



CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S
Commissioner
Scotland



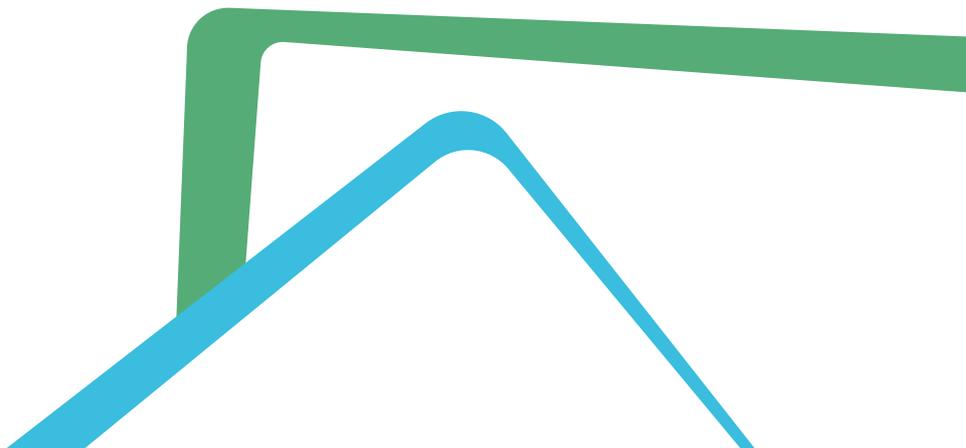
Camouflaged in the education system

The experiences of children and young people from Armed Forces families

This report informs the Commissioner's strategic priority work on education and is part of the report series:
"This is our lives, it matters a lot" – putting children's rights at the heart of education

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About Forces Children Scotland

Forces Children Scotland provides support and opportunities to enable babies, children and young people from Regular, Reservist and Veteran families to realise their potential and thrive. Working closely with children and young people, we bring tailored support to schools and community settings.

As a rights-based organisation, we are dedicated to co-production and the meaningful participation of Forces children and young people in our work. Our advocacy efforts are committed to advancing the co-produced Forces Children's Rights Charter, which outlines how Forces children can be recognised, heard and supported, without disadvantage arising from parental service.

We work in partnership across sectors and offer professional development opportunities to share our learning, raising awareness of the unique needs of children from Forces families and ensure that their rights are respected.

About the Children and Young People's Commissioner

Nicola Killean is the [Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland](#). She became the Commissioner in August 2023 and has a six-year term. The Commissioner works with her team to promote and protect the rights of children and young people in Scotland. That is:

- ▶ Everyone under 18, and
- ▶ Everyone up to 21 who is in care or care experienced.

The law that created the Commissioner's role says that the Commissioner must:

- ▶ Promote awareness and understanding of children's rights.
- ▶ Involve children and young people in the office's work.
- ▶ Make sure laws, policies, and practice affecting children and young people's lives are fair and respect their rights.
- ▶ Promote and carry out research to progress children's rights.
- ▶ Share examples of adults working well to fulfil children's rights so others can learn from it.

The Commissioner also has legal powers which we can use in some situations where we are concerned that human rights promises to children and young people are not being kept. We use these powers of investigation and litigation (taking action in court) when we think we can make a bigger change. Our office's role is to hold people in power to account and to take action when children's rights are breached. Our values of leadership, participation, independence, bravery and respect guide us. They were developed from the office's work with children and young people across Scotland.

Foreword from Steven Sweeney



Children and young people from Armed Forces families bring many strengths to our schools and communities. They are so often adaptable, outward-looking and resourceful. However, this apparent resilience should not lead us to assume that children are coping well or do not need support. Experiences of mobility, separation and uncertainty are a routine part of Forces life, and education systems are not adequately prepared to respond to these realities.

This report brings together evidence, professional insight and, most importantly, the voices of children and young people themselves to explore how education in Scotland can better support Forces learners.

Despite the best efforts of educators and other professionals in Scotland, Forces children too often encounter systems that are not designed for their circumstances. Where disadvantage occurs, it is usually the result of procedures that have not been adapted to predictable patterns of transition, loss and separation associated with Forces life.

Children told us that while good starts are prioritised, less attention is paid to continuity, endings, and the cumulative impact of repeated change.

They did not ask for special treatment, but for understanding, consistency and support that follows them instead of resetting with every move. Our findings highlight the need for coordinated, rights-based action across education, local authorities, welfare services and the Armed Forces community. Sustainable change depends on shared responsibility, clear accountability and practices that are embedded rather than reliant on individual goodwill.

I am grateful to the children and young people for their time and honest contributions as well as the professionals who supported this work. The voices gathered in this report are a reminder of our collective responsibility to ensure Forces children and young people belong, are heard, and can realise their full potential within Scotland's education system.

Steven Sweeney
Chief Executive Officer,
Forces Children Scotland

Foreword from Erin

Erin, a young person working alongside Forces Children Scotland, shares her experience of contributing to this report.

On the residential with Forces Children Scotland, I was able to learn, discuss and educate others around the support for Forces children within education. We discussed how education is not made for many young people today, but specifically for Forces children it can be even more challenging, between moves in and out of different curricula and deployments, as well as gaps in our learning.

In primary and secondary schools, it is often hard to get the additional support from teachers and officials within education whose job is to provide that very support. Whether a school is heavily Forces or not, there needs to be a change to support the education and rights that children and young people deserve.



Executive Summary

This report has been produced by Forces Children Scotland to capture and elevate the educational experiences of children and young people from Armed Forces families, and in doing so, explore what needs to change within the education system. It was commissioned by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland as part of the delivery of the Commissioner's [Strategic Plan 2024–28](#), specifically the priority of education.

Forces Children Scotland defines a child or young person from a Forces family as someone whose parent or carer serves in the Regular Armed Forces, serves as a Reservist, or has served at any point during the first 25 years of that child or young person's life. Throughout this report, we will use the term Forces children to refer to all babies, children and young people from Armed Forces families.

In March 2025, the Commissioner published "[This is our lives, it matters a lot](#)": Putting children's rights at the heart of education, which brought together children and young people's views on education and organised them under five core themes.

This report on the educational experiences of Forces children highlights key areas of success, and those requiring improvement, across the same five themes:

- ▶ Culture – how does school make us feel?
- ▶ Curriculum – what we get to experience and learn
- ▶ Personalisation and support – how am I supported to learn?
- ▶ Assessment and qualifications – how do I understand and show all my skills and achievements?
- ▶ Purpose – what is school for?

We introduce an additional cross-cutting theme that is salient to Forces life:

- ▶ Transitions, separation and loss – how does this frame my school experience?



The report explores the following topics:

- ▶ The central role of schools in better supporting the unique experiences of Forces life, including mobility and deployment, addressing stigma and prejudice, providing mental health and emotional support, and offering a sense of safety and belonging.
- ▶ The impact of changing schools and moving between different curricula, including consequences for educational ambitions and continuity of support.
- ▶ Access to academic support and additional support for learning, alongside the challenges associated with repeated transitions, gaps in learning, and attainment.
- ▶ Experiences of falling behind or needing to catch up, sustaining motivation when learning is disrupted or key foundations are missed.
- ▶ The importance of stable relationships, and the effects of losing or experiencing change in trusted support networks.

Overall, the report illustrates a clear gap between what Forces children say they need and what systems are currently able to offer.

Many children described experiencing unmet needs around feeling connected, being heard, and getting the right support for their learning. Awareness of the specific experiences of Forces children is uneven, and the lack of consistent approaches across schools and local authorities makes it harder to provide reliable, rights-based support. While there are policies that promote inclusion, practical barriers often limit how far these are put into action.

What we heard from children and young people shows the need for more joined-up, child-centred support bringing together emotional, educational, and social help. This means moving away from fragmented and mostly adult-led responses and towards approaches that recognise Forces children as active partners in shaping their own wellbeing. Teacher training and whole-school practice should focus on clear, dependable systems for emotional and learning support, rather than relying on individual staff members to step in informally.

Scotland does not yet have a systemic understanding of the risks to Armed Forces children's learning. Alongside our understanding of the lived experiences of these children, there is a need for robust, long-term data to establish patterns and inform protective measures.

Looking beyond schools, stronger coordination between education, welfare, and Armed Forces-related services is essential. Better collaboration, shared oversight, and clearer accountability will help ensure support is continuous, responding to children's changing needs and reducing gaps between services.

Recommendations

Children and young people from Armed Forces families move through and between systems on a regular basis. These systems include the different education, health and social care systems in the UK home nations, overseas education and health systems, and internal Ministry of Defence (MOD) systems that control postings, deployments, housing and welfare provision. Some children may also move between third sector provisions for additional support and caring responsibilities. They experience these transitions as disconnected and lacking coordination.

Systems change is needed. Improving outcomes for Forces children requires a shift from fragmented, reactive responses to a coordinated, rights-based system that recognises the cumulative impact of mobility, loss and separation on learning and wellbeing. This demands shared responsibility across education, MOD and local authority welfare and Armed Forces organisations and across nations, underpinned by clear accountability, consistent practice and effective information-sharing. Support must be designed to follow the child across settings and stages, rather than being reset with each move, and embedded within school cultures and systems rather than dependent on individual awareness or empathy. Meaningful participation by children and young people is central to this shift, ensuring that support reflects lived experience and enables Forces children to realise their rights and potential.

Recommendation 1: Guarantee consistently available, proactive support at times of loss, separation and transition

Education authorities and schools should guarantee consistently available, proactive and tailored support for Forces children and young people during periods of loss, separation and transition. This includes school moves, parental deployment, training exercises and weekending. Support should be planned in advance wherever possible, sustained across moves between schools, local authorities and education systems, and designed to prevent gaps in provision, repeated reassessment or loss of information. This support must address both educational and wellbeing needs and be underpinned by clear ringfenced systems and cross-sector coordination between education, welfare and Armed Forces organisations, rather than reliance on individual goodwill or discretion. Implementation should be clearly accountable.

Recommendation 2: Embed a whole-school, rights-based approach that understands Forces life and centres children's voices

Education authorities and schools should embed a whole-school, rights-based approach that builds understanding of Forces life and centres Forces children's lived experiences and voices across school systems and the curriculum. Forces children and young people should be supported to co-

create national learning resources that reflect the understanding they want education staff to have. There should also be age-appropriate personal and social education (PSE) inputs delivered to all pupils, to promote understanding of Forces life, to challenge stigma and foster school cultures grounded in dignity, fairness and belonging. This approach should be universally embedded across policy, practice and curriculum, and adequately resourced.

