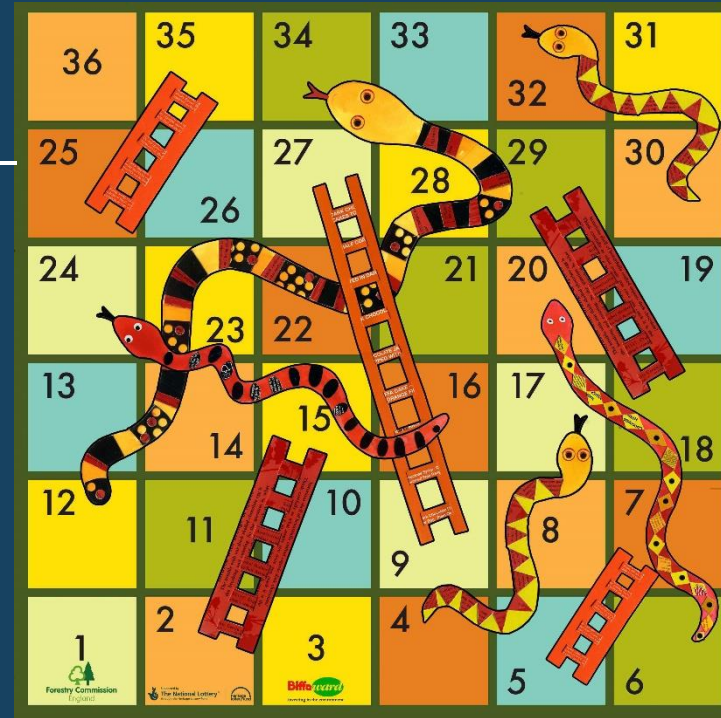


# Armed Forces Children's Needs – Challenging Professionalism, Policy and Practice

**SCiP CONFERENCE**  
**26 NOVEMBER 2025**



# Study Overview and Thanks

- ▶ Ethical approval
- ▶ Multi-disciplinary Advisory Board
- ▶ Stakeholder involvement sessions in Edinburgh and Aberdeen
- ▶ Academic Literature Review
- ▶ Review of national policies and guidance
- ▶ Data collection and analysis
- ▶ Engagement through focus groups:
  - ▶ Across Scotland
  - ▶ Tri-Service
  - ▶ Serving and veterans
  - ▶ All age groups
  - ▶ Queen Victoria School, Dunblane

# The Literature

- ▶ A “forgotten sub-population” in research. (Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021).
- ▶ Ofsted (2011) focussed on England, highlighted problems with school admissions, poor transfer of information, and slow assessment and support for service children. Children missing months of education.
- ▶ "Living In Our Shoes" (Walker et al., 2020). Parents cited lack of support and understanding of having a child with additional support needs by senior military officers .
- ▶ See also: “The special case of Military children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)”, (FIMT, 2024)
- ▶ Overall the academic literature is sparse.
- ▶ Where it exists it points to gaps in data on the extent and nature of armed forces’ children’s needs.

# The Wider Context

- ▶ Education is a devolved issue.
- ▶ Since devolution in 1999 there has been increasing divergence between the UK nations on educational policy (Sibieta and Jerrim, 2021).
- ▶ In general mobile families appear to be more satisfied with provision in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK, but
- ▶ There is still room for improvement

# The Wider Context

- ▶ One of the most frequently words used by parents in relation to having the children's needs met is “fighting”.
- ▶ In 2024 98% of parental appeals to the SEND Tribunal in England were successful.
- ▶ *“Parents often feel that they have to fight against the system to get their voices heard and their young person diagnosed, and that does not reflect the intention behind the 2004 act.”* Jenny Gilruth, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, 20 March 2024

# Policy Across the UK Nations

- ▶ There is no shared terminology : SEND (England), SEN (N Ireland), ASN (Scotland), ALN (Wales)
- ▶ The statutory plans all differ across the UK.
- ▶ There is little or no consideration of the implications of mobility eg how places on waiting lists will be maintained.
- ▶ The codes of practice are lengthy, complex, technical and hard to read or interpret.
- ▶ The armed forces is mentioned only once in the Scottish code and then receives no further attention.

