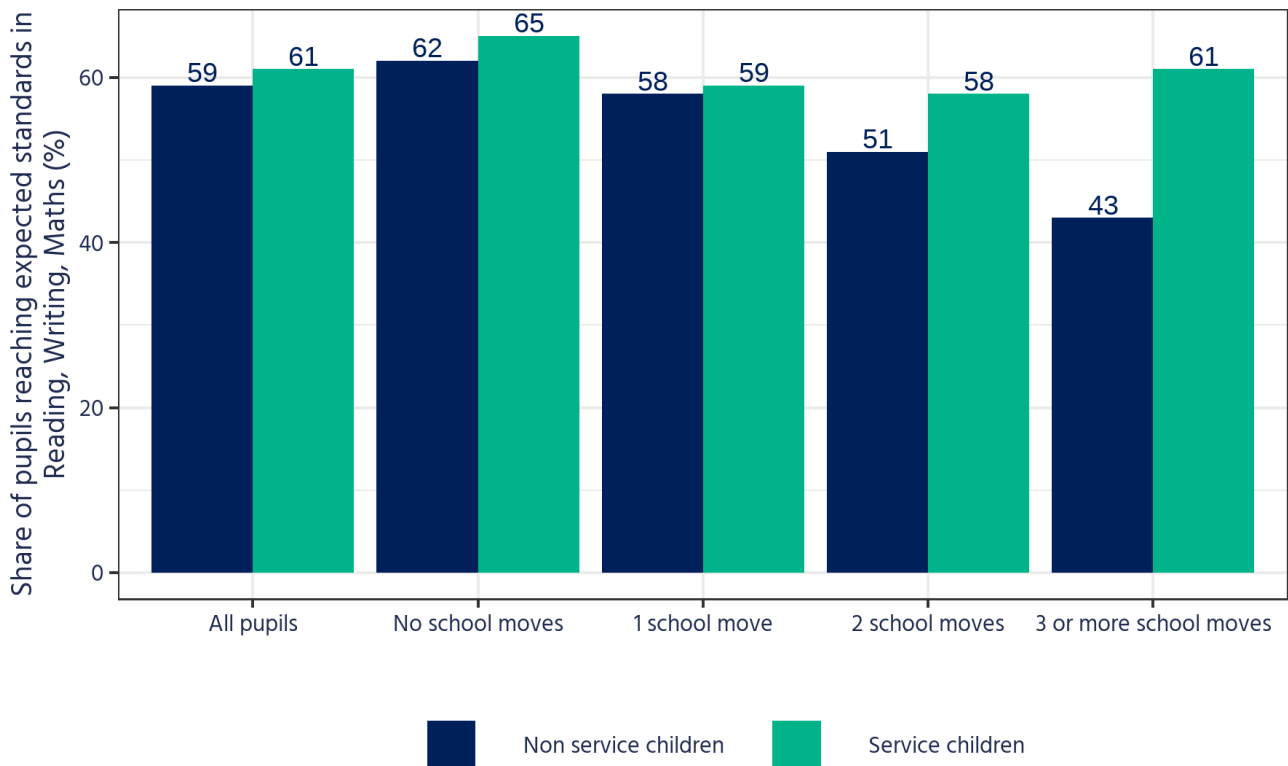
**Figure 4: Share of pupils achieving a strong pass in English and Maths GCSEs in 2022 by service child status and number of school moves throughout secondary school**



Note: Cohort includes all KS4 pupils who were in state-school system throughout secondary school  
Number of moves refers to moves during secondary school

Similarly, service children outperform non-service children with the same number of school moves in Key Stage 2 (KS2) exams, as shown in Figure 5. However, unlike in secondary school, for service children in primary school, attainment is similar for pupils with any number of moves (1, 2, or 3 or more).