Recommendation 3: Embed children and young people's participation in their learning journey

Education authorities and schools should ensure meaningful, supported participation opportunities for Forces children and young people at all ages and stages of their learning journey. This should enable them to identify their needs, influence decisions and shape the support they receive, in line with their rights under the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC), and ensure that understanding of Forces life is grounded in lived experience rather than adult assumptions. Participation approaches should be systematically recorded, evaluated and reviewed, with clear accountability for how children's views inform decisions and outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Reform teaching, learning and assessment to reflect mobility, wellbeing and fairness

Education authorities and schools should reform teaching, learning and assessment to reflect the realities of Forces children's lives, in line with the direction set out in Professor Louise Hayward's Independent Review. This should include reducing over-reliance on single high-stakes assessments, increasing flexibility in how learning and achievement are demonstrated, and systematically identifying and addressing gaps arising from movement between curricula. Schools and systems should recognise the impact of mobility, separation, loss and anxiety on learning and performance, particularly during assessment periods, and provide reasonable adjustments and alternative pathways where required. These approaches should be embedded across policy and practice, and supported by professional learning.

Methodology

This work built on what we have already learned from children and young people's involvement in our school-based forums and participation projects. Guided by our [Participation Principles](#), we drew on previous work to avoid repetition, matching what we have heard against the six identified themes and identifying gaps in knowledge. We ensured participants understood what was different about this work and what their involvement was intended to achieve.

To gather evidence, we designed [participation activities](#) for delivery in school and youth group settings.¹ Children and young people were invited to take part and provided with clear information about the purpose and intended outputs. Consent processes emphasised that participation was an opportunity to share views, learn and influence services, not a responsibility to represent all children and young people or provide definitive answers.

The activities were facilitated by Forces Children Scotland participation and rights workers, Armed Forces Support Workers, and community learning and development workers linked to the Armed Forces. This ensured representation from Army, Navy, and Air Force and from both serving and veteran families. The sessions involved:

145

Children and young people aged between eight and 17.



Half of the children and young people who took part had not previously engaged with Forces Children Scotland sessions.



60% of participants were girls.



Locations in Moray, Fife, Edinburgh, and Argyll and Bute.



Session notes captured on Padlet, allowing for comments and voting to support thematic analysis.

Additionally, Forces Children Scotland's Deputy CEO met Armed Forces Support Workers and senior leaders in schools to explore their perspectives across the six themes. While this report focuses solely on Forces children's views, these discussions helped identify areas of disconnect between children's experiences and school provision.

After the report was drafted, 15 young people aged 12 to 20 took part in a two-day residential to review the themes and proposed recommendations, informing the final report.

¹ These participation activities can be found at: <https://forceschildrenscotland.org.uk/camouflaged-in-the-education-system/>

Limitations

Due to limited time and resources, participation opportunities were offered only through existing contacts and relationships. As a result, participants were children and young people who are recognised as Forces children by their school or community and who were willing to engage in Forces-related activity. It was not possible to include children from Forces families who do not identify as such, who chose not to participate, or who are educated in schools that are currently unconnected to our work, at home or in private schools. While some Fijian young people were involved in the activities, children and young people from the Fijian and Nepalese Forces communities are harder to reach through traditional school-based methods.²

2 There is a small but significant population of children of serving and veteran soldiers of Nepalese and Fijian origin living in Scotland, the exact numbers of which unknown.

We were unable to extend the scope of this report to consider the educational experiences of Forces babies and very young children in early years settings. Other project work with this age group carried out by Forces Children Scotland in partnership with Early Years Scotland³ and Starcatchers⁴ highlights this age group experiences transitions in their placements, their experience of Forces life impacts their early years' experience, and their learning needs are considered second to their parent's childcare needs. This is an area that requires further exploration through the lens of the infant and their rights.

Consequently, these groups remain under-represented and continue to be among the least heard within this already lesser-heard population.

3 Forces Children Scotland | Early Years Scotland <https://earlyyearsscotland.org/partnerships/fcs/>

4 Wee People, Big Feelings <https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/wee-people-big-feelings/>



Forces children in Scotland: Context and identity

Forces children have a unique collective identity shaped by the jobs their parents do in the Armed Forces, with their day-to-day shaped by the demands of military service. They are more likely than other children to move frequently, and many experience periods of separation from a parent. Additionally, growing up in an Armed Forces family often creates a strong sense of identity that makes Forces children feel different from their peers.⁵

These experiences mean that Forces children have specific needs and challenges at school, which are not always well understood or supported within the system.

Important statistics

There are over 13,000 Forces children in the Scottish education system. They are present in every local authority, with the highest numbers in local authorities that have large military bases: Moray, Fife, Argyll and Bute, Highland, and Edinburgh. Among Forces children, 29.2% are from currently serving families, 8.2% have parents serving as Reservists and 53.5% are the children of veterans. A further 6.3% had parents with more than one of these backgrounds, and the remaining 2.8% identified a connection to the

Forces without specifying the connection.⁶ These figures are based on self-disclosure at the point of school enrolment or completion of the National Census,⁷ so they are likely an under-representation of the true figures.

Education and attainment – The majority of Forces children are educated in their local authority catchment schools. A minority attend independent boarding schools, Queen Victoria School,⁸ or are home-schooled.⁹ Recent research indicates there is no higher prevalence of additional support needs compared with the non-military population. However, the additional needs of Forces children can be compounded by military life.¹⁰ While there is currently no equivalent dataset for Scotland, research based on English datasets suggests that when considering broad GCSE achievement, Forces children achieved slightly higher than non-Forces

5 Robinson, L, 2024. *How does military life shape service children's identity and school experiences?* <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:27e632f6-7353-40ec-98ee-c4d66aa8ef51>

6 Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, 2025. *Summary Report on the Results of the 2024 ADES Data Collection Exercise on the Population of Children from Armed Forces Families in Scotland.* <https://www.ades.scot/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Summary-Report-2024-ADES-DATA-Collection-SEEMiS-1.pdf>

7 This method does not include students from independent schools or Queen Victoria School (QVS).

8 QVS is a non-selective, co-educational boarding school in Dunblane for children of service men and women and the only school in the UK which is managed and funded by the Ministry of Defence.

9 Ministry of Defence, 2025. *Tri-service families continuous attitude survey 2025: main report.* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tri-service-families-continuous-attitude-survey-2025/tri-service-families-continuous-attitude-survey-2025-main-report#childcare-and-childrens-education>

10 MacLeod, C, Matthews-Smith, G, Short, G and Zielinska-Pocwiardowska, I, 2025. *A Game of Snakes and Ladders: Armed Forces families with children requiring additional support with their education.* <https://forceschildrenseducation.org.uk/a-game-of-snakes-and-ladders>

children, when controlling for factors such as language spoken, prior attainment, and differences between schools. However, when focusing on individual GCSE grades achieved, Forces children were significantly more likely to attain average grades at GCSE and less likely to attain very high or very low grades.¹¹

Experiences of Forces life

Forces children are not a homogeneous group. They each have unique experiences of Forces life, even within individual families. Broadly speaking, their experience of Forces life is influenced by their parent's branch, rank, the nature of their role, and the decisions the family makes due to the parent's service.

Typically, children in Royal Navy and Royal Marine families face the highest levels of parental separations due to longer and more frequent deployments and, in the case of the Royal Marines, deployments with little to no notice. They face fewer moves, with many naval families choosing to base themselves in a permanent location and more likely to own a home.¹²

Those with parents in the British Army face the highest levels of mobility, moving on average every two years. These moves tend to be with whole units, meaning children and young people will move with other children and young people they know. They are more likely to live in Service Family Accommodation provided by the MOD.¹³

Children with parents serving in the Royal Air Force tend to move slightly less frequently than their Army counterparts but are more likely to move as a single family or a smaller squadron. Their lives, and those in the community around them, have an audible reminder of their parent's service through the presence of aircrafts taking off and landing, day and night. Their experience of parental deployment is very different, with deployments of several months but also daily sorties, where their parent engages in exercises or rapid operational responses but is back home for dinner.



11 Lee, C, Cotton, A, Newbury, D and Connelly, V, 2025. *Supporting ALL to Thrive: Executive Summary*. <https://sattproject.org.uk/impact-event/>

12 Ministry of Defence, 2025. *Tri-service families continuous attitude survey 2025: main report: Service comparisons*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tri-service-families-continuous-attitude-survey-2025/tri-service-families-continuous-attitude-survey-2025-main-report#service-comparisons>

13 Ibid.

Forces children's identity

Forces children are often viewed through a dichotomous lens of either being 'brave, adaptable and resilient', ascribing military values to them, or 'vulnerable, disadvantaged, victims of military life'. Both views define children's identity in relation to their parent's service and overlook children's own views about their identity and the importance they ascribe to their parent's job.¹⁴ They also fail to recognise that children can experience Forces life in both ways, by "acting/pretending as though military life is only bad/only good."

Recent participative research demonstrated that while the Forces child identity exists because of the relationship between the child and the military, how they choose to engage with that identity depends on their unique experiences and developing sense of self.¹⁵ The findings showed that children's relationship with the Forces child identity varies and fluctuates across three states:

- ▶ one that they accepted,
- ▶ one that they rejected or did not care much about, or
- ▶ one that they were conflicted about.

As is expected with children's evolving capacities and development of unique identities, their relationship with their Forces identity can develop or change over time.¹⁶

Some of the young people involved in the formation of this report spoke about their relationship in more complex ways. One young person described being proud of their parent's service, while also feeling conflicted about some of the military operations they had been involved in. Other young people were accepting of the identity but also resented it being ascribed to them.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴ Robinson, L, 2024. *How does military life shape service children's identity and school experiences?* <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:27e632f6-7353-40ec-98ee-c4d66aa8ef51>

¹⁵ Ibid.



Human rights and Armed Forces Covenant duties and education

Both human rights protections and the Armed Forces Covenant framework place clear duties on education systems to address disadvantage and support children and young people from Armed Forces families.

UNCRC

Forces children below the age of 18 have the same rights under the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) as all other children, including the right to education (Articles 28 and 29). Children's right to a broad education includes more than access to schooling. UNCRC Article 29 states that children have the right to an education that develops their personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. In practice, this means that education must:

- ▶ be child-centred and empowering,
- ▶ respect the child's inherent dignity and enable their participation, and
- ▶ include not only literacy and numeracy but also life skills which give children the tools needed to pursue their options in life.¹⁷

Children from Forces families also benefit from additional protections that are relevant to their circumstances, including:

- ▶ The right to maintain relationships with parents when separated (Article 9).
- ▶ Recognition of parental responsibilities and the duty of the state to give parents the help they need to raise their children (Article 18).¹⁸

17 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001. *General Comment No. 1 (2001) Article 29(1) the aims of education*. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2001/en/39221>

18 Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. *UNCRC Simplified Articles*. <https://cypcs.org.uk/rights/uncrc/articles/>

These rights are protected in Scots law by the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#).