# Accessibility

**Table 16: Readability of the parental guides produced by the UK nations**

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Words per sentence	21	20.3	26.2	28.7
Average syllables per word	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.5
Flesch Reading Ease	50.2	59.3	44.9	50.8
Interpretation of reading ease based on Flesch Reading Ease Chart	Fairly difficult to read	Fairly difficult to read	Fairly difficult to read	Fairly difficult to read
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	11.5	10	13.5	13.3

# Parental Guidance



- ▶ Organisations
- ▶ Fragmented, siloed and inefficient:
  - ▶ 153 different SENDIAS organisations , 30 of which were unavailable on a survey day
  - ▶ SENAC in Northern Ireland
  - ▶ SNAP in Wales
  - ▶ Enquire in Scotland (this alone has any reference to mobility)
- ▶ Official Parental Guides:
- ▶ Still presents reading challenges
- ▶ Present interpretation challenges
- ▶ No specific consideration of the Armed Forces and little on mobility



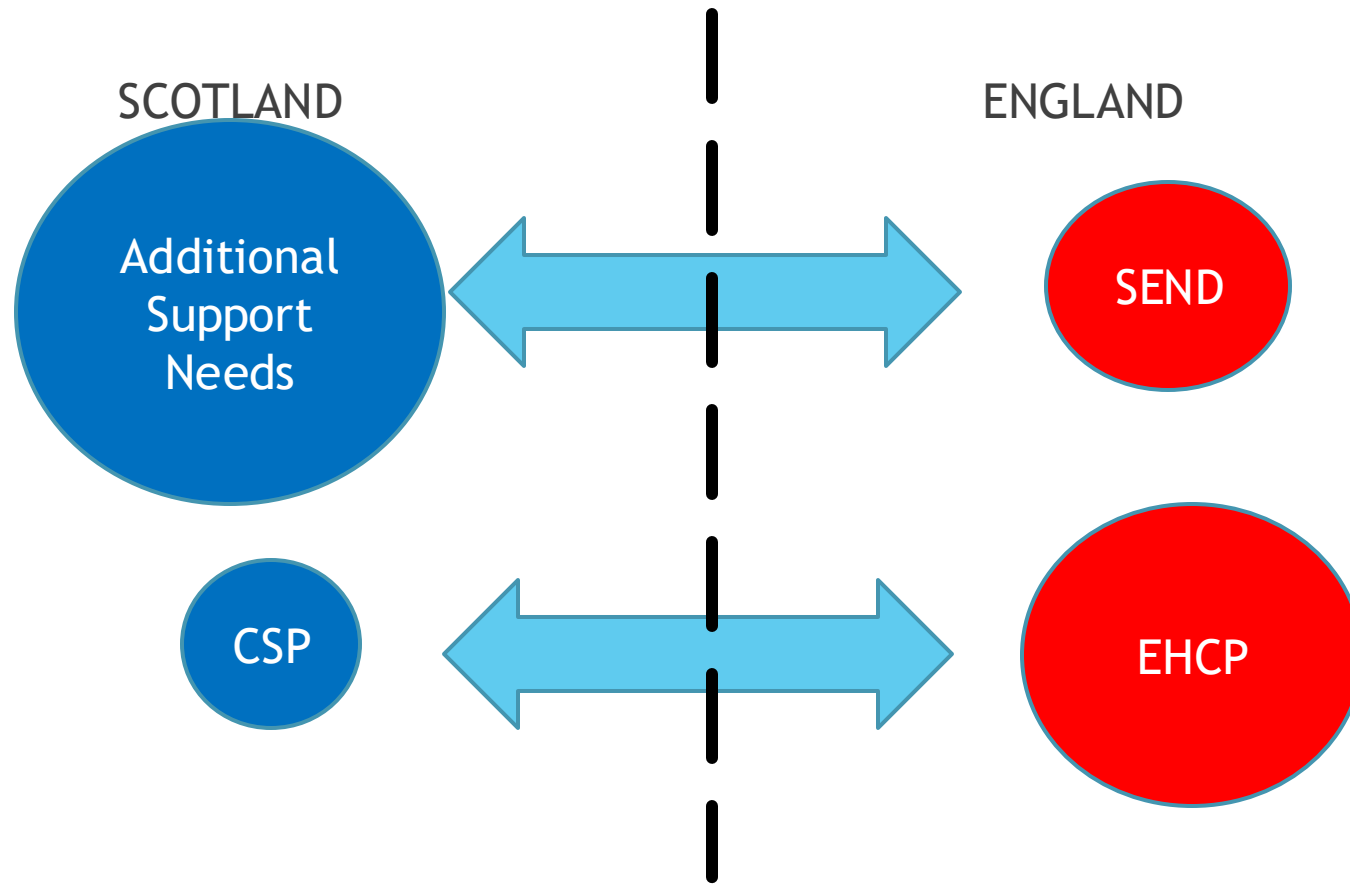
# Percentage of Children Requiring Additional Support in their Education 2023/2024