**Figure 5: Share of pupils reaching the expected standards in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 by service child status and number of school moves throughout primary school**

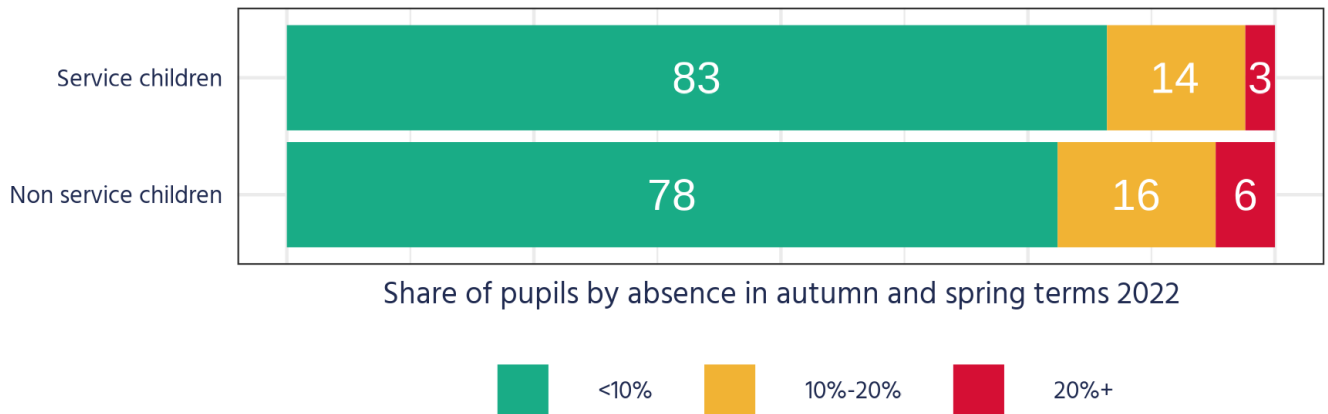


Note: Cohort includes all KS2 pupils who were in state-school system throughout primary school  
Number of moves refers to moves during primary school

## 2.6. Absence rates of service children

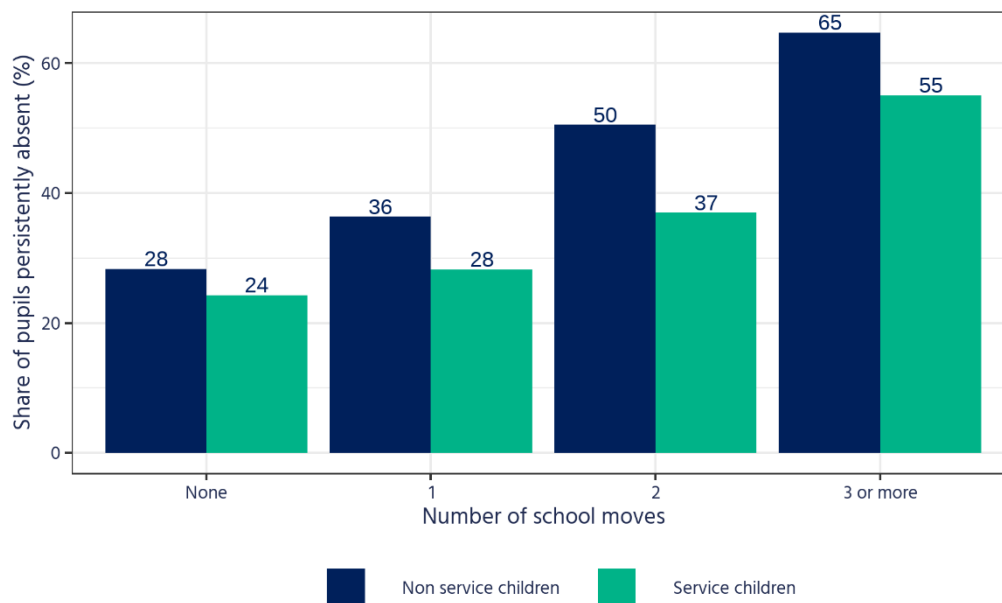
As shown in Figure 6, service children are less likely to be persistently absent (missing over 10% of possible sessions) than non-service children.

