



# ENABLING YOUNG CHILDREN FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES TO THRIVE: EARLY YEARS EVIDENCE, PRACTICE AND POLICY

RESEARCH REPORT  
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## FOREWORD

The story of the SCiP Alliance has always been one of community, action and impact. This groundbreaking early years research continues that story by giving us a robust, UK-wide evidence base on the earliest experiences of children from Armed Forces families—experiences too often overlooked in policy, practice and research. This report offers clarity, confidence and direction.

Across parents, practitioners and providers, the message is unmistakable: the early years matter profoundly for Service children, and the system is not yet shaped around their needs. Yet the sector's commitment, compassion and expertise shine through, showing what is possible when support is well understood and well delivered.

The research highlights the distinctive experiences of young Service children. Many thrive, but too many face instability at a formative stage—disrupted attachments, delayed access to support and the emotional effects of mobility and deployment. Families often absorb these pressures and need more help.

Practitioners, meanwhile, are dedicated and increasingly aware of the cohort's needs, but they lack the training, resources and system-level backing to respond consistently. Where strong relationships, routines and tailored approaches are in place, children can flourish—but this good practice relies on goodwill rather than guaranteed support.

The report identifies clear priorities for practice—visible support, emotional security, strengthened development and transitions, attention to children's voices and close partnership with families. It also makes clear that practice alone cannot overcome entrenched barriers. System-level change is essential: national visibility, seamless transfer of additional needs information, dedicated early years funding, workforce development and improved access to childcare.

This research does more than document challenges. It shows what is possible. It equips us to design evidence-led tools that work in real settings and strengthens our shared voice in shaping the systems around them. Above all, it ensures that the youngest children in Armed Forces families do not remain invisible.

My belief remains simple: when we deploy practical, evidence-led tools and support sustained engagement, we can improve Service children's lives—child by child and across the whole system. This report provides the evidence and the momentum to act together.



**Philip Dent**  
Director  
Service Children's  
Progression  
Alliance

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our thanks to all those who contributed to this research and have given their time, expertise and experiences with professional generosity, commitment and compassion to create the evidence within this report.

We extend our sincere thanks to the Naval Children's Charity for coordinating this initiative and to the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust for their generous funding and confidence in this work, without which the project would not have been possible.

Finally, we acknowledge the project Steering Group for their expert oversight and the Advisory Panel, chaired by Debra Barton, Early Years Specialist Lead in the Ministry of Defence (MOD), for their advice and guidance throughout the design and delivery phase. Their expertise has been instrumental in ensuring the rigour and relevance of our findings.

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## DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP Alliance) defines a Service child as "a person whose parent, or carer, serves in the regular Armed Forces, or as a reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that person's life."

In this report, the term 'Service child/ren' and children from Armed Forces families is used to describe the cohort of children aged 0-5 who meet this definition. When describing the families of Service children, the term 'Armed Forces families/parents' is adopted.

Early Years settings include all types of provision offering education and care to children aged 0-5. This covers school-based early years provision, private, voluntary and independent nurseries (PVI), as well as individual childminders. When discussing a setting's approach, the principles can usually be applied to individual childminders, as they reflect on their own individual practice. This report offers insight applicable to all Early Years settings, supported by research that incorporates contributions from the full range of setting types.

Across the four nations of the UK, different statutory terms are used to describe children with additional needs: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in England and Northern Ireland, Additional Support Needs (ASN) in Scotland, and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in Wales. This report uses the term "additional needs" as an umbrella term, except where nation-specific policy, legislation or direct quotations are used, in which case the relevant statutory term is retained.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research addresses a gap in evidence, understanding, and resources for early years settings supporting children from Armed Forces families aged 0–5 years. It was undertaken because there is little existing research on the needs and experiences of Service children in the early years, and practitioners currently lack practical guidance to identify and respond to those needs. The research set out to identify both the strengths and challenges faced by young Service children and their families but the lack of published appreciative studies on the benefits of military life to children and their families, and the lived realities of the study participants, brought into sharper focus the challenges they face. This evidence imbalance is reflected in this research report and highlights a need for more appreciative studies focusing on thriving and resilient young Service children to counter a discourse of disadvantage and inequity. Nevertheless, the research data highlights the high level of additional needs and felt unfairness in the lives of Armed Forces families and their young children.

The Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) was commissioned to explore what is currently known about the early life and educational experiences of young children from Armed Forces families, with a view to informing an effective toolkit for early years practitioners. The research combined a rapid evidence review with primary data collection, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups with parents, providers, and sector stakeholders across all four UK nations. This research will be utilised to develop a Thriving Lives Toolkit bespoke to those providers and practitioners working in the early years.

## KEY FINDINGS

### CHILDREN AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES

- **Disruption and instability:** Young children from Armed Forces families often experience frequent moves, parental deployments, and multiple transitions, which can disrupt friendships, routines and learning. Although many of these children cope well and can positively benefit from their experiences, evidence reveals that for significant numbers these challenges are linked to anxiety, attachment issues, and emotional regulation difficulties.
- **Impact on development:** Many children from Armed Forces families make good developmental progress, but a higher prevalence of speech, language and communication delays, as well as difficulties in personal, social and emotional development, were frequently reported.
- **Barriers for children with additional and complex needs:** Children from Armed Forces families with additional and complex needs face greater exclusion and delays in accessing support than that reported by other children. Frequent relocations often result in repeated assessments and disrupted interventions.
- **Family wellbeing:** Parents, particularly those left at home during deployments, can experience isolation and stress which in turn affects young children's wellbeing at a formative stage in their lives. Support for Armed Forces families, as well as children, is therefore critical.



## PRACTITIONER KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY

- **Growing awareness, limited resources:** Early years providers increasingly recognise the unique needs of Armed Forces families but often feel under-prepared and under-resourced to meet them. Provision is inconsistent across locations and services.
- **Emotional and relational support:** Early years practitioners play a vital role in offering stability, continuity and reassurance. Strategies such as deployment packs, memory books, and nurturing routines were used by settings and valued by families.
- **Training gaps:** Most early years practitioners reported little or no formal training on supporting Armed Forces families, relying instead on personal experience. There was strong demand for specialist professional development.
- **Barriers to access:** Availability, affordability and eligibility rules for early education and childcare are significant challenges. Armed Forces families in all four nations often face waiting lists, residency-based restrictions and a lack of flexible provision that reflects the needs of service life.

## CURRENT AND BEST PRACTICE

- **Inclusive pedagogy with tailored support:** High-quality early years practice benefits all children but needs to be flexibly adapted to military life. Routines, personalised support, and enriched learning environments are especially important.
- **Specialist resources:** There were a wealth of resources and programmes identified that were seen as valuable in supporting children from Armed Forces, but settings often had to self-fund resources.
- **Partnerships and collaboration:** Stronger links between providers, military welfare, local authorities, and health services were identified as essential to continuity and effective support.

## PRACTICE LEVEL PRIORITIES

From the evidence, eight priorities for practice development were identified – it is suggested that early years providers should ensure that:

1. A clearly visible approach to supporting children from Armed Forces families is developed, shared and promoted;
2. Child wellbeing and mental health are supported;
3. Child development and learning are prioritised;
4. Transitions are supported and celebrated;
5. Children participate in decisions and are heard;
6. The family around the child are valued, engaged and supported;
7. Staff are developed to ensure they are knowledgeable, nurturing and trained;
8. Setting level barriers to accessing childcare and early education are removed.



## POLICY AND SYSTEM-LEVEL PRIORITIES

While practice-level improvements are vital, families in this review highlighted a lack of support from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) for themselves as parents and for their young children. Evidence from practitioners also indicated that systemic change is required to ensure Armed Forces families are consistently supported to access the support and services needed to thrive. From the evidence, five priorities for policy and system development across all four nations were identified:

1. **National Policy Framework** – recognise children from Armed Forces families explicitly in early years policy across all four nations, mandating visibility, data collection and targeted strategies.
2. **Continuity of Support** – introduce a “Service Child Passport” for 0–5s to ensure seamless transfer of health, development and additional needs (SEND/ASN/ALN) records across borders.
3. **Funding Reform** – provide dedicated funding, such as the Service Pupil Premium, for the Early Years sector, using mechanisms appropriate to each national context, to ensure consistent support for Service children with ring fenced funds for interventions and support for those with additional and complex needs.
4. **Workforce Strategy** – embed Armed Forces awareness in early years qualifications and provide free, accessible training for practitioners, supported by regional champions.
5. **Access and Affordability** – ensure flexible, high-quality childcare provision that reflects military life, with clear national and local guidance and information tailored to Armed Forces families, giving attention to removing system level barriers to accessing childcare and early education.