England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Percentage of school roll with special educational needs disability (SEND)	Percentage of school roll with special educational needs (SEN)	Percentage of overall school roll having additional support needs (ASN)	Percentage of children with SEN/additional learning needs
18.4	19.2	36.7	13.4

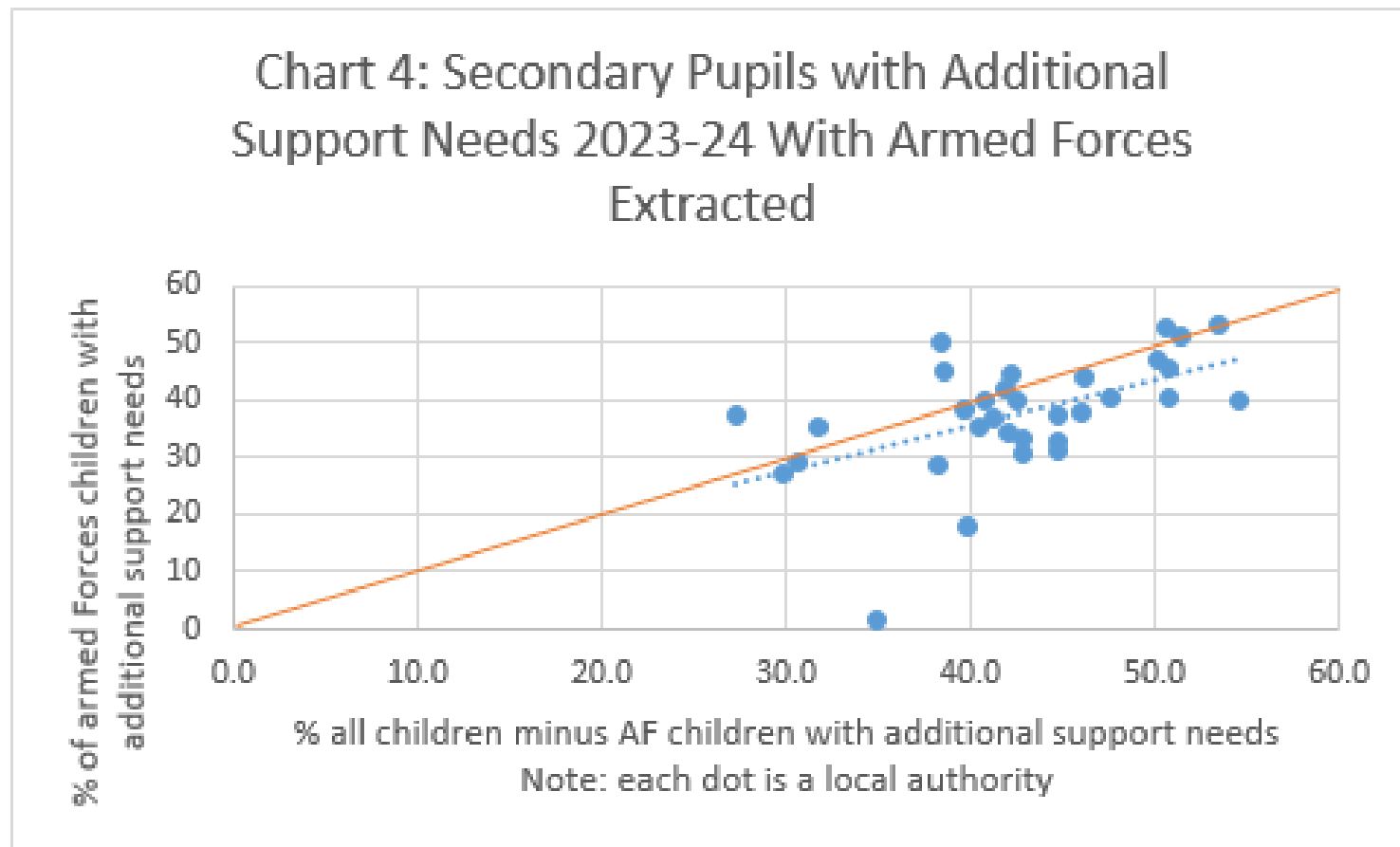
Percentage with an EHCP	Percentage with a Statement	Percentage with a CSP	Percentage with an IDP
4.8	7.6	0.19	3.9