**Figure 6: Share of pupils by absence in autumn and spring terms 2022**



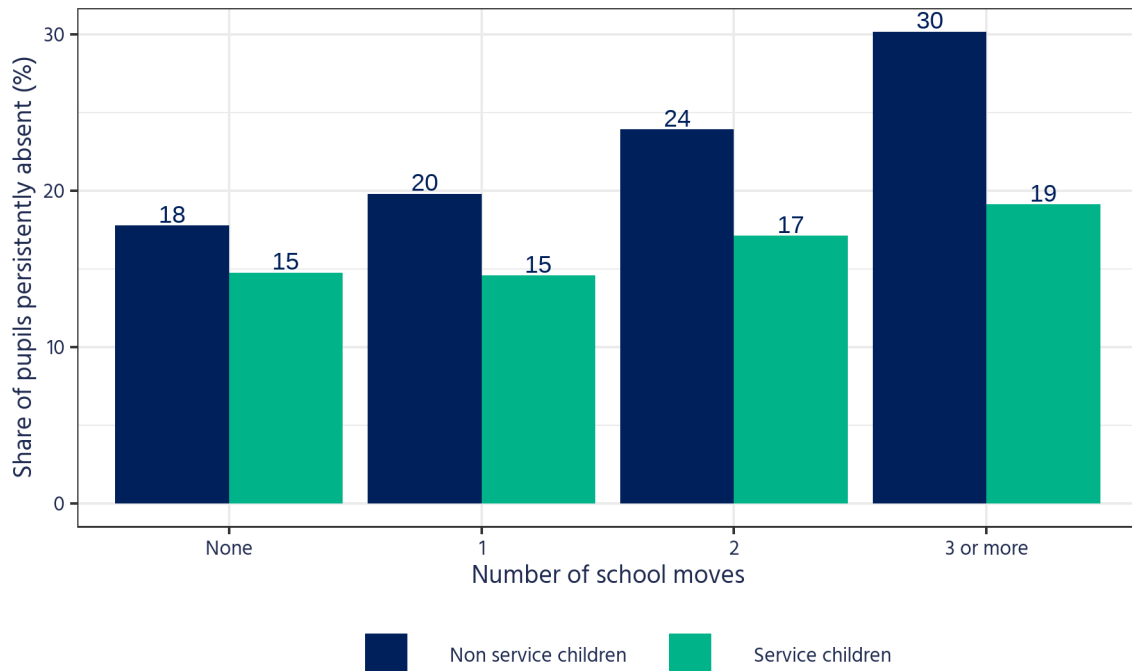
However, as shown in Figure 7, the share of Year 11 pupils persistently absent increases in the number of school moves for both service children and non-service children. Among service and non-service Year 6 pupils, the share persistently absent is higher for pupils with at least 3 moves, as shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 7: Share of Year 11 pupils persistently absent by number of school moves and service child status**



Note: Cohort includes all KS4 pupils who were in state-school system throughout secondary school  
Number of moves refers to moves during secondary school

**Figure 8: Share of Year 6 pupils persistently absent by number of school moves and service child status**



Note: Cohort includes all KS2 pupils who were in state-school system throughout primary school  
Number of moves refers to moves during primary school

## 2.7 Share of children who left the state school system

Among the 2017-18 Year 7 cohort, 9% of pupils who were service children in Year 7 left the mainstream state school system for at least one term throughout secondary school, compared to 7% of non-service children. Among the 2016-2017 Year 1 cohort, 21% of pupils who were service children in Year 1 left the mainstream school system for at least one term throughout primary school, compared to 8% of non-service children. Pupils leaving the state school system could be due to moving to an independent school, moving to alternative provision, moving to a school out of the country, becoming home schooled or missing education.

