

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Forces Children Scotland is a children's rights-led organisation. We value children and young people's thoughts and opinions, and our work is guided by them. In 2023 we launched our co-produced influencing strategy, [A Force for Meaningful Change](#), which has five manifesto themes. This report furthers the theme of upholding children's rights.

When it comes to realising their human rights, children from armed forces and veteran families face challenges through experiences resulting from the role of a serving parent.

Children and young people from armed forces and veteran families are not a homogenous group. Many do well and there are many examples of where their rights have been promoted. However, in this report, we will demonstrate that some children and young people from this community do not experience their human rights to the fullest.



THE CHILDREN'S HUMAN RIGHTS CONTEXT

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was created in recognition of the fact that children require special protections for their rights due to their status as children. While the UNCRC makes no explicit reference to children and young people from armed forces families, all its provisions apply to them as a group who experience greater risk of their rights not being promoted.

When it comes to children from armed forces and veteran families, **Scotland and the UK must understand and consider their unique childhoods to ensure everything possible is being done to protect and promote their rights.**

In July 2024, Scotland incorporated the UNCRC into Scots Law, within the limits of devolution. **To support promotion of children's rights, a plan for the progressive realisation of the rights of children from armed forces and veteran families must be built into budget and policy planning at a UK, Scottish and local government level, to ensure the greatest impact for these children.**

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The Armed Forces Covenant and its Duty go some way towards strengthening protections for forces children but, with the commencement of the UNCRC Act, **we need urgent clarity about how the UK and Scottish Governments and local authorities will protect against potential disruption to the fulfilment of their rights.**

This report outlines how the rights of children and young people from armed forces and veteran families are affected across three categories – **protection, provision and participation** – and shares recommendations that children and young people have said would make a difference.

RIGHTS TO PROTECTION

These ensure children are protected from actions that threaten their dignity, survival or development. These actions are, in the main, carried out by adults and institutions. These rights include:

Article 2 Non-discrimination.

Article 9 To not be separated from their parents.

Article 16 To be protected from arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family home or correspondence.

Article 3 For all decisions made about them to have their best interests as a primary consideration.

Children and young people from armed forces and veteran families often face barriers to their protection rights due to a parent's service.



Children and young people frequently express that separation is one of the most difficult aspects of having a serving parent¹. Children and young people also report that service life can impact on their right to privacy and that they can

¹ Children's Commissioner (2018) *Kin and Country: Growing Up as an Armed Forces Child*, page 10

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feel discriminated against because of their parent's service. The impact differs depending on the child's age and experiences.

We urge decision-makers to review all policies and guidelines relating to postings and extended residential training courses, to ensure that there is direct instruction to consider the impact on children, and that any possible mitigations are considered and implemented.

More needs to be done to educate the wider community about the strengths that children and young people from forces families bring to new settings and the challenges to their protection rights they face.

More needs to be done to identify mitigations for the effects of separation, discrimination and breach of privacy for all children, to promote their best interests.

Article 3 gives children the right to have their best interests assessed and taken into account as a primary consideration².

There may be a perceived clash between the best interests of children from armed forces families and national security and the needs of the services. **When some sacrifice is required, the distribution of rights should be fair³.** Children and young people from forces families tell us that it does not feel fair and they do not feel heard.

When children's best interests conflict with other interests and a suitable compromise cannot be found – as is the case with children from forces families and the service-related separations they experience – then in weighing up the rights of all concerned, **the child's interest must have a high priority and not just one of several considerations.**

RIGHTS TO PROVISION

The UNCRC gives children rights to the services, skills and resources necessary to ensure their survival and development to their full potential. These rights include:

Article 24 Access to healthcare

Article 28 and 29 Access to education

Article 27 Access to suitable housing

Article 18 Access to childcare and family support.

² UNICEF, [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

³ Theobald (2019) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: "Where are we at in recognising children's rights in early childhood, three decades on?". [International Journal of Early Childhood \(springer.com\)](#)



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Children and young people have raised accessing these rights as challenging due to being in a forces family. The provision rights will provide mitigation when the protection rights cannot be fully met.