Other human rights protections

Young people aged 18 and over have a right to education enshrined in several international human rights treaties, including the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 2 of the first Protocol), and the International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (Article 10), although these rights are not as wide-ranging as in the UNCRC.

Armed Forces Covenant

Forces children across the UK are members of the Armed Forces community and within the scope of the Armed Forces Covenant. While the Covenant does not specify individual rights, it places expectations, and in some contexts, statutory duties, on public bodies to give due regard to the disadvantage arising from parental service. Education, housing and health services fall within the scope of this legal duty. Further 'special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured and the bereaved.'¹⁹

19 Armed Forces Covenant, 2025. *About the Covenant*. <https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/about-the-covenant/>

Findings

Transitions, separations and loss – how does this frame my school experience?

For many Forces children, change is not an occasional disruption but a part of everyday life. Moving between schools and education systems, experiencing periods of separation from a parent, and repeatedly saying goodbye to people, places and routines shape how children experience learning and belonging. The children and young people described these experiences as closely connected, with separations, loss and transitions often overlapping and reinforcing one another.

Under the UNCRC, children have the right to maintain relationships with their parents when separated, the freedom to form and sustain friendships and social connections, and the right to an education that develops their talents and abilities while promoting respect for others. For Forces children, frequent moves, parental separation and repeated loss can make it harder to realise these rights.²⁰

Transitions across education systems, separation from a parent, experiences of loss, and the quality of support around beginnings and endings all shape Forces children's wellbeing, relationships and engagement with learning.

²⁰ Forces Children Scotland, 2024. *It's not just their job; it's our whole lives: Rights Report*. <https://forceschildrenscotland.org.uk/projects/its-not-just-their-job-its-our-whole-lives/>

The experience of moving between systems

Evidence from the Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey 2025 shows that Armed Forces families with school-aged children who move are more likely to report difficulties with their children's schooling than families who do not move.²¹ This aligns closely with what children and young people shared about their own experiences of moving between education systems.

Transfer of information and support – One major challenge of school moves is that children and young people experience a perceived lack of communication between the schools. They described support for learning documents not being transferred or otherwise not being read by class teachers, resulting in an exacerbation of any learning difficulties and increased anxiety.

Missed or repeated learning – Children and young people consistently described transitions between schools, curricula, and local authority systems as confusing and stressful. Many spoke about gaps in their learning and frustration at repeating work they had already covered. As one child explained, "School work is different and sometimes the same as you have already done."

²¹ Ministry of Defence, 2025. *Tri-service families continuous attitude survey 2025: main report: Childcare and children's education*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tri-service-families-continuous-attitude-survey-2025/tri-service-families-continuous-attitude-survey-2025-main-report#childcare-and-childrens-education>

For others, the lack of continuity left them feeling lost in the classroom, “Nothing at school makes sense.” Moves that occurred during a school term were felt to be even harder. One young person said, “Moves during term mean catching up, not enough help and being expected just to know.”

Missed opportunities for diagnosis and intervention – Some children described “being unable to get a diagnosis due to constant moves”, while another described their experience of social anxiety and autism being difficult because “we had to wait to put me on a waiting list due to the move back to Scotland”. This young person was moving to their seventh school and felt they were not getting the help they needed.

Year groups – Uncertainty around year group placement was a particular source of anxiety. One young person said, “Due to when my birthday is, I constantly have to prove that I am in the right year.” Children and young people felt that decisions about whether they moved up or down a year were often made by schools or local authority staff without their involvement or consideration of their learning progress, social needs or the impact on any future moves. Several children and young people described being placed in a different year group without fully understanding why; this sense of exclusion from decision-making added to feelings of confusion and disengagement.

Impact on confidence and aspirations – The impact of these repeated transitions extended beyond academic learning. Some children and young people described a loss of confidence and motivation, feeling unsure of what they could achieve in an unfamiliar and unpredictable system. One young person said, “Switching education systems

meant that I stopped being challenged and eventually stopped challenging myself. If I would have stayed in one education system, I believe I would have attained more than I have in school today.”

Another said, “Starting over constantly can knock your confidence, you learn to fade into the background.”

Practical support in the classroom was also described as inconsistent. Children and young people spoke about needing clearer guidance from teachers, particularly when expectations and routines differed from their previous school. As one child put it, “Help new people to know what to do in class”, while another said that “different routines in different schools makes it hard to settle in.”

Teacher understanding and support – Several children and young people highlighted strained relationships with teaching staff when they struggled to adjust. Experiences of confusion were sometimes met with impatience, leaving children feeling misunderstood and unsupported. One child shared, “Teachers – they don’t understand, they don’t help, if you bring something up, they don’t take it seriously,” while another explained, “I get confused and the teacher gets impatient.”

Together, these experiences show how moving between education systems can disrupt learning, undermine confidence, reduce aspirations and attainment, and weaken children and young people’s sense of belonging at school, particularly when their voices are not included in decision-making.

Parental separation and impact on learning

Forces children often experience regular separation from a serving parent, most commonly due to deployment or training exercises and increasingly due to 'weekending'. That's when a serving person works away from home during the week and comes home at weekends.²² This term can be a misnomer when cost-of-living challenges and distance make returns home more infrequent.

Children and young people described how these periods of separation can have a direct and ongoing impact on their learning and wellbeing at school, heightened when there was limited or no contact with the serving parent. One young person identified one of the biggest barriers to their learning was "communication being poor with parents when away".

Impact on learning – Some children and young people shared how separation affected their mental health and ability to concentrate and engage in learning before and during deployments. One said, "I worry more when I know he's going away, that is when I need support." Another young person described "constantly worrying about my parent", while another explained that their grades suffered as they "missed out on homework because I am worried about Dad on deployment". Another talked about the impact it had on their achievement, saying, "Because I was doing well academically, my mental health got ignored by the school, now I am failing my exams."

Lessons, activities, and wider conversations can act as reminders of a parent's absence, making it harder to focus. This included curriculum content, Newsround, and informal discussions between peers. Some schools were described as responding well, particularly where large deployments were planned, by putting additional support in place during exam periods. However, children and young people noted that this was more difficult when deployments were unplanned, not widely known, or affecting only a small number of pupils.

Understanding and flexibility – Some young people described being punished for not paying attention or missing homework due to parental separation, and others sought support from their guidance teacher but felt they were given too little time. Positive examples highlighted the difference that understanding and flexible responses can make. One child described becoming distressed in class due to their parent's deployment; their teacher worked with them to create a family diary, helping them record key moments such as a team football score and take photographs to send to their dad. As a result, the child felt happier at school and better able to engage in learning.

Young people attending schools with only a few Forces children felt their teachers and peers lacked relevant knowledge about Forces life. One said, "I know if I went to my guidance teacher they'd say, 'bless your cotton socks' and not understand", while another said, "I went to my guidance teacher [when my dad was deployed] and asked for help. All we did was meditate. She had no idea."

²² Naval Families Federation, 2023. *Experiencing Parental Absence in Royal Navy and Royal Marines Families: A Guide for Parents and Adults Supporting Children and Young People: Issues Pertinent to Naval Life*. <https://nff.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/6656-NFF-Parental-Absence-Guide-DI.pdf>

Some wanted reassurance from any adult in the school, not just guidance. They recognised the need for schools to have more capacity to support pupils with more guidance teachers or smaller class sizes. They also suggested that there needs to be better communication between welfare support provided by the serving parent's unit and the school, particularly for dispersed children and at times of deployment and pending postings.

Weekending – In recent years, families across all three Forces have increasingly chosen to live away from their home base to provide greater educational stability for their children. While this can reduce school moves, it often leads to more frequent separation from the serving parent. Children and young people described experiencing weekending in much the same way as deployment, with similar feelings and emotional impacts, but repeated in shorter, ongoing cycles, "Weekending – going through the emotions every week!" For many, this pattern of continuous separation shapes both their emotional wellbeing and their experience of learning at school.

Several young people described feeling pulled between school, friends, and family commitments. One spoke about "not having time for school due to seeing or talking to my parent", while another described "mixing having to spend time with parent/friend/schoolwork." Others felt pressure to spend time with friends when they instead wanted to be with a parent at home, as one explained, "My friends always hang out at the weekend, but I need to spend as much time with Dad when he is home because I worry I will miss my last moments with him in case something happens."

One young person also described the challenge of adjusting when a parent stopped weekending and left the Forces, "I was so used to him being away and then he was back and there all the time. It was a big adjustment for both of us and I got no support."

Additional responsibilities – Many spoke about taking on additional responsibilities at home when a parent is away, including caring roles or increased household duties. These responsibilities were not always recognised or considered by schools, particularly in relation to homework deadlines and assessments. As one young person explained, "Homework/due dates don't take kids with responsibilities like carer/special needs into account."

When expectations at school do not reflect the realities of home life, children and young people described feeling under pressure and unsupported. One young person described the frustration that came with the uncertain nature of the additional responsibilities, "I have to parent my little brother most of the time, but when my parents aren't busy at work, they tell me off for parenting him."

Some young people described their experience of their parent returning from conflict and its impact on their learning. One young person commented, "They're not the same when they come home from a warzone and it's so hard watching them adjust to normal life." Another said, "Parents go to war and their mental health gets affected, and it's a domino effect on to us."

For some children, the additional caring responsibilities come during and after their parent leaves the Forces, particularly if they have left through medical discharge. One said, "You carry on silently until you burst because you don't want to add stress to your parent when they are struggling too. This affects your schoolwork etc."

Another young person said, “I feel that most people don’t realise that PTSD is a life-changing condition that doesn’t just affect the person but their family. My mum spoke to the SLT [senior leadership team] and it was agreed that all staff I had contact with were made aware. Sadly, no one outside of the SLT knew, which did pose challenges.”

This experience highlights a frequent disconnect between respecting a child’s privacy and confidentiality and ensuring things are shared appropriately with permission to ensure children and young people with additional responsibilities get the support they need and want.

Loss

Children and young people described experiences of loss as a recurring part of life in Armed Forces families, often linked to new postings and school moves. For some, this meant being physically distant from extended family, such as grandparents. For others, loss was felt through the disruption of everyday relationships and routines, including leaving behind an understanding teacher, a close friend or friendship group, or a valued club or hobby.

Importance of relationships – There was a strong and consistent message about the importance of relationships. Friendships and connections with teachers were described as central to enjoying school and feeling a sense of belonging. One young person said, “Having a good teacher in school who understands makes the difference – need them to assess the gaps in our learning.” Without these connections, school could feel lonely and difficult. As one child explained, “Friends – if someone has no friends, they will feel lonely, sad and like they don’t belong.”