## **2.8. Consistency of Service Child status**

Among the 2021-22 Year 11 cohort, 4% of pupils (225 pupils) who were service children in Year 11 had their Service Pupil Premium (SSP) support interrupted for one term at some point in secondary school. Among the Year 6 cohort, 5% of pupils (329 pupils) who were service children in Year 6 had their Pupil Premium support interrupted for one term at some point in primary school. This typically coincides with a move to another school.

## **2.9 Consistency of SEN support**

Among the 2021-22 Year 11 cohort, 6% of pupils who were service children in Year 11 with SEN support at some point in secondary school (95 pupils) lost their SEN support when moving schools compared to 3% of non-service children with SEN support. Similarly, among the Year 6 cohort, 8% of pupils who were service children in Year 6 with SEN support at some point in primary school (102 pupils) lost their SEN support when moving schools compared to 4% of non-service children with SEN support.



## 3. The issues that can impact military families

### 3.1. Housing and accommodation for military families

Amongst service families, housing is one of the issues which is raised the most.<sup>25 26</sup> Many military families live on base, with varied reports on the quality-of-service housing provision.<sup>1</sup> There are different housing entitlements to which service personnel are entitled depending on their marital status. And the exact type of housing allocated depends on rank for officers and family size for other ranks.<sup>27</sup> Single or unaccompanied personnel are expected to live in single living accommodation (SLA).<sup>28</sup> Some service personnel living in SLA commute back to families on the weekend.<sup>29</sup> An estimated 24% of Armed Forces families live separately to serving personnel.<sup>30</sup>

Married personnel with families are entitled to service family accommodation (SFA). Recently the military has changed its policies and allowed non-married personnel who are in long term relationships to be eligible, but not entitled, to SFA. And the Future Accommodation Model (FAM) is a redesign of policy that incentivises living off patch with financial assistance from the military.

### 3.2. Deployments of personnel

One of the unique things facing military families is service personnel being deployed. This can be a particularly stressful time for families due to the uncertainty of how long the time away from home will last.<sup>31 32</sup> Service charities report that families speak of the impact of deployments on home life to them,

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<sup>1</sup> The family federations collect data on the issues affecting personnel in their respective branch. The RAFFF and NFF use this data in larger reports whereas the AFF publish an annual '*Family Concerns report*'. For the April 2021 to March 2022 period, housing and accommodation were the biggest issues, making up 22% of all inquiries in that time period. Similar sorts of complaints are repeated in the 2019-2020 *RAFFF Impact report* which reported that housing and accommodation took up 42% of inquiries in that time period.<sup>1</sup> *The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2021*, reports the large amounts of investment that the military has put into housing and accommodation, but, with a satisfaction report of just 53%, issues remain

looking for support.<sup>33</sup> Some organisations also report that this can affect service children's wellbeing long term.<sup>34</sup>

### **3.3. The Impact of service life on young people and children**

Amongst married military personnel, 78% have at least one child with 49% of all personnel being financially responsible for at least one child.<sup>35</sup> And service life has a tremendous impact on personnel's children, this is a nuanced picture with some children being more resilient and stronger consequently.<sup>36</sup>

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#### **3.3.1. How the school system aims to support service children**

Educational outcomes are an important indicator and a metric by which to assess children's future life chances. It is therefore encouraging, particularly the unique experiences of service children, that they do at least as well as non-service children on Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 assessments (see Section 4). There are, however, circumstances which do affect their outcomes.

Service children who experience multiple moves or instability have, expectedly, worse outcomes. The reasons for this are complex and include the impact of families living apart, gaps in education provision because of placement moves, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support being inconsistent or interrupted, a lack of understanding of what works for military family and the impact of school moves.