The frequent moves experienced by those in the armed forces directly affect how their children experience their provision rights.

Family support is a fundamental provision to reduce families entering a crisis point and the chances of family breakdown⁴.

Article 18 of the UNCRC recognises that parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their child(ren). **Governments must provide appropriate assistance to parents so they can fulfil their parenting responsibilities⁵.**

The Scottish Government has committed to a transformational agenda to deliver family support in ways families need, when and where they need this, however, forces families are not named as a priority group to receive support.

Research into the lives of forces families has consistently highlighted challenges in receiving formal family support which understands and responds to the unique circumstances in which parenting and childhood takes place^{6,7}. For the serving parent, research has shown that reintegration into the family following deployment is particularly difficult⁸. **Research shows that the challenges to family life through service separations and reintegration can have a detrimental impact on the short-, medium- and long-term wellbeing of partners and children⁹.**

Children and young people have told us they would like support as a family during service-related separations.

4 Scottish Government, *Whole Family Wellbeing Funding – Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)*

5 UNICEF, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

6 The Centre for Social Justice (2016) *Military Families and Transition*, page 33

7 RAF Benevolent Fund (2021) *Growing up in the RAF*, page 13

8 DeVoe and Ross (2012) *The Parenting Cycle of Deployment, Military Medicine*, page 187

9 Godier-McBard, Wood and Fossey (2021) *The Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict – Update and Review Report*, pages 24, 25, 43



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The annual survey of forces spouses and partners, **FamCAS**, has reported that **nearly three in eight spouses/partners did not know where to go for welfare support while their serving spouse/partner was deployed**¹⁰. Only 30% reported being satisfied with aspects of support during deployment – and this has been decreasing since 2015¹¹.

Forces children and young people and their families tell us that it can be difficult to access the right support at the right times. **They are reluctant to access services provided by the Ministry of Defence, such as welfare services, as they feel it may adversely affect the serving parent’s career to do so.**

It is imperative that armed forces and veteran families are actively considered in the delivery of the Scottish Government’s whole family support and involved in the design of such services. We need to see an end to the ‘just get on with it’ culture and foster one in which it is okay for forces families to seek support when they need it – and for them to receive support for as long as it is needed.

Another important aspect of support for families enshrined in Article 18 is the provision of childcare. **The lack of childcare, particularly before and after school and during school holidays, can result in the non-serving parent experiencing challenges when it comes to maintaining employment or obtaining the respite necessary during deployments.** This issue is far reaching, with 74% of families with a child under the age of five requiring childcare¹². Impact on partner employment is cited as one of the common reasons that service personnel decide to leave the forces¹³.

To meet the needs of service families, **it is imperative that childcare is recognised as a right and more needs to be done to ensure that what families say they need is available in all areas, particularly where there is a large population of forces families.**

Article 28 recognises the right of children to access education.
Article 29 urges governments to ensure



¹⁰ Ministry of Defence (2023) *Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2023*, page 20

¹¹ Ministry of Defence (2023) *Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2023*, page 21

¹² Ministry of Defence (2023) *Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2023*, page 15

¹³ Selous, Walker and Misca (2020) *Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the Needs of UK Armed Forces Families*, page 99



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education develops the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. 17% of families with school-age children said they had experienced a change of school for service reasons in the previous 12 months¹⁴. FamCAS reported that families who moved were more likely to experience difficulties when it came to schooling when compared with those who did not move¹⁵. This is supported by emerging research showing that service-related mobility has a negative effect on children's academic potential, with children who experience more moves, or moves at key stages, being less likely to achieve higher grades in the senior phase¹⁶.

Some families face difficult choices when seeking to provide their children with educational stability.

These choices include sending their children to boarding school, staying put as a family, with the serving parent travelling home when they can, or having extended family members care for the child while the rest of the family moves away. There is a scarcity of research on these choices in the context of military service and attainment.

There is a lack of information about how many young people from forces families access higher

and further education compared with non-forces children. It is acknowledged though that frequent moves across educational systems may impact on the likelihood of a young person from a forces family attending university¹⁷. More needs to be done to mitigate the barriers to forces children in accessing further education.