Another reflected on the impact of repeated moves, saying, “If my friends didn’t leave it would be better.”

Building new relationships – Despite recognising how important friendships are, many children and young people described finding it increasingly hard to build new relationships, especially as they got older. While making friends in primary school often felt easier, each move made some children and young people more hesitant and less confident about forming new connections, especially in secondary school. One child described the challenges that come with being new to a school when they said, “Making friends [can be hard] – young people at school already know each other/don’t want to know you.” Some young people described an “uncertainty with who else has a military background”, especially in larger high schools, which made it harder to make supportive connections. They also described peers being less understanding or making value judgments.

One young person said, “People don’t understand there are lots of different jobs in the Forces – they are not all soldiers, and they are not out killing.” Another talked about “the difference with ‘disgust’ or pity when you tell them you’re from a Forces family”.

Wellbeing support – Children and young people cited many examples of effective wellbeing support, but the provision was patchy and often oversubscribed. Examples included access to a play therapist for Forces children, Parents on Deployment groups, and ‘Big Sisters’ in a boarding environment where senior pupils arrange activities at weekends for those not going home. These supports were described as having a positive impact on both children’s wellbeing and

their ability to engage with learning and in fostering connections across the school community, highlighting the continuing need for a structured and supportive response to feelings of loss.

Supporting good transitions

Most children and young people described feeling positive about how they were welcomed into new schools, particularly in the primary years. One child suggested, "Make new pupils feel welcome." Being able to quickly understand the new school culture and rules was crucial for children and young people, "Learning new school rules and fitting in makes it easier."

Buddies versus mentors – Being assigned a buddy on arrival was often seen as helpful in settling in quickly and navigating a new environment. However, experiences of being the buddy were more mixed. Some children and young people felt the role could negatively affect their existing friendships, particularly where there was an assumption that two Forces children would automatically get along. Others felt they were not given the skills, guidance, or support needed to carry out the role.

Looking back, some young people felt that a more effective approach would be to introduce a mentor role carried out by older Forces children, supported by training and clear guidance. One young person said, "I'd think of it as more of a guide than a buddy, just someone who helps you get to grips with the area and the school. I've always connected with older children at each school naturally and they've told me the basics, what teachers to avoid conflict with etc."

Another said, "Being another Forces child/ someone who's been in similar situations may help make the other person more comfortable in the new environment; speaking with some S1s last year from Kinloss when I did a small task with the dandelion project, they did open up a bit more to me as an older pupil from the same background."

They also emphasised the importance of a whole-class approach to welcoming new pupils, where both Forces and non-Forces classmates take on small roles to help new children feel part of the wider class.

Transitions within school – Children and young people also reflected on how transitions within a school can be just as challenging as moving between schools. Some described that successfully navigating major transitions, such as starting a new school, sometimes made smaller transitions feel harder rather than easier. Moving between year groups, adjusting to new routines, or having to explain their circumstances again to a new teacher could feel tiring and frustrating. Repeatedly asking for additional support or re-establishing understanding was described by some as more difficult than making one larger change all at once.

Ongoing support – While initial starts were generally described as positive, many children felt that once they were settled, support quickly shifted to "business as usual". One young person suggested "a designated catch-up time in the timetable, particularly if you have moved at an awkward time". Children and young people felt there was less attention given to ongoing transitions, such as parental separations, moving between school years and particularly into the senior phase, or preparing to leave the school again.

This was especially noticeable in schools with a high number of Forces children, where staff sometimes assumed familiarity with Forces life meant additional support was less necessary. Children and young people described how a poor or abrupt ending at one school could make it harder to feel confident and positive about starting at the next one.

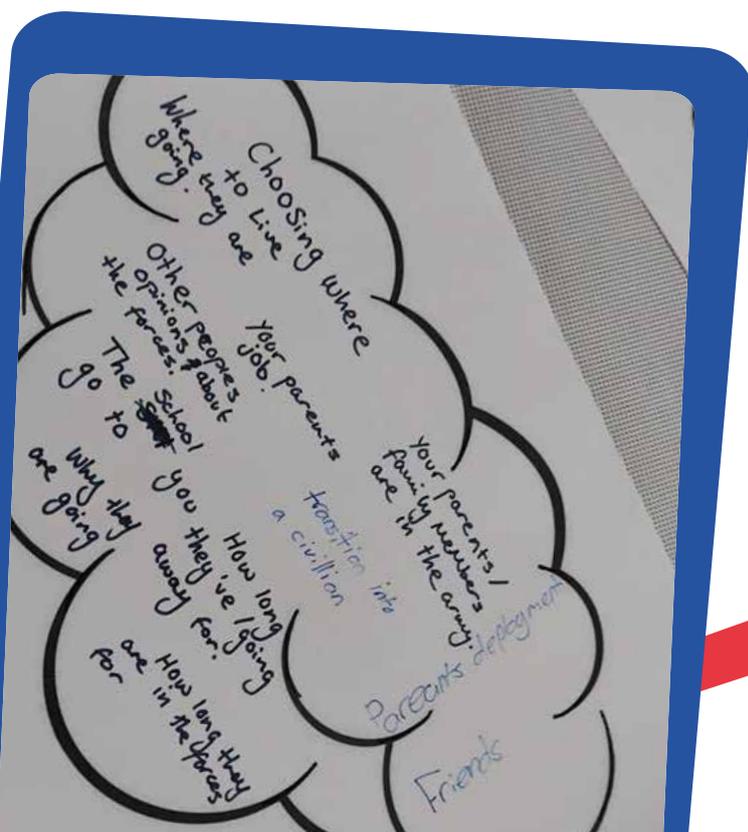
Good endings – Children and young people consistently highlighted the importance of both good beginnings and good endings in reducing feelings of loss and supporting a positive school experience. They shared examples of thoughtful practices used by schools to mark someone leaving, including whole-school goodbye songs written for the occasion, memory books signed by classmates and friends, and activities that helped them reflect on their learning journey and build confidence for their next school. One child expressed the importance of “goodbyes to friends and good teachers who understand”. Importantly, children and young people noted that these approaches supported not only those who were leaving, but also the classmates who were staying behind.

How do transitions, separation and loss shape Forces children’s school experiences?

These accounts show that transitions, separation, and loss are central to how Forces children experience education. Moving between systems can disrupt learning and confidence; separation from a parent can affect emotional wellbeing, concentration and responsibilities at home; and repeated experiences of loss can weaken children’s sense of belonging and connection. These experiences determine how easily children and young people can maintain relationships with parents, build and sustain friendships, and engage fully in education in ways that nurture their interests, talents and respect for others.

While many schools work hard to support good starts, children and young people observed that less attention is paid to the ongoing and cumulative impact of these experiences, including parental separations, smaller transitions and endings. When support focuses only on arrival, opportunities to uphold children’s rights to connection, participation and continuity are often missed.

What emerges most strongly from children and young people’s voices is the importance of consistent, thoughtful support that recognises transition as a process rather than a single moment. Good beginnings, careful endings, and understanding during periods of parental separation help protect children’s rights to maintain family relationships, to form and sustain friendships, and to access an education that enables them to thrive.



Culture – how does school make us feel?

Forces children were clear that school culture plays a crucial role in whether they feel respected, safe and able to learn. They spoke about the need for a shift in culture that actively promotes their dignity, inclusion and upholds their right to be treated without discrimination. For Forces children, whose experiences and identities are not always well understood, this cultural context can make the difference between feeling supported and feeling singled out or overlooked.

Visible culture, staff understanding of Forces life, behaviour management and responses to discrimination can either uphold children's dignity and rights or leave them feeling overlooked, misunderstood or unfairly treated.

Visible culture

Children and young people highlighted the importance of visible aspects of school culture, such as the website, rules and uniform, which can be particularly significant for Forces children. Many Forces children grow up with a strong expectation of fairness and consistency because of their parent's service, meaning that how rules are communicated and enforced at school can strongly affect whether they feel respected and treated fairly.

Welcoming – Children and young people stressed the importance of feeling welcomed from the very start, with schools showing a willingness to accommodate their needs. They appreciated out-of-hours school tours, Armed Forces noticeboards, child-friendly website information and student leaders welcoming Forces families. Some children described the positive experience of seeing something about

Forces life on school websites before they arrived, noting it is "good to see other people like myself on school websites".

For children moving to schools with only a few Forces children, the lack of a welcome can make settling in more difficult. One said, "My school isn't a very big Forces school, so what about me? Forces support is something I go out of school to receive."

Fairness and consistency – School uniform was referred to frequently as an example of visible school culture, and children described feeling frustrated when rules or uniform policies were applied inconsistently or ignored. As one child said, "Some people get told off for things that others don't," while another noted, "Uniform is not consistent."

As one child explained, "School is supposed to have a strict uniform policy, but children still find a way to change it in a way that makes it feel more like themselves." When this went unchallenged by staff, Forces children described feeling confused or uncomfortable, highlighting the importance of clear and consistent approaches to visible school rules.

Interestingly, these views contrast with the findings of the report, "[This is our lives, it matters a lot](#)": Putting children's rights at the heart of education, where children "often described being required to conform to school rules (on a wide range of things) that don't make sense or seem arbitrary or trivial, about control rather than order".²³ This view was mirrored by some young people involved in a previous Forces Children Scotland

²³ Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2025. "This is our lives, it matters a lot.": Putting children's rights at the heart of education. <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/wpcypcs/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/March-2025-Education-reform-report-FINAL.pdf>

project.²⁴ They spoke about the need to be flexible with uniforms, with one young person giving the example of wearing a hoodie that reminded them of their dad when he was away on a submarine and there was no contact for several months at a time. They were told to take it off, whereas they wished that school would “recognise our coping mechanisms”.

Regardless of their specific views on wearing a uniform, fairness and consistency emerged as a common theme.

Pupil-led instead of teacher-led – Some children and young people observed that when teachers did not have the capacity to nurture school culture, standards were instead set by their peers. When the school culture was led by those who did not understand or agree with the Armed Forces, their school experience was more difficult, and challenges like bullying were not effectively addressed.

One described the negative impact on them of “topics such as war, WWI/WWII not being treated with respect and jokes being made around Forces children”. Many children felt that visible school leadership, such as that shown through assemblies celebrating Forces events, would cultivate a positive culture and give them a platform to advocate for themselves and talk about their experiences.