One of the levers available to schools is the Service Pupil Premium (SPP). The SPP is funding allocated to schools for pupils flagged as service children. The funding exists so that schools can meet service children's needs. The analysis in the Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2021 shows that each military child receives around £310 annually, meaning cumulatively '...more than £24.7 million will be paid to schools in the financial year 2021/22, benefiting nearly 80,000 pupils'. The ways in which this funding is used is not prescribed, nor is there a huge amount of guidance on what works to support these children. A report commissioned by the Service Children in State Schools (SCSS), Supporting Service Children: The Voice of Schools Consultation Findings, breaks down how the SPP is (non-exclusively) spent. 76% of schools surveyed use it to promote emotional/mentoring support, 48% use it to enable service children to participate in 'enrichment activities', 47% use it to provide academic

support and 24% use it to fund staff posts. Understanding if the SPP is used effectively is a case-by-case scenario, as there is currently no universal oversight or accountability into how the SPP is spent.

### **3.3.2. Service children and the value of community**

In *The Big Ask*, all children told the CCo that they liked being part of a community - they care about improving their neighbourhoods and want things to do activities that are affordable, fun, and sustaining.<sup>39</sup> Given military children's sometimes transient experience, it is true that they are less likely to feel part of a geographic community but do strongly feel part of a values-based community around being part of service families. They value and cherish being part of a familiar and supportive community, given the challenges they face in having consistency and stability. Among the cohort of pupils in Year 6, 27% of service children experienced at least two moves in primary school compared to 9% of non-service children (see 4.5).

Part of this sense of community comes from service children feeling proud of their parents' jobs and proud to be part of the Armed Forces community.<sup>40</sup> Military children were not only proud but extremely well-informed members of the Armed Forces community, with it making up a significant part of their identity.<sup>41</sup> We know that military children experience their own and unique set of challenges that come with frequent moves and parents being deployed. A real source of strength for these children was being able to share their experiences with other children going through the same thing, in a school setting.<sup>42</sup> Attending a school with other service children helped to develop an environment in which young people felt confident in expressing their feelings and seeking support.<sup>43</sup> Living in forces accommodation helped children develop close relationships with the children of other service personnel, which is invaluable when children are having to navigate the challenges of service life.

For military children not living and being educated on a base, being part of a supportive community at school, where teachers and/or students understood them, was really important. This support was particularly effective when military children had a named teacher, who was responsible for the wellbeing of service children.<sup>44</sup> For older children, the Armed Forces themselves were who they felt would most support them and provide them with the community they were seeking out.<sup>45</sup>

Groups such as the Scouts are key in supporting military children to feel more part of their community. Working with the Royal Navy, RAF and Army has enabled uniform groups like the Scouts to have badges

in partnership and empower children to develop skills for life like teamwork, leadership, and collaboration. These communities provide places of community and sources of support for military children and teach other children about the realities of service life, further broadening the support network military children can depend on.

### **3.3.3. Looking after the needs of young carers in military families**

As with many young carers, the needs of military children who are young carers are often complex. There is currently no reliable data on the number of young carers in military families nor on their experiences.<sup>46</sup> The office has recommended that all schools appoint a young carers champion who is able to support their needs and make sure they have someone who is able to understand and champion them. The office is keen that this group are recognised and their particular needs met.

## **3.4. The health and wellbeing of serving personnel and their families**

As the *2019/20 RAFF impact report* describes, there is a lot of confusion around access to healthcare for both personnel and serving families.<sup>47</sup> For defence personnel themselves their health is managed by Defence Medical Services (DMS), whereas the rest of the military family's healthcare is provided by the NHS (this is excluding overseas postings where the entire military family might be cared for by DMS or local health services).<sup>48</sup> There is higher than average demand for healthcare services by military families. The AFF report *Duty and Care Armed Forces Family Mobility and Health Care Report* included how in 2021 82% of military families needed access to dentist, 89% needed access to a GP, 54% needed access to a hospital or specialist service and 18% needed access to mental health services.<sup>49</sup>