Challenges can also arise for children and young people from forces families in accessing Additional Support for Learning (ASL). Children and young people from armed forces families are specifically mentioned in the Supporting Children's Learning statutory guidance as a group that may have additional support needs over and above specific learning difficulties due to service-related

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence (2023) *Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2023*, page 17

¹⁵ Ministry of Defence (2023) *Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2023*, page 30

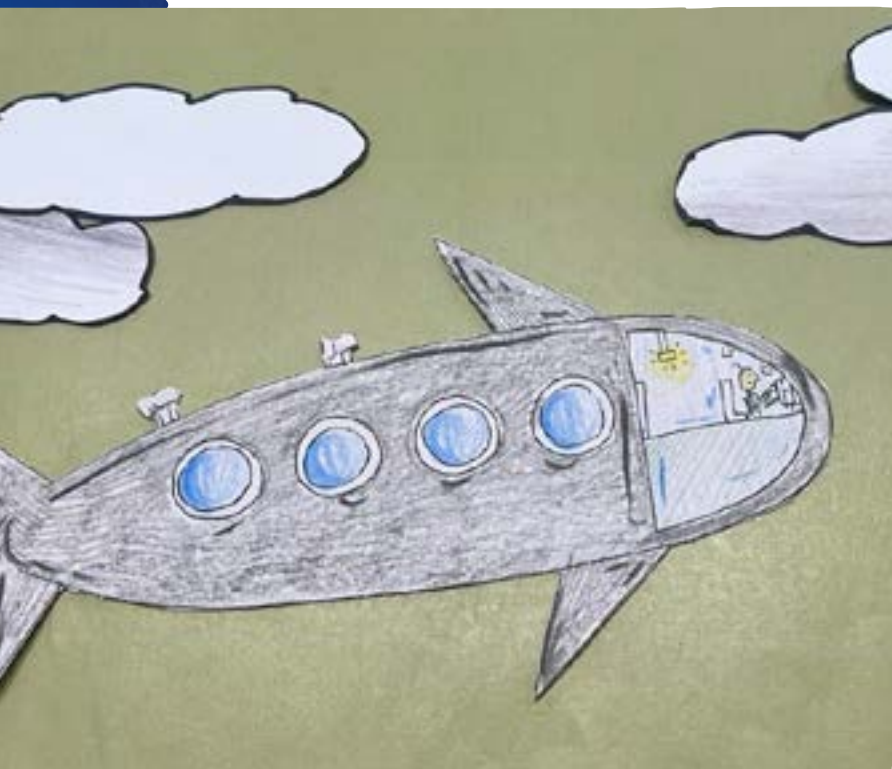
¹⁶ Cotton (2024) *GCSE attainment in children from military families, (conference session), Forces in Mind Trust Research Centre Conference, 13 May 2024, London*

¹⁷ Selous, Walker and Misca (2020) *Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the Needs of UK Armed Forces Families*, page 65



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events such as deployment¹⁸. However, children and young people have told us that these needs are often not recognised or met, which can affect their right to education and longer-term attainment. When it is recognised, it makes a significant difference to the young person. **Sometimes, specific learning challenges such as dyslexia or autism are not identified early due to frequent school moves.**



Under Article 24 of the UNCRC, children have the right to enjoy the highest attainable standards of health and access to services and facilities for the treatment of illness and promotion of health. Frequent moves mean that children and young people may end up at the bottom of waiting lists each time they move, resulting in delays in seeking medical advice or delays in receiving treatments for already identified health conditions. While the duties under the [Armed Forces Covenant](#) should mitigate this, it is not the experience for many families.

The additional stressors of life in an armed forces family may

lead to some children and young people having poorer mental health and they require the right support at the right time. There is a clear need for mental health and wellbeing services that understand this group's unique challenges and experiences.

Article 27 outlines the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development¹⁹. While the primary responsibility to secure this rests with parents, governments should provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly in regards to nutrition, clothing and housing, when there is the need²⁰.