Understanding Forces life

All staff must be upskilled – Understanding Forces life is essential to feeling supported at school. It is not enough for only pastoral staff or senior leaders to have this understanding if

it does not translate into better experiences in the classroom. When class teachers and support staff do not understand the realities of Forces life, this directly affected the support they received day to day and whether they felt taken seriously.

Need for improvement greater in secondary schools – Children’s experiences differed significantly between primary and secondary school. Forces children in primary school were more likely to say they felt understood and received support tailored to their individual needs. Many described feeling known by staff and confident that someone would notice if they were struggling. Many young people noticed a significant change when they moved to secondary school. The shift from smaller school communities with a single main class teacher to larger settings with multiple teachers, bigger class sizes and less direct contact with senior staff was described as challenging, leaving some young people feeling less visible and less understood. One said, “I had more support in primary school, but I didn’t do exams then.”

Support based on their individual experience – In schools with a high number of Forces children, some young people described a different challenge. Familiarity did not always lead to better understanding. Instead, children felt they were sometimes viewed as a single group, rather than as individuals. As one child highlighted, there is “the wide variety of Forces children in school”, yet this diversity was not always recognised, with schools instead “expecting everyone to have the same experiences”.

Children were clear that they want individual support, informed by a genuine understanding of how mobility, separation and loss can affect children in different ways. Some young people suggested supports

²⁴ Forces Children Scotland, 2026. *Spinning Out: Submariner Story*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzLMiqABiqg>

such as “extensions or allowances on assignments for stress or a parent coming home” or “leniency with sensitive topics in the curriculum”.

Feeling understood – Several young people described feeling dismissed or misunderstood by staff who lacked awareness of Forces life. This left some children feeling invisible or reluctant to speak up when they needed help. As one young person said, “People in school don’t understand me or listen,” while another shared, “Some teachers are mean and don’t understand.”

For these children, being misunderstood affected both their wellbeing and their engagement with learning.

Commitment to understand – Children and young people were clear about what would make a difference. They wanted teachers to take the time to understand the military context and how it shapes their lives. As one child put it, “Teachers need to understand more about the military.” Another reflected, “School would improve if teachers took us seriously.”

They also emphasised that understanding means recognising what may not be immediately visible, including pressures at home and emotional impacts of separation. As one child explained, “People can’t see everything about you – what is happening at home and how it makes you feel.”

Showing understanding and empathy – Positive experiences stood out strongly where teachers did demonstrate understanding and empathy. Children and young people identified that when teachers made a big effort to make their class welcoming for Forces children, it made them want to learn. They described feeling valued and supported when staff took the time to listen and respond to their individual circumstances. These experiences were captured in comments such as, “Great teachers – more brilliant teachers – who fully understand our feelings and supported us.”

Overall, the message was clear: An understanding of Forces life needs to be embedded across school culture and practice, so that every child is recognised as an individual and supported with dignity, respect and fairness.

Dedicated support – Some children and young people have a dedicated Armed Forces Support Worker within their school. Others have a Support Worker with a local authority-wide remit. Almost all valued having a dedicated worker who understood Forces life and could both support them and advocate on their behalf. However, some did not want this support to be visible and during class time. One solution proposed was an online space for Forces children in a school or across the local authority to create supportive and safe spaces. This would offer children and young people choice in how much or how little they engage. While children valued the dedicated support, most were clear that it needed to be supplemental to all staff in the school understanding Forces life.

Belonging

Children and young people highlighted how important a sense of belonging was to their school experience.

Being identified as a Forces child – Some described feeling isolated when they attended schools with few Forces children or when they weren't given a chance to explore their Forces identity. One said, "Near exam times I don't talk about being part of a Forces family as there are not a lot of Forces pupils at my school. I forget to mention it, and it really does affect me. People don't take you seriously."

Some felt the school did not recognise them as a Forces child, even in areas with high Forces populations. One school reported that advice from the local authority was that GDPR prevented the school from approaching parents to declare their connection to the Armed Forces, even when their child wanted that recognition.

Structured opportunities – Clubs and shared activities were highlighted as an important way of building identity and connection. Social clubs provided in schools for Forces children created opportunities for support and a sense of belonging. These clubs in particular were described as spaces where children felt understood and could share experiences with others like them. As one child said, "Clubs give us identity. Military clubs give us friends, shared experience."

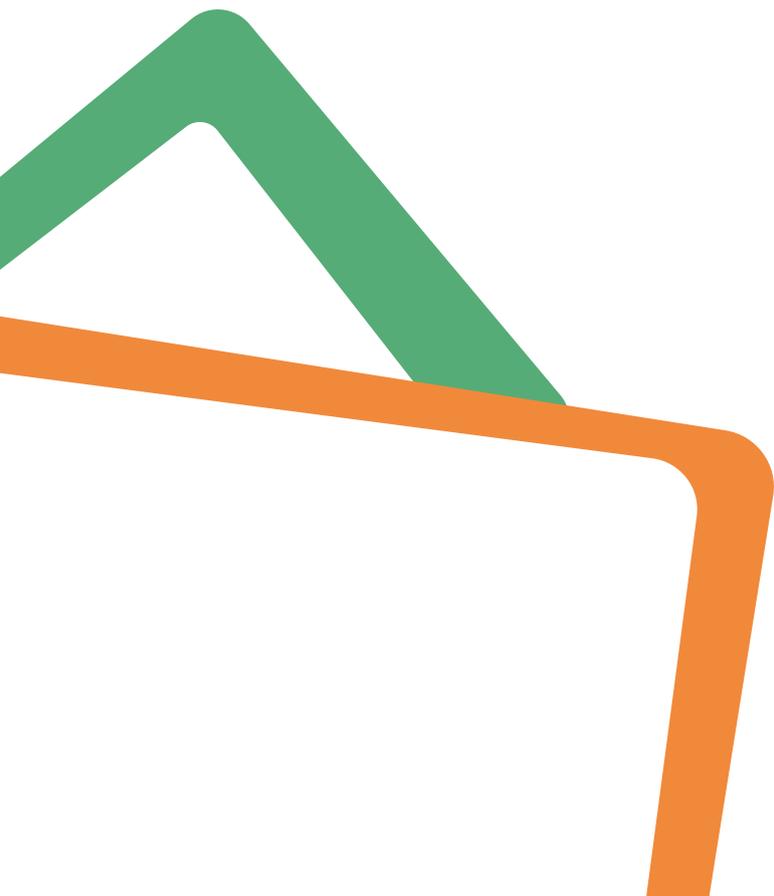
Attending schools with a higher number of Forces children also helped some young people feel less alone, with "so many Forces YP in the school so that helps".

Kindness and inclusion – Children and young people also spoke about the importance of kindness and inclusion in creating a sense of belonging. Simple actions and supportive peer relationships were seen as making a meaningful difference, captured in comments such as "making others feel included" and "kind towards others/friendship group".

Behaviour in schools

The children and young people spoke extensively about how behaviour in school affects their ability to learn, feel safe and feel treated fairly.

Military life sets expectations – For many Forces children, expectations around behaviour are shaped by family life influenced by military service, where values such as discipline, fairness, responsibility and consistency are strongly emphasised. While there is limited research on the direct impact of military service on children's behaviour, the findings of one study suggests that the qualities that support operational



effectiveness in the Armed Forces can also shape parenting, with military-connected families more likely to use structured, rule-based parenting styles.²⁵ This may suggest that Forces children are more comfortable in environments with clear expectations and consistent and fair consequences, and more sensitive to situations where behaviour is managed inconsistently.

Inconsistency in management – Many children and young people described frustration when behaviour was managed inconsistently in school, particularly where they felt that those displaying challenging behaviour received more attention than those who followed the rules. Several children felt that quieter or well-behaved pupils were overlooked, which undermined their sense of fairness and belonging. As one child put it, “Quieter/well behaved pupils get ignored,” while another said, “Teachers should take more care on kids that actually behave.”

Protected support – In schools with dedicated Forces Support Workers, some children felt that this support was often redirected towards non-Forces pupils with more visible behavioural needs. While children understood the need to support all pupils, they described this as sometimes coming at the expense of their own learning and wellbeing, reinforcing a sense that their needs were less visible or prioritised. They were keen to see this resource ringfenced and protected.

Safety – For some children and young people, particularly those in lower secondary school, concerns about behaviour went beyond

frustration and affected how safe they felt at school. Several described feeling more secure in primary school environments, where behaviour felt more predictable and relationships more stable. As one young person shared, “I like the old school (primary) better, I felt more safe.” Another said, “I want to go back to my primary school.”

Fairness – Children wanted behaviour to be addressed fairly and consistently, with clear consequences and recognition of positive behaviour. One child summed this up as, “Equality – good behaviour and bad behaviour treated consistently, and behaviour gets a reward if any good.” Others highlighted a lack of meaningful consequences, saying, “If someone is bad, they just get told off, no consequences,” and “Equal punishments would help.”

Implementation gap – Children linked behaviour management to wider issues of school culture and trust. Some felt that stated policies were not always reflected in practice and a broader frustration with a perceived gap between messages and reality, saying, “Teachers say they’re doing things to make changes, but it’s not seen. It feels like they’re just trying to maintain a specific image.”

Children’s experiences suggest that clear expectations, consistent responses and visible fairness are particularly important for Forces children. It suggests that Relationships and Behaviour Management policies need to be known and understood by children. When behaviour is well managed, it supports learning, safety and trust. When it is not, it can undermine children’s sense of dignity, security and belonging.

25 Speck, K, and Riggs, D, 2016. *Parenting styles in military and civilian families with adolescents: The impact of deployment, mood, and marital satisfaction*. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-21488-7_7

Prejudice, discrimination and bullying

Public attitude to the Armed Forces –

Research suggests that since 9/11, public attitudes in the UK towards the Armed Forces have become increasingly complex. While there remains a broad respect for those who serve, this often sits alongside scepticism about the use of military force and its relevance to everyday life in Britain. Recent conflicts have largely been fought far from UK borders, have not always been understood as contributing to security at home, and have had uncertain or contested outcomes. At the same time, fewer people now have direct personal or family connections to the Armed Forces, as service numbers have declined and the geographical footprint of military bases has become more localised.²⁶

For Forces children, this wider social context shapes their experiences in school and in their communities. One said, “I know how some people may feel about the military, so I don’t bother.”

Many children and young people described feeling different, isolated or misunderstood by peers and sometimes by school staff. Despite the protections set out in the UNCRC, including the right to be free from discrimination, Forces children reported ongoing experiences of prejudice linked to their parent’s service, accent, nationality or perceived difference, for example, “I think it is really scary as a Forces child how people are so misinformed about Forces families and what they do. There is an assumption that we do it [violence] as well, well no... I am my own person.”