The main issue in providing healthcare to serving personnel and families stems from the mobility that is essential to military life. Frequent mobility causes difficulty with registering and accessing, for example, GPs or dentists and causes a large wait for services, since moving local authorities (LA) places families to the back of waiting lists. It also creates difficulty securing continuity of treatment and means children may face repeated assessments for SEND. Regarding waiting lists, LiOS reports that there are concerns about the continuation of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Though this LiOS report points out that service children should not be moved to the bottom of the waiting list when moving LA, this frequently happens anyway. Only 16% of parents were confident that their child was

recognised as a military child by their healthcare provider and 70% of parents reported that their GP or other NHS professional was not sufficiently understanding of their needs as a military family.<sup>50</sup>

The NHS has recently released *Healthcare for the Armed Forces community: a forward view from serving to civilian life: health and wellbeing for all* which incorporates the concerns and needs of defence personnel into the NHS's long-term plan.<sup>51</sup> NHS England is on track to extend access to mental health support to a further 345,000 children and young people by 2022/23, which includes service children.

### **3.5. Communicating with families**

Currently, much of the communication between the Armed Forces and personnel's family members is via the serving member of the military. Recent surveys show 37% of families receiving information via the serving partner.<sup>52</sup> 30% of military families say they receive no information from the MoD at all, with some spouses commenting they feel undervalued as a result.<sup>53</sup> LiOS recommends direct communication to military spouses to alleviate these problems and other organisations have also provided toolkits on how to provide for service children.<sup>54</sup>

## **4. Next steps**

Military families are remarkable, and they deserve services and support that recognise that and help them thrive. All families deserve a support network around them, and it is beholden on all of society to help them achieve this. Given the range of issues that are affecting military families, below are a set of potential solutions to improve service families and children's experiences and outcomes.

### **4.1 Solutions**

#### **1. Recognising the power of families**

The starting point for better support to families of serving personnel is proper recognition of the role families play in supporting the serving member. The Ministry of Defence should set the tone by ending the practice of referring to military families as 'dependents'. This does not recognise that often non-military partners are earning themselves and fails to recognise the enormous strength that serving personnel draw from their family support network.

#### **2. Upholding the Armed Forces Covenant across all public services**

The nature of life in a military family life is changing. With a shift from military families living on bases to the community, there can be small numbers of service children in one school, or families in one local area. Public and voluntary services need to change their mindset from supporting military families on bases, to supporting them in the community. All public services, even if they do not think they have a service population, should be clearly advertising the Armed Forces Covenant provisions available so that families do feel they are having to seek special provisions.

#### **3. Identification of and communication to families**

As more military families move away from military bases and into the community this should be reflected in the Armed Forces thinking towards identification of and communication to military families. The Forces should do more to communicate directly with military partners, spouses, and children. This is particularly important to maintain a sense of community when the serving personnel is on deployment.

#### **4. Better understanding of service children in education**

As CCo research has shown, service children perform as well as all children, and often better if they do not move frequently, as the frequency of school moves can undermine educational progress. But more is needed to help children who are subject to frequent school moves. The Children's Commissioner would like to see:

The Department for Education put a greater focus on ensuring children in receipt of the service pupil premium are able to benefit from the National Tutoring Programme, particularly those who experience a school move.

The Department for Education work with the Educational Endowment Foundation to undertake research to understand the most effective ways to support children in military families who are disadvantaged as a result of multiple school moves in order to build up a more comprehensive evidence base as to the use of service pupil premium.

The Department for Education use the reforms in the SEND Green Paper to ensure that Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) move with a service child when they move due to deployment.

#### **5. Consistency in the health service**

To uphold the Armed Forces Covenant it is vital that military families' access to healthcare is not disturbed by moving between areas. The NHS is making progress supporting military families as they move, by implementing military families' champions. This is the right approach, but it needs to go further by ensuring all service family champions are consistent in their provision, accountable, well known, and capable. There needs to be clearly defined principles of what serving families should expect, such as not going to the back of CAMHS waiting lists. To support this, more could be done to raise awareness both with serving families and NHS staff.

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