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2017) [Supporting Children's Learning: Statutory Guidance on the Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) Scotland Act 2004 \(as amended\) Code of Practice \(Third Edition\)](#), page 11

^{19 20} UNICEF, [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)



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57% of armed forces families live in service family accommodation (SFA). Children, young people and their families consistently raise concerns about the quality of this housing and the impact on them. Substandard conditions, such as mould, pose a hazard to health but these faults are not dealt with quickly or properly.

Children and young people have asked for schools to work with them to develop a whole-school approach.

We call on the Scottish Government to strengthen implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 in relation to learners from forces families.

The UK Government and all devolved governments must work together to design and implement a robust information transfer system within education.

The UK and Scottish Governments must investigate the standard of housing provision across Scotland and work with the Ministry of Defence to make sure SFA is of a good standard for all children, young people and their families.

RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATION

The UNCRC gives children rights to participation. These rights include:

Article 12 Right to have the views heard and taken seriously.

Article 13 and 17 Access to information.

Article 31 Right to play.

Article 15 Freedom of association.

Key to the right to participation is **access to justice** when their rights are breached. For this to happen, children must know all their rights in accordance with **Article 42**.

Children and young people from forces families feel unheard by decision-makers due to the scale of state-led decision-making that determines so much of their childhood. Concerns around security can mean there is a disconnect between the information that children from forces families want, the information given by the MOD to their non-serving parent and what their parents choose to share with them.



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FamCAS found that 62% of families felt that they did not receive information from the MOD often enough, while 55% said policies aimed at them were not communicated effectively by the services²¹. **Due to the nature of the serving parent's job, there is a balance to be struck between national security and the rights of children to have information.** Without the latter, it can be hard for a child to form an opinion and it can be easier for an adult to dismiss their view as not being based on all the information.

Life in a forces family can significantly impact the ability of children and young people to maintain friendships and associations, continue the leisure activities of their choice and access the play and rest they need to develop. **To mitigate this, children from forces families should be supported to maintain hobbies, interests and friendships, whether that be through the provision of transport or funding for activities, or help to maintain digital connections.**

Social and mass media pose challenges as they provide easy, instant access to information about conflicts and situations to which a parent may be deployed. Research from the United States of America indicates that this can exacerbate common stressors experienced by service children²².

Key to children's right to participate is their ability to access justice when their rights are not upheld. To ensure children and young people are able to access justice, they, and the adults who support and care for them, need to be able to recognise when their rights have been breached. Child-friendly complaints procedures must be developed across all areas identified in this report.

TRANSITION TO VETERAN STATUS

The decision by serving personnel to leave the armed forces affects the whole family²³. All members may need to think differently about housing, health, education and finances. For children, moving to civilian life can result in further disruption to their childhood and friendships, such as through another house and school move.

There is a lack of information for the non-serving members of the family, despite children and young people experiencing the same feelings and barriers as their parents during this transition²⁴.

21 Ministry of Defence (2023) Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey 2023, page 18

22 Godier-McBard, Wood and Fossey (2021) The Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict – Update and Review Report, page 45

23 Selous, Walker and Misca (2020) Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the Needs of UK Armed Forces Families

24 Children's Commissioner (2018) Kin and Country: Growing Up as an Armed Forces Child



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This experience of transition can result in children and young people feeling isolated and distant from their armed forces identity. At the same time, they can face a reduction in access to services to support them²⁵. Some children may find themselves also navigating the challenges of becoming a young carer if their parent has been medically discharged from the armed forces. **More needs to be done to understand the experiences and views of children, ensuring Scotland is better equipped to support them at this critical moment of transition, fulfilling the ambition to be “the destination of choice for service leavers and their families”²⁶.**

CONCLUSION

Children and young people from armed forces and veteran families are at risk of falling through the cracks of rights protections as decisions that affect their lives are made not only by the Scottish Government and local authorities, but also by the UK Government, and particularly the MOD. It is vital that attention is paid to this group and mitigations put in place where they face barriers to their rights being upheld, on account of the systems that are not always able to meet their unique needs.



²⁵ Heaver, McCullough and Briggs (2018) *Lifting the Lid on Transition – The families’ experience and the support they need*

²⁶ Scottish Government (2022) *The Strategy For Our Veterans: Taking The Strategy Forward In Scotland – Our Refreshed Action Plan*