Bullying and racism – Some children directly experienced bullying, including racist behaviour, as a result. They felt this was not taken seriously or addressed effectively. As one young person shared, “Racism – boys especially are racist. And it’s not dealt with.”

Others described being targeted because of their background or identity, saying, “being made fun of because I come from a different country,” and “having a different accent”. One young person reported changing their accent in order to fit in. Several children spoke about repeated criticism or hostility from peers, with one explaining, “People shout at me, I can’t get it right”, and another recounting “in Primary 2, my friend was labelled as a killer, which isn’t nice”.

Community views – The understanding and acceptance of Forces children’s identities and experiences varied depending on location. In areas with fewer military families, children described feeling visibly different and singled out. In contrast, in areas with a higher Armed Forces presence, some children reported facing resentment from peers or the wider community, particularly around access to dedicated support or clubs. Others described teachers and community members not understanding the unique challenges associated with Forces life, such as parental separation and limited contact during deployments and the everyday constraints of service law. They felt their parent’s service and the cumulative impact of Forces life was not fully understood, either compared with civilian professions that require frequent travel or with high-risk jobs that are not marked by long periods of separation from their parent and frequent moves.

²⁶ Strachan, H, and Harris, R, 2020. *The Utility of Military Force and Public Understanding in Today’s Britain*. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA213-1.html

Seeking help – Children and young people also spoke about their reluctance to seek help from school staff, often based on previous experiences where reporting concerns did not lead to meaningful change. Some described being moved to another class when issues arose. Others said that speaking to guidance staff might result in a conversation with the individual involved, but little changed in the wider culture. As one young person put it, “Guidance don’t do much about bullying/ incidents,” and another said, “Bullying is not dealt with properly, no matter how much I report situations they never change.”

These experiences left many children feeling unheard and discouraged from further reporting. Over time, this eroded their trust in school systems and reinforced a belief that raising concerns would not make a difference. For Forces children, whose lives are already shaped by frequent transitions and a strong sense of fairness, the persistence of discrimination and ineffective responses can have a significant impact on their wellbeing, sense of safety and ability to fully participate in school life.

Children and young people’s experiences show that school culture plays a decisive role in whether Forces children feel safe, respected and able to learn. Inconsistent rules, limited understanding of Forces life, ineffective responses to bullying and discrimination, and gaps between stated values and everyday practice can undermine trust and belonging. Where schools demonstrated clear expectations, fairness, empathy and a willingness to listen, children felt recognised as individuals and better supported to thrive. Embedding understanding of Forces life, alongside consistent, rights-respecting approaches to behaviour, inclusion and participation, is essential to creating school cultures that uphold dignity and ensure Forces children are treated without discrimination.



Curriculum – what we get to experience and learn

Frequent movement between education systems, differences in curriculum sequencing and teaching approaches, and limited support for transitions can disrupt learning, progression and engagement.

Different systems and curricula – Frequent moves between education systems across the home nations of the United Kingdom or abroad can undermine the right to an education in practice. Most curricula are designed on the assumption that children will begin at one point and progress through a shared sequence of learning. This means that moving between systems with different sequencing, pacing and priorities can create significant disruption for Forces children. Rightly or wrongly, some young people felt the curriculum was more difficult and challenging in England, citing when they learned times tables as an example. These challenges are not the result of any single curriculum, but of the difficulty in navigating between them without adequate support.

Without an understanding of where children

have come from, gaps or repetition in learning are more likely to occur, affecting continuity and progression. One young person said, “Moving between education systems has meant I have repeated a lot of my learning and found myself in S3 ‘learning’ what I had been taught in Year Six.” Teachers may not have the time to develop the level of understanding needed of other curricula to recognise possible gaps or repetition and deliver the individual support needed to address them. One young person offered an example of good practice when their teacher personalised their learning by continuing to teach a topic that the young person had been learning at their previous school.

Different systems mean different ages at the same stages – Children spoke about struggling to catch up, or conversely repeating learning they had already mastered, when transitioning between curricula. One young person described it as “forever playing catch-up, always behind”. Differences between education systems across the UK and overseas were particularly stark. For example, differences in school starting ages, the balance between play-based and formal learning, and the structure of school years could lead to children feeling misplaced socially and academically. Some described confusion and anxiety about being in the “wrong” year group, or being older or younger than their peers, with implications for friendships and future transitions.

Different learning and teaching approaches – Differences in teaching and learning were also raised, including changes in approaches to reading, classroom technology, and expectations of independent learning, for example, “Moving across curricula multiple times. Arriving in Scotland from Fiji where

they use blackboards not tech!" Another young person mentioned their Forces friends in Edinburgh working with a school-supplied Chromebook while they had no technology support in Moray.

Children and young people felt that differences in approaches to learning and teaching could mean learning gaps were sometimes unnoticed or unacknowledged, leaving them to compensate through additional work at home. One young person said, "I feel frustrated. I am unable to keep up, I am not learning new things. Teachers expect you to have the knowledge or expect you to catch up yourself."

Impact on motivation – Over time, missed or repeated learning affected motivation and engagement. One young person explained, "Switching education systems meant that I stopped being challenged and eventually stopped challenging myself."

Not accessing the subjects they want –

Children and young people described missing opportunities to pursue subjects they were interested in due to class allocations, full classes, timetable clashes, missing prior learning, or a lack of comparable courses. For some, this led to disengagement and a sense that "school is boring". One young person described repeating S2, having been advised not to change year group as the classes were full. For them, it felt like a wasted year of repeating learning.

Taken together, these experiences show how curriculum discontinuity can limit Forces children's ability to fully realise their right to education. While the reasons behind the differences in attainment levels²⁷ and historically lower reported numbers of Forces children progressing to university²⁸ are not yet well understood, children's accounts suggest that disrupted learning pathways, reduced challenge, and disengagement may play a role. Ensuring that curriculum transitions are better understood and supported is essential to protecting Forces children's educational rights and long-term opportunities.

27 Lee, C, Cotton, A, Newbury, D and Connelly, V, 2025. *Supporting ALL to Thrive: Executive Summary*. <https://sattproject.org.uk/impact-event/>

28 UCAS. *HE provider good practice briefing for students from UK Armed Forces Families (Service children)*. <https://www.ucas.com/providers/help-and-support/good-practice/good-practice-for-under-represented-groups/he-provider-good-practice-briefing-for-students-from-uk-armed-forces-families-service-children>



Personalisation and support – how am I supported to learn?

Practice and legislative context –

Personalisation and support for Forces children in education must be understood within the context of the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) approach.²⁹

Forces children are mentioned in the statutory guidance for additional support for learning as a group that may require additional support, either temporarily or over a longer period, to fully access their education and participate in learning.³⁰ The Scottish Government further recognises transitions, interrupted learning, separation and loss as Forces-specific circumstances that may require additional support.³¹ This means that education authorities must:

- ▶ “make adequate and efficient provision for the additional support required for each child or young person with additional support needs for whose school education they are responsible,
- ▶ make arrangements to identify additional support needs, and
- ▶ keep under consideration the additional support needs identified, and the adequacy of support provided to meet the needs of each child or young person.”³²

29 Scottish Government. *Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)*. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/>

30 Scottish Government, 2017. *Additional support for learning: statutory guidance 2017*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-childrens-learning-statutory-guidance-education-additional-support-learning-scotland/pages/2/>

31 Scottish Government. *Scottish Armed Forces Education Support Group*. <https://www.gov.scot/groups/scottish-armed-forces-education-support-group>

32 Scottish Government, 2017. *Additional support for learning: statutory guidance 2017*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-childrens-learning-statutory-guidance-education-additional-support-learning-scotland/pages/2/>

Many Forces children and young people also have a disability, entitling them to assistance that ensures they receive an education which fully develops their potential, as per UNCRC Article 23. Disability has a broad meaning in this context, including “long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”.³³

For many Forces children, an absent parent means taking on additional responsibilities at home, including caring for siblings or additional home tasks. In some Forces families, there are young carers due to family circumstances not related to Forces life. In other Forces families, there are young carers due to Forces life, such as caring for a parent with PTSD or significant physical injury. Forces life, with its many moves and separations, creates additional challenges and need for support for those with additional caring responsibilities and young carers.³⁴ These can ebb and flow with new postings and deployments, and transitions can have negative effects on continuity of support, with resulting impact on these children and young people’s educational experience and attainment.

33 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2007. *General comment No. 9 (2006): The rights of children with disabilities*. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2007/en/48507>

34 The Children’s Society, 2017. *Young Carers in Armed Forces Families: Evidencing the Need*. <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/young-carers-armed-forces-families.pdf>

Despite the challenges, many children and young people described how inconsistent understanding of the impact of Forces life across schools often leads to fragmented or uneven support. Frequent school moves can disrupt trusted relationships, pause or reset assessments for additional support for learning, and break continuity in help that had previously been in place. While the attainment of Forces children in Scotland is only now beginning to be formally measured, children's experiences suggest that gaps in personalised support risk widening existing inequalities.

Academic and learning support

Many children and young people said they would benefit from more tailored academic support, such as one-to-one help, subject-specific tutoring, catch-up time built into the timetable or additional assistance with coursework and exams, particularly to support gaps in learning and knowledge. To reduce the experience of repeated learning, some young people suggested a flexible approach to the curriculum or willingness to adapt the work, for example by giving the family a copy of the topics in the subject, allowing the child to highlight parts they have learnt and providing extension resources for students to progress from what they already know.

Experiences varied widely between schools, and children and young people felt that access to support often depended on individual teachers and how well they understood Forces life. They suggested communication between schools was key to understanding where the child is at and what they can learn next. Possible solutions offered were "a tutor to catch you up" as well as "information shared between schools timeously and a parent meeting with the class teacher/ teachers right after the move". One young person described the drop-off in support they received when moving off a base, highlighting the need for children and young people in dispersed families, saying, "I was in Edinburgh for three months and had extra support to catch up. We then moved off base, and I had no support and was so far behind."

Another young person described formally asking for additional support when their father was deployed, yet this not being acknowledged by any of their teachers for the first five months of the deployment. When the need for additional support was eventually acknowledged by a teacher, the teacher thought it was needed because their parents had separated. They did not realise that the student and parent were separated because of deployment and there was a worry about the risk their parent faced.



Additional support for learning

Some children and young people described how frequent moves can mean additional needs or disabilities are overlooked or not identified, masked by curriculum gaps, or are repeatedly reassessed rather than supported consistently. One said, "The key building blocks missing from my education was a lot of additional support for my learning difficulties; I know myself throughout moves that I was struggling a lot with my undiagnosed dyslexia within the school systems. Whenever we moved it was insanely hard to figure out why I was falling behind unlike others my age, my mum had to fight with the English schools to get me tested for dyslexia which they never did. She often blamed herself thinking the issue with my progression in education was because she enrolled me at four-and-a-half instead of five."

