

Report summary

Children in Service families

The quality and impact of partnership provision for children in Service families

This survey was requested by the Ministry of Defence to examine educational and other outcomes for Service children and to evaluate the quality of provision made for them whether living abroad or in England. Service children face challenges that often go beyond the experience of the majority of families and children living in the UK. The families of Service personnel who are deployed in overseas Commands, and/or are actively deployed, are often highly mobile. The combination of deployment of a family member and regular moves of home and school can cause anxiety and stress for Service families whether living in the UK or overseas: education is disturbed, social networks are disrupted and parents left behind have to cope with the effects of being a 'single parent'.

During the survey, inspectors visited 30 maintained and three independent schools in England with varying percentages of Service children on roll in 16 local authority areas. They also visited 11 Service Children's Education schools and four Pupil and Family Service Centres in Germany and Cyprus. Interviews were held with children and young people, parents, school staff, governors and associated professionals from military and civilian backgrounds. Inspectors also held discussions with 16 local authorities who had varying numbers of Service children within the school population. In addition, 166 maintained schools in England responded to a survey questionnaire and the views of Service Children's Education schools located outside of Germany and Cyprus were also gathered.

Although, according to the Department for Education (DfE), Service children make up around 0.5% of the total school population in England, there is currently no definitive record of the number of service children living in the UK and/or overseas. DfE data; Ministry of Defence personnel records and other sources of data, have identified anywhere between 38,000 and 175,000 dependants of military personnel in education. There is no requirement for Service personnel to either declare children on their personal military record or to schools, and the DfE only collects data from State schools in England.

Data from the DfE's 2010 research report indicate that many Service children, who are geographically mobile, do not perform as well as non-mobile Service children across all key stages. Moving schools in Years 10 or 11 in particular, is associated

with a considerable fall in performance. During this Ofsted survey, inspectors found that many schools visited had difficulty in setting accurate academic targets for those Service children who were mobile, to ensure that they could achieve to their full potential. However by the end of all key stages, inspectors found that Service children's progress was broadly in line with other pupils in the school whether educated in English schools or overseas. In some cases, achievement was found to be a little higher for those educated overseas; at Key Stage 4, for example, attainment of Service children educated overseas is above the England average.

Inspectors found some important shortcomings in provision in the schools and local authority areas visited in England, especially where small numbers of Service children were being catered for. These included:

- problems with school admissions; a small proportion of the families interviewed had siblings in the same key stage in different schools because of unsuccessful applications and a lack of availability of school places
- children missing parts of, or repeating areas of, the curriculum
- poor transfer of information about pupils between schools, with particular difficulties with the transfer of statements of special educational need
- slow assessment and support for Service children with special educational needs or a disability
- a general lack of awareness of Service families and their additional needs.

Local authorities in England with higher percentages of Service families' children, and Service Children's Education schools abroad, were more able to quickly and successfully address the needs of children transferring into their schools, for example by providing good quality support services and taking steps to overcome the challenges associated with school admissions.

There were good examples of partnership working between schools and external agencies, both in England and abroad, which were helping to meet the needs of Service children. In these cases, schools worked very successfully with other agencies such as educational psychologists and Army Welfare Services to support Service children and their families, particularly prior to, or following, a move.

Inspectors found deficiencies in the organisational model for post-16 education and training provision for young people in Service families in Germany and Cyprus. The curriculum options for young people over compulsory school age, was very limited in scope and sixth forms were geographically dispersed and small in scale.

Although some progress has been made in reducing the impact of the challenges identified in the 2005-06 Defence Committee Review, many of the issues faced by Service children in schools in the UK and overseas have not been fully resolved.

Key findings

- In the UK there is no accurate record of the number of Service children and no organisation is properly accountable for tracking their location and/or movement between schools. This includes pre-school children, those who are home educated and those who are not in education, employment or training.
- Service children in the schools visited were achieving generally in line with their peers academically by the end of each key stage, but many children's learning had slowed or receded by continual moves and they needed additional support to catch up. Some did not achieve the grades they might have achieved, if they had not been geographically mobile.
- Service children were generally susceptible to social and emotional disturbance while a parent or other family member was on active deployment. This was further heightened for some children with special educational needs or where parents were deployed in areas of military conflict.
- In the best instances, effective pastoral systems ensured that schools had an early knowledge of family circumstances. Staff were able to monitor and, where necessary, support students who were reacting adversely to a change in home/school environment or disruption within their families.
- Schools with high proportions of Service children on roll, including Service Children's Education schools abroad, were often more effective in supporting children's personal needs effectively and promptly.
- Continual moves had a considerable impact on Service children and young people's social and emotional development and their friendships.
- Local authorities visited in the UK during the survey had differing systems for school admissions and this caused problems for Service families, because of delays in admissions departments processing requests for school places, or finding a school that could meet a child's needs.
- Systems of transfer of children's records between schools were uncoordinated and important information was delayed or did not arrive at all.
- There was no continuous learning and development record which accompanied a Service child throughout the whole of their education. Information from the previous school was sometimes insufficient to ensure that the receiving school could prepare for and meet the child's learning needs immediately upon arrival.
- Partnerships between schools and external agencies were judged to be good overall, both in England and in Service Children's Education schools overseas. Key aspects of this provision included the collaborative work of Pupil and Family Services in Germany and Cyprus in helping to meet a wide range of pupil needs; and the role played by some local authorities in England in assisting schools to provide social and emotional support to Service children and their families.

- Local authorities that had a long serving association with Service families and those with higher numbers of Service children in their schools were better placed to recognise and meet their needs.
- Additional funding streams for Service children varied from local authority to local authority in England so there was no equivalence of provision.
- There was generally a lack of continuity of support and provision for children from Service families as they moved between the schools surveyed, particularly those that moved singly or in very small numbers in the UK, or when they moved during term times. This tended to have a greater effect on those children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, those with missing records or those whose parents did not disclose their needs at all.
- Service Children's Education schools in Germany and Cyprus were not able to fully meet the needs of all of the 14–19-year-olds. Staying on rates in school sixth forms were too low. Young people were not always able to follow courses of their choice due to the limited range of subject options and the restricted qualifications structure available to them. As a result, some young people dropped out of full-time education or training; their destinations were not specifically monitored and there was weak accountability for their outcomes.

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