# The Educational Hadrian's Wall (with apologies to Northumberland)



Not to scale

# Percentages of Armed Forces Secondary Aged Pupils in Scotland 2023/2024



Co-efficient of Rank Correlation = 0.57

Source: ADES 2023 data collection exercise

# What we found about the armed forces children ASN population

- ▶ The majority of AF children have no additional support needs.
- ▶ There is little difference in the INCIDENCE of ASN in the AF children's population when compared to the general population.
- ▶ There is little difference in the NATURE of needs in the AF children's population when compared to the general population.
- ▶ The level of need may be AMPLIFIED for some AF children as a result of mobility or the nature of AF family life.
- ▶ More research is needed on this area of findings although recently published studies appear to corroborate these findings.

# The views of schools

- ▶ *“This process works better within Scotland. The experience from outwith is quite variable.”*
- ▶ *“We very rarely hear from schools in England during transfer, we always try to ensure that passports are completed with needs and attainment evidence is documented prior to families leaving us.”*
- ▶ *“EHCP Plans (sic) are not always in place for transferring pupils. It would be really useful to have a common transition guidance so all children, irrelevant of school placement, get the same transition experience.”*
- ▶ *“Often parents wish to make classing decisions as the academic year in birthday’s works from March 1<sup>st</sup> in Scotland and September 1<sup>st</sup> in England. Parents should follow guidance from the school but often wish to class up feeling they might move back to England. However often these pupils are not ready for this and socially and emotionally are behind.”*
- ▶ *“Pupils need support with waiting lists and diagnostic processes. By the time an Ed Psych or school has worked with the pupil, they are often moved and this process starts again.”*
- ▶ *The attainment gap within my school is armed forces pupils. Significant support and intervention is required for a high percentage of these pupils.”*

# The views of children and families

- ▶ “I don’t want to be thought of as ‘that weird Navy kid’”
- ▶ “There is a wide range of support services.....but it is knowing where they are. Charities based in England do not understand the Scottish context and what we are dealing with up here.”
- ▶ “It is not acceptable to rely on charities and volunteers to support military families”
- ▶ “We don’t understand the education system”
- ▶ “The only support we got in moving to Scotland was a phone call and one sheet of paper. The schools rang each other. There was no transfer of records.
- ▶ “It was horrendous. We were fighting for support.”

# What works well?

- ▶ A welcoming school.
- ▶ When there is effective transfer of information between schools.
- ▶ A school that understands the needs of the armed forces children population.
- ▶ A member of staff in the school who has served, or who is an armed forces spouse, or who has taken time to find out and understand the needs of this population.
- ▶ In some areas better policies and procedures for placing children in schools.