"Not getting answers and support to figure out why I was falling behind made things a lot harder to explain as there was no diagnosis there at the time. I'm glad I did finally get tested and both me, my parents and teachers could finally understand my development and what can best support my education."

As one young person said, "You don't always realise at the time that you are struggling, and you don't have the capacity to advocate for yourself at the time."

Anxiety specific to Forces life was identified as a significant barrier for some, affecting school attendance and concentration. One young person shared, "I really struggled with my mental health with my Dad being away and stopped attending class. They add pressure and expect me to just get on with it."

Differentiated learning – Targeted support to help Forces children review or consolidate missed learning was not consistently available, particularly in schools with only a small number of Forces pupils. This is more evident when children are placed in classes matching their chronological age rather than their academic stage. While supporting their socialisation, this decision can impact how they learn essential educational building blocks and requires differentiated learning within their allocated class. Depending on when a move took place, children can miss out on foundational knowledge, which becomes harder to identify and address as they progress through the system.

One young person described this experience, "I moved from Germany to Scotland after completing Primary 4, but because the German system followed a different structure, I joined school in Scotland at the end of Primary 5. That meant I effectively skipped a full year of schooling and missed key parts of the curriculum, leaving me feeling as though I was playing catch-up for the rest of my school career. When I moved again six months later to an area with very few Forces families, I found myself now in Primary 6 (there was confusion about where to put me due to my age) and the support I'd been receiving in Edinburgh disappeared."

"I went from being top of my class in Germany to struggling to keep up, and most teachers couldn't understand how I had missed an entire year of basic concepts, leaving me without the time or help I needed to ever properly grasp them."

Children and young people emphasised the importance of targeted support and personalisation during transitions to minimise disruption and maintain momentum.

Understanding Forces life and family pressures – Children and young people described how better understanding of Forces life among teachers could reduce stress and improve support, particularly around deadlines, concentration and behaviour during periods of deployment. Some highlighted the impact of highly publicised conflicts, which increased anxiety about a parent’s safety and the possibility of sudden deployment. This was more apparent in secondary schools with subjects like Modern Studies. Others spoke about the need for flexibility around term-time absence, especially where families had limited opportunities to spend time together following long separations.

Mental health – Many children and young people asked for support for their mental health and wellbeing, not just a focus on their learning. They wanted school-based counsellors to understand Forces life, so they didn’t need to explain it, before being able to receive the right support. One said, “The counselling service in school is not personalised and there are long waiting lists meaning it is not available when I need it.”

They also asked for access to counselling outside of school, provided by a service with expertise in Forces life, which was easily and quickly accessible at key times like deployment or a new posting. Most children and young people saw the value of Forces clubs and groups, offered in schools by Forces Support Workers or interested teachers³⁵, to create connections and provide support for their wellbeing. They

said, “you can make friends with others [from the Forces], share what it is like to be in a Forces family” and spend time with “people who understand the situation you’re going through”. Some young people suggested the value in increased connection between the Forces Welfare Services and school to improve understanding and awareness and highlight key changes on the base such as deployments, new postings and a change in command.

Young carers – Young carers within Forces families are identified as a particularly under-recognised group³⁶, especially in veteran families where schools may not identify children as Forces-connected at all. This often means caring responsibilities go unnoticed and unsupported with a significant impact on learning and attainment, for example, “If I had gotten [the support] sooner a lot of the stress that I felt would have been dealt with.”

One young carer who was only one of a handful of students in their school felt they were better supported as a young carer but that the support did not understand the Forces context to their caring, such as how it fluctuates depending on their serving parent’s presence at home.

Consistency, visibility, and choice – Support was described as inconsistent not only between schools, but within them. Even where there was a dedicated Forces support role, young people said this was sometimes under-resourced or lacked clear structure, limiting its effectiveness. Secondary-aged pupils were often reluctant to accept support if it meant being singled out or judged,

35 These groups vary between exclusive spaced for Forces children and those open to Forces children and their civilian friends. The important factor in how they were valued by Forces children was that they were created and delivered in partnerships with them.

36 The Children’s Society, 2017. *Young Carers in Armed Forces Families: Evidencing the Need*. <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/young-carers-armed-forces-families.pdf>

and some were unaware of what help was available. Many children and young people described feeling like good support came from individual good teachers or support staff rather than something that was school-wide and systematic. One young person highlighted the importance of choice when they said, "If I was having problems coping with Dad being a veteran, I'd go to the Military Support Teacher. If I was having problems with school, I'd go to the Raising Attainment Teacher. Choice is important."

Not all children and young people wanted support in school or wanted to engage with Forces clubs offered by school staff or the Armed Forces Support Worker. For some this was because they felt like they had already missed enough learning, whereas for others it was linked to how they viewed their Forces identity. This was more apparent in secondary schools, where attendance at clubs and activities dropped off as they got older. Being able to choose how and when to access support was important to most children and young people. A small number wanted to access support without necessarily identifying as a Forces child.

Some children and young people felt that they constantly needed to advocate on their own behalf to have their needs and adjustments met. One young person said, "Reach out to us! It is good when you don't need to constantly advocate for ourselves."

Importantly, children and young people stressed that support should not focus solely on challenges. Opportunities for leadership, peer mentoring and ambassador roles were valued, helping Forces children to build confidence, contribute positively to school life and be recognised for their strengths as well as their needs.

Participation and student voice

For children and young people, meaningful participation is essential to identifying their learning needs and shaping the support that works best for them. Forces children, in particular, described how many aspects of their lives are decided for and about them – postings, school moves, separations and systems – with limited opportunity to influence decisions or assert their right to have a say. They felt this lack of agency often extends into education, especially during transitions, when information is shared between schools without their involvement.

Children and young people described what good participation could look like in practice. They suggested one-to-one conversations with a member of support for learning to create a short learning profile, written with them, setting out what they want teachers to know about their strengths, needs and learning preferences. As one young person explained, "In school it would be me and a member of support for learning talking one-to-one, writing a learning profile about what things I wanted teachers to know/be aware of when discussing my needs and additional support. This would then be sent to all teachers."

While this approach was described from secondary school experience, children and young people felt it would be equally valuable in primary schools.

They also highlighted that participation should be a supported conversation, not a test of confidence or articulation. Younger children may need prompts, accessible language and trusted adults to help draw out their views. One young person provided the following example, "Where information from

parents or previous schools suggests a child struggles in noisy environments, a teacher could explore this directly with the child in a way they understand, enabling them to explain what affects their concentration and what helps.”

Children and young people felt that even very simple conversations could ensure their perspective is captured alongside professional and parental input, keeping the child at the centre of decisions about their education and support, regardless of age.

Parental involvement

Almost all children and young people highlighted the important role their parents played in shaping their school experience and advocating for the adjustments and enhancements they needed to achieve and be happy. Some recognised that their parent’s service meant they missed out on some of their key educational moments and created a disconnect between home and school. This led to the parents feeling disconnected from their education and the child feeling unsupported by them. Some young people identified several things schools can do to create and foster a real and meaningful connection between home and school which takes account of Forces life. These included “additional financial support so parents can attend”, “digital parents nights”, “arranging different times”, “allowing the stay-at-home parent to bring support”, “serving parents being given time off to attend” and “joint parents evening for siblings so they only have to attend once.”

Overall, the children and young people wanted greater cohesion and communication between their parents and school to better meet their needs.

While Scotland’s policy and legislative framework provide a strong foundation for personalised support, this is not always realised in practice for Forces children. As one young person said, “Good ideas, bad execution”. Inconsistent understanding of Forces life, disrupted transitions and reliance on individual staff can lead to fragmented support, missed needs and increased anxiety. Children and young people were clear that effective personalisation and support depend on continuity, informed and flexible practice, parental support, meaningful participation, and genuine choice.



Assessment and qualifications – how do I understand and show all my skills and achievements?

Assessment and qualifications were a significant concern for Forces children and young people. Their experiences outlined below show how high-stakes, time-bound assessment can intensify the effects of mobility, family separation and disrupt learning, particularly at key points in the exam cycle.

Recognition of prior learning and achievements – Young people described frustration at the lack of recognition for learning and achievements gained elsewhere. Moving schools could feel like starting again, with previous progress, qualifications or skills not always acknowledged. In the Scottish context, some highlighted that assessment often relies on topic-specific knowledge built up over time, which can disadvantage those who have moved systems and missed earlier content. One young person gave the example of moving into the senior phase and taking Modern Studies, “Different schools learn different modules at different times. I had new topics at my new school.” Several felt that assessments focusing more on transferable skills and approaches to learning would better reflect their knowledge and achievements across different settings.

Many Forces children and young people are involved in activities outwith school where they demonstrate achievements and leadership. They want a system which means that these out-of-school achievements contribute towards their overall attainment. Many feel this will make up for the other challenges they experience in demonstrating their learning in a school environment.

Different assessment approaches – Many spoke about the challenge of navigating different assessment approaches across education systems. Moving between curricula often meant learning how to succeed in one assessment model, only to have to adapt quickly to another, for example, “I did not get told how to write for Scottish assessments and exams.”

One young person expressed frustration at experiencing the stress and pressure of exams in one system which then had no value in the next when they said, “pointless exams/ assessments when switching education systems, like the SATs in England”. While a small number said they thrived under the current system, most described assessments as stressful and felt they did not always allow them to demonstrate what they knew or could do. As one young person put it, “Makes me feel bad, stressed about learning, achievements, anxiety – dislike handwriting long answers.” Another young person said, “It’s all about memory and not about actual knowledge learned.”

High-pressure exams – Children and young people were particularly concerned about assessment systems where the bulk of a final grade is determined by performance in a single, high-pressure exam. They felt this approach did not take account of the realities of Forces life or the impact that events outside school can have on concentration, emotional wellbeing and performance. Several gave the example of sitting exams shortly after a parent had been deployed, when worry and distraction made it difficult to focus, despite having prepared well. Qualifications Scotland may give special consideration if they have been fully prepared for the assessment, but their performance is materially affected by circumstances beyond their control. Valid reasons include domestic circumstances.³⁷ Special consideration can only be applied for by the school, so it requires the school to be aware of the deployment and to understand how it could affect the young person's performance. Many of the young people did not know that this was an option and thought that others in this situation would not know to approach the school as ask for them to apply. Some also worried that this would not be accepted as exceptional circumstances because it was their "normal".

