

Supporting our armed forces families

Mobile learners need their schools to support them through some challenging experiences

Children from armed forces families have to deal with the emotional impacts of parental absence and moving schools, which can have a negative effect on their educational experiences.

Research from the University of Stirling on 'Exploring the experiences of children and young people from armed forces families' found that children usually have little opportunity to reflect on their experiences of being part of an armed forces family at school, while the level and nature of support available to them within their schools varies dramatically across Scotland.

There are more than 12,000 children from armed forces families in Scottish schools, with high concentrations in parts of the country where there are air force, army and navy bases, including Edinburgh, Midlothian, Argyll and Bute, Highland and Moray.

Lou Kinnear, Positive Relationships Co-Ordinator at the Highland Council, said: "A key priority for us is to improve the identification of armed forces families which, with a total of 912 in Highland, we know is still hugely under reported.

"If we know a pupil is from an armed forces family, we can ensure educators and practitioners have

an awareness and understanding of their specific needs so they can get the right support to the pupil at the right time. Some key areas of importance are the impacts of deployment and separation. High levels of mobility, particularly for the Army, can result in our children and young people experiencing new education systems and being put in different year groups, and sometimes repeating work already covered. This can impact on a pupil's sense of belonging, wellbeing, achievement and attainment." The Highland Council's Military Liaison Group (Education), produces information, resources and training.

Kinloss Primary School, in Moray, has developed dedicated support resources for transitions, as well as a weekly club for children with parents who work away from home or are experiencing deployment. Around 60 per cent - 150 children - in the school are from armed forces families, some returning to Scotland from postings abroad and others transitioning from UK schools.

Wide-ranging considerations

With such a significant number, Kinloss needs to consider ways to support families who feel isolated and away from their support networks as well as those who feel there is little point in short-term engagement with their new community.

Headteacher Rachel Wolford said: "There are wide-ranging issues for us to consider, including mental and emotional resilience, and the general wellbeing of the children, as well as concerns that parents have about the impact of moving schools on attainment and achievement and their understanding of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence. There are children who are here for their entire primary journey, but they are affected by friendships lost due to their friends being posted. Sometimes a parent is deployed for months with

very little notice and school is the only constant that the child has in their life.

"A lot of children have moved to Kinloss during the Covid-19 pandemic and experienced a different transition. It has been a challenge to have the interactions with armed forces families that we would normally have when they join us. We have had to adapt our approaches, and both teachers and parents have missed the usual contact and open afternoons we hold, which are so important for making new families feel welcomed into our school community.

"Pre-Covid, we had adopted a whole-school health and wellbeing approach, which has been so valuable during the pandemic. We take an area of the programme and bring this to assembly and our health and wellbeing lessons and bring this back into focus again at the end of the week."

ADES' Forces Children's Education's National Transitions Officer Carolyn MacLeod agreed that many forces families have faced the challenge of making in-person connections throughout the pandemic. However, she added: "Just as in the wider population, while some of our learners have struggled, others have thrived with blended learning. They are not a homogeneous group.

"There are forces children in schools within every local authority, but it can be a lot more challenging for a school to effectively engage with them if there are fewer learners, rather than it being the ethos of the school."

Carolyn has created a Toolkit for Teachers to help staff answer the questions they will have when a learner from a forces family joins their school. Key areas covered include the importance of identifying armed forces learners, their challenges, inclusion, support



Carolyn MacLeod



available, and celebrating their successes. She explained: “This resource is both an opportunity to reinforce the knowledge that schools have but also for those who don’t have an understanding at all. It is very much something people can dip into to help with some of the language and the questions that families often ask. Through a partnership approach, we need to help schools to look at where each child is in their learning journey.”

More divergent approaches

University of Strathclyde research exploring literature on the experiences and educational outcomes of armed forces children found that it is important to understand the mental health needs of armed forces families, incorporating a trauma-informed approach within educational settings, while training should focus on preparing teachers to support armed

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forces children through challenges such as parental deployment and school transitions.

Meanwhile, recently published research from the Education Policy Institute provides a comparison of education across the devolved nations, which concludes that each is becoming even more divergent in its structure, systems and approaches, and that this pattern will continue.

Carolyn said: “Such a scenario is important and will have a significant impact on children and young people who are mobile and engage in education in different jurisdictions; often returning to or re-visiting education in one of the devolved nations during their learning journey.

“Such an experience is not the sole purview of children of armed forces families, as many other groups and individual families are mobile, or

in transition. I refer to these mobile families as those ‘in the fringes’ as education systems best support those children and families who are static in a local community. There are many families and children who experience frequent mobility and changes in education settings.

“An education system that is child-needs led should provide options and support that will enable families who are mobile to benefit from the best education experience that is available, and most appropriate for each child.

“We want education to provide continuity and long-term learning, which will always be difficult in this context. The pandemic has shown that there is potential for more adaptability and flexibility in our curriculum. Helping children of forces families will help all children.”

FORCES CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Supporting Armed Forces families in Scotland
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Toolkit for teachers



RESOURCES

- Forces Children’s Education Toolkit for Teachers – bit.ly/30jWc64
- A comparison of school institutions and policies across the UK – bit.ly/3dEBpNv
- Exploring the experiences of children and young people from armed forces families – hdl.handle.net/1893/28852
- Education Scotland resource – bit.ly/3DN2KaS
- The Educational Challenges of Armed Forces Children – bit.ly/3GyoN6Z