# Synthesis

- ▶ Systems in which there are general low levels of confidence
- ▶ Statutory systems which are complex and impenetrable in application.
- ▶ A knowledge gap on implications of mobility and AF life
- ▶ Different educational contexts
- ▶ Different vocabularies
- ▶ Different definitions
- ▶ Different statutory plans
- ▶ Different pupil populations
- ▶ Different considerations of armed forces status
- ▶ A professional knowledge gap between the systems
- ▶ Sparse or poor parental guidance on the issue of mobility

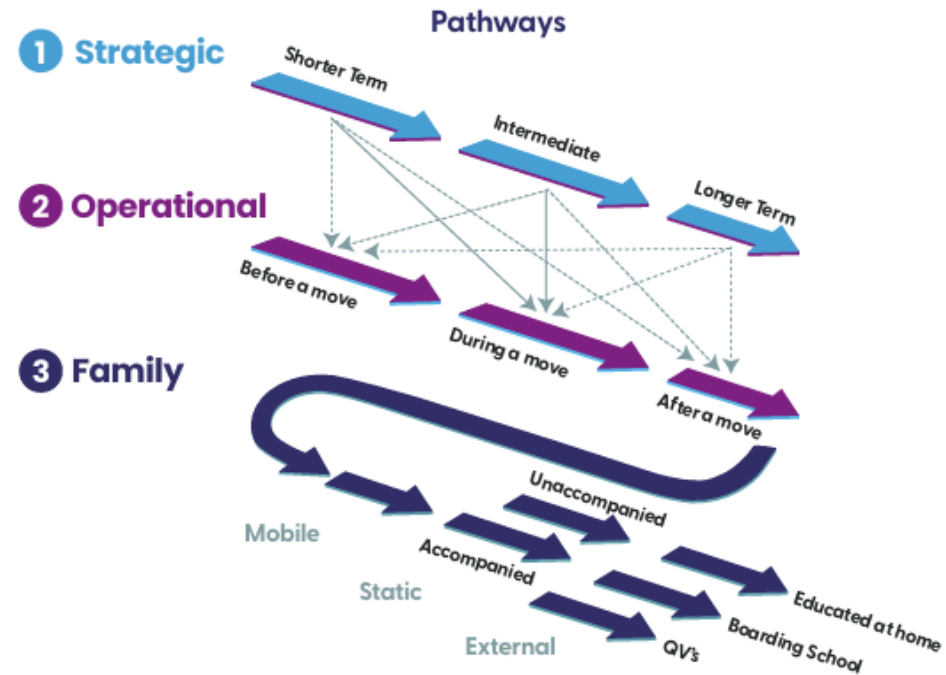


# Main Conclusions

- ▶ The amplification effect of AF life needs to be better understood.
- ▶ More research is necessary to corroborate and extend these findings.
- ▶ Transfer of information on pupil learning should be improved.
- ▶ Several aspects of family moves could be improved including placement in schools
- ▶ AF families should be considered in the national revisions of codes of practice.
- ▶ This issue needs to be part of initial teacher education and career long professional learning.
- ▶ A much better understanding of differences between the UK education systems and their implications for children and families is required.

# The 3 pathways

Figure 3: A diagrammatic representation of the relationship between the strategic, operational and family pathways



# Links

## For on-line copy of the report

- ▶ <https://forceschildrenseducation.org.uk/a-game-of-snakes-and-ladders>
- ▶ <https://www.napier.ac.uk/about-us/our-schools/the-business-school/our-research/military-transitions-research-centre/research-and-publications>

## E-mail contacts

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- ▶ [nationaltransitionsofficerades@gmail.com](mailto:nationaltransitionsofficerades@gmail.com)
- ▶ [grahamrshort@outlook.com](mailto:grahamrshort@outlook.com)

# Workshop

## Topics for Discussion (1)

1. Amongst professionals, what needs to be done to improve an understanding of the implications of mobility for children and families? That is, is there sufficient understanding of the differences between the UK's education systems, and their implications?
2. What do professionals (educators, establishments, education authorities) need to do to better support armed forces children with additional support needs?
3. How can the advice and support to mobile armed forces families be improved?
4. What can be done to improve the transfer of information between schools ? (Think about how understandable, or useful, the information is - not just how the information is transferred).

# Workshop

## Topics for Discussion (2)

- ▶ A 5-nation working group is presently trying to produce 10 “Top Tips” to assist establishments to better support mobile families and children.

What would be your 10 Top Tips?