Assessment methods mattered deeply to children and young people. They described traditional exams, and the lead up to them, as placing too much pressure on performance. One young person said, "Teachers panicking us after prelims about our level of knowledge and what we still need to cover." Some young people particularly highlighted the pressure experienced when exams were held in large halls or under tight time constraints.

One young person said, "Big test halls causing anxiety," while another explained, "Less time limited tests/not timed – causes panic and worry during the test." Others questioned whether some subjects rewarded short-term memory rather than understanding, saying, "Subjects like history are just boring, they're a memory test – you remember for a couple of weeks and then move onto the next topic."

For young people living near operational bases, these pressures could be heightened. Those in Lossiemouth described how their concentration during exams could be significantly affected by hearing aircraft take off, knowing from the sound that it was a rapid response to an emerging situation rather than a routine flight. In these moments, anxiety about a parent's safety could quickly override their ability to concentrate, yet the assessment system made little allowance for this context.

³⁷ Qualifications Scotland. Exceptional circumstances. <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/109851.html>

Additional support for learning

Additional support and extra time – Many young people valued that within the Scottish system they qualified for additional time and support in exams without a formal assessment or diagnosis. However, many also said that they were not given the accessibility arrangements as promised, some said they needed to fight for the accommodations in the first place and then needed to remind the school during assessments. Some young people commented that the criteria for qualifying for additional support in exams did not account for Forces life. As one young person said, “There is a lack of understanding that our lives aren’t consistent like peers’. There are ups and downs in Forces life.”

Alternate assessment methods –

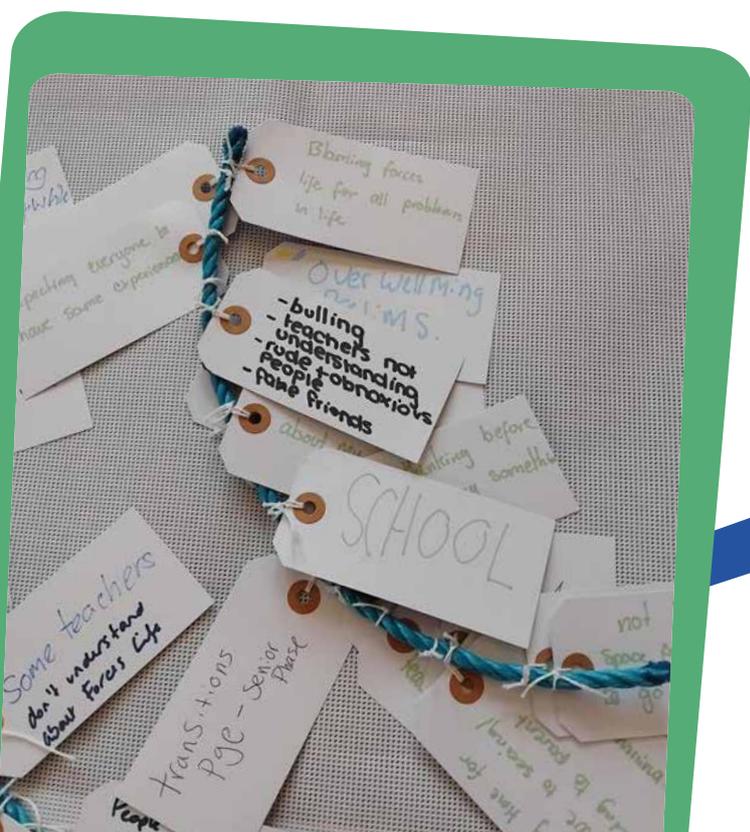
They offered practical suggestions for improvement, including greater choice and flexibility in how learning is assessed. These included open-book assessments, options to type or give oral answers, more classroom-based assessments, breaks during long exams, and environments that reduce stress.

As one young person summarised, “More diversity/choice for method of testing (open book, optional a,b,c,d, written, typed, oral)” and another asked, “Why always written tests? Could we have a spoken test?”

Together, these views point to a strong desire for assessment approaches that are fairer, more inclusive, and better able to reflect the knowledge, skills and resilience Forces children develop across multiple education systems and life contexts.

Young people’s experiences of assessment and qualifications highlight how a system built around high-stakes, time-bound assessment can compound the effects of mobility, disrupted learning and family separation. Rather than reflecting what learners know and can do, current approaches often reward stability and endurance, leaving mobile learners at a disadvantage. These experiences closely mirror the concerns set out in the Hayward Review of Scottish Education, which identified the need to reduce reliance on high-stakes assessment and to better recognise learning, skills and achievement across contexts. For Forces children, a more flexible, inclusive approach is not abstract reform, but a practical requirement to ensure fairness and continuity in their learning journeys and to address the identified gaps in attainment.³⁸

³⁸ Lee, C, Cotton, A, Newbury, D and Connelly, V, 2025. *Supporting ALL to Thrive: Executive Summary*. <https://sattproject.org.uk/impact-event/>



Purpose – what is school for?

This section explores how Forces children and young people understand the purpose of school from their unique experience of education across systems, drawing on their views about learning, personal development, relationships and wellbeing.

Learning – Forces children spoke in practical terms about the role of school, seeing it mainly as a place for learning, exams and preparation for further study or work, and for building on their existing skills, for example, “To educate and prepare children for the future.”

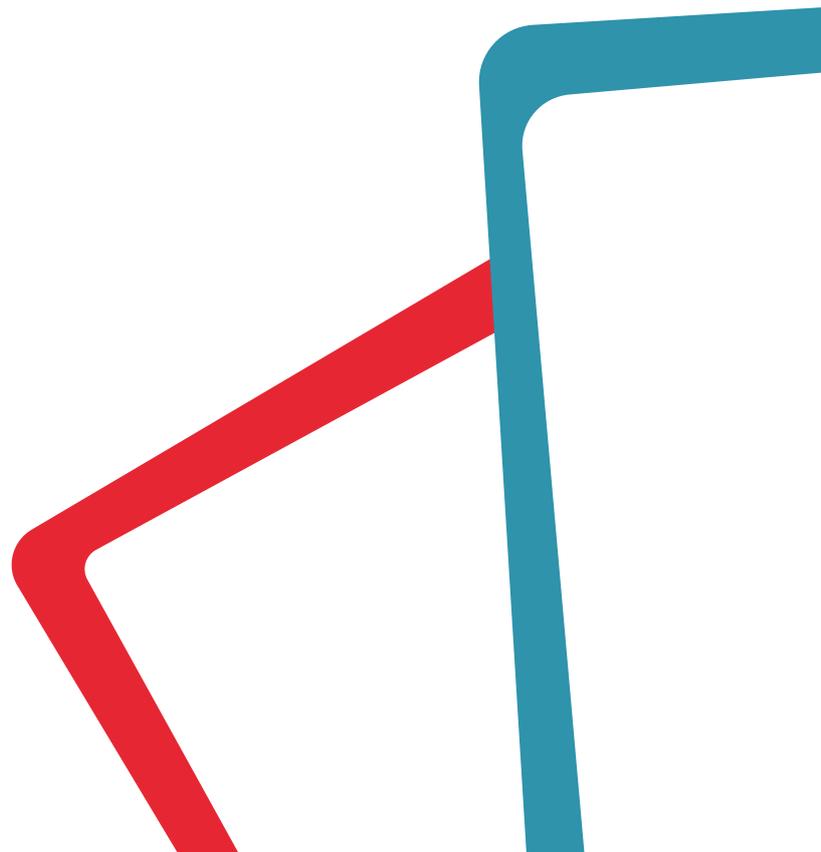
Shaping their future – At the same time, they were clear that school matters for much more than academic outcomes. One young person said it was “to become an established, educated and mature person before you leave”, while another said, “to find joy in ambitions: develop new skills, future goals and decent work for all”. Recognising the wider aspirations of Article 29, one young person said, “to understand the world around us, ourselves and others” and another thought it was to “find your passion”.

Socialising, hobbies and extracurricular activities – The children and young people valued the opportunities school provides to socialise, take part in leisure and cultural activities, develop routines, and support their mental and physical wellbeing. They thought school was an important place to “connect with others”, “make friends”, and “have lots of socialisation opportunities”. Frequent moves often disrupted hobbies, clubs and interests, making school an important route back into

these activities. However, many Forces bases are in rural areas with limited public transport, which can make access to extracurricular activities outside the school day difficult. This left some children feeling disadvantaged and questioning whether school was fully delivering on its wider purpose.

Wider relationships – Children also highlighted the positive influence of relationships with adults in the school community, but frequent moves disrupted these connections, and the pace and pressure of the school day often left little time to enjoy these wider benefits.

Children and young people’s views show that while learning and qualifications are central, the purpose of school is broader and relational. Frequent moves and practical barriers can limit access to friendships, activities and trusted adults, affecting how fully Forces children and young people experience the wider benefits of education.



Concluding remarks and next steps

This report highlights the need for continued and deepened engagement with Forces children and young people whose experiences are currently less visible. Further participation is particularly needed with those in independent schools, those who may be the only Forces child in their school, and those who feel ambivalent about, or in conflict with, their Forces identity. These children and young people may experience many of the challenges identified in this report, but are often less likely to be identified, to self-disclose, or to access support.

The educational experiences of babies and very young children from Forces families in early years settings require closer attention. Partnership work with Early Years Scotland has highlighted frequent transitions across nursery and childcare provision, driven by postings, mid-year moves, limited availability of places, split statutory hours across settings, and staff turnover near bases where practitioners may also be military

spouses. In a Forces context, early years provision is often framed around supporting retention and the employment of the non-serving parent, rather than its educational value for the child. As a result, children may move settings without consideration of the impact on attachments, relationships and learning. Parents report children transferring without records of their progress, which can be particularly challenging when moving between education systems. Further exploration with parents, practitioners and very young children themselves is needed.

Future work should prioritise inclusive, rights-respecting participation approaches that actively reach these groups and create safe opportunities for them to share their experiences and shape solutions. This is essential to ensure that policies, practice and support systems reflect the full diversity of Forces children's lives, rather than only those who are already visible or engaged. Without this, there is a risk that existing gaps in understanding and provision will persist, leaving some children unsupported during periods of loss, separation and transition.

Ongoing listening, alongside robust monitoring of educational outcomes and wellbeing, will be critical to translating the findings of this report into sustained change. Only by centring Forces children's voices and lived experience can education systems move beyond awareness and towards consistent, equitable, and effective support that fully realises their rights.



"You carry on silently until you burst because you don't want to add stress to your parent when they are struggling too. This affects your schoolwork etc."

"Parents go to war and their mental health gets affected, and it's a domino effect on to us."

"Moves during term time mean catching up, not enough help and being expected just to know."

"There is a lack of understanding that our lives aren't consistent like peers'. There are ups and downs in Forces life."



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