While noting that many children from Armed Forces families thrive and do well, this research demonstrates that a significant number of children in their early years often face distinctive challenges linked to military mobility, deployment and family stress, which impacts their emotional wellbeing and developmental progress. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the families of these children also may experience distinctive challenges linked to their situation including isolation and anxiety, which can disrupt their daily lives, affect their mental wellbeing, and in turn affect the children at this formative stage of life. Early years providers play a critical role in offering stability and support, to both the children and the wider families, but they need consistent training, resources and systemic backing to do so effectively. A practitioner toolkit to support the early years sector should reflect this distinctive context of Service children and their families.

The data also suggest that developing practice is insufficient in ensuring that all children from Armed Forces families receive the best early years' experience – there are too many structural challenges that are outside of the control of early years providers and require more strategic, policy level action. By embedding Armed Forces awareness within early years policy, funding structures, professional development and access arrangements, the UK can ensure that the youngest service children thrive, and that their families are equitably supported at this crucial stage of life.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

This research addresses a gap in evidence, understanding, and resources for early years settings supporting children from Armed Forces families aged 0–5 years. It was undertaken because there is little existing research on the needs and experiences of service children in the early years, and practitioners currently lack practical guidance to identify and respond to those needs.

The focus on early years is a timely and powerful opportunity to better support service children and young people at, arguably, the most crucial stage in their development. Reflecting this, a 2022 directive from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) on the education of Service children and young people, highlighted the importance of educational support, including during the early years phase, which provides the starting point of young people's journeys through the system.

**●● Our Service children and young people, from an early age, can sometimes experience challenges that their civilian counterparts may not...Education, from early years through to higher education, can provide the stability to help children and young people through these times.<sup>1</sup>**

There is increasing acknowledgement that high-quality early years education provides the highest cost-benefit returns than investment in any other education stage<sup>2</sup> and a host of benefits for individual children's social, emotional and cognitive outcomes.<sup>3</sup> The MOD statistics suggest that a third of UK Armed Forces families have children under 5,<sup>4</sup> amounting to approximately 30,000 Service children in the early years.<sup>5</sup> While there is currently limited research on whether Service children in the early years face particular challenges or have comparably poor outcomes, the importance of supporting all children during this crucial

stage, combined with the large population of children and families that stand to benefit from better support for Service children in the early years underscores the high potential impact of this work.

In early 2024, the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) were commissioned on behalf of the Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP Alliance) and the Naval Children's Charity to produce a rigorous, accessible research report, drawing together existing knowledge and new primary research to build a better understanding of:

- Service children's experiences and outcomes in the early years;
- The current state of play in early years settings in terms of their awareness of and support for Service children;
- What effective, high-quality practice supporting Service children, young people and families' looks like in the early years.

This project has been funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust Transformational Grants Programme.

This research set out to identify both the strengths and challenges faced by young Service children and their families but the lack of published appreciative studies on the benefits of military life to children and their families, and the lived realities of the study participants brought into sharper focus the challenges they face. This evidence imbalance is reflected in this research report and highlights a need for more appreciative studies focusing on thriving and resilient young Service children to counter a discourse of disadvantage and inequity. Nevertheless, the research data highlights the high level of additional needs for Armed Forces families and their young children.

1 Ministry of Defence (2022). JSP 342 Education of Service Children and Young People.

2 James J. Heckman et al., (2017) 'Quantifying the Life-Cycle Benefits of a Prototypical Early Childhood Program',

3 Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Penderi, E., Rentzou, K., ... & Leseman, P. (2015). A review of research on the effects of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) upon child development.

4 Ministry of Defence (2025) UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey 2025

5 Ministry of Defence (2022) UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-32

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To frame this research, the following three research questions and associated sub-questions were agreed:

**1. What are Service families' and children's experiences of early education and care?**

- a. What are the main challenges faced by service families in accessing early education and care?
- b. What support is needed for Service families in the early years?
- c. To what extent do the needs of Service children differ from those of other children in the early years?
- d. What support is needed for Service children in the early years?

**2. To what extent are practitioners in early years settings aware of Service children and families and their needs?**

- a. How do practitioners understand the needs of Service families and children?
- b. How do they currently work with Service families and respond to their needs?
- c. To what extent do practitioners feel there are barriers to their ability to support Service families and children?

**3. What are the key principles of effective practice in supporting Service children and families in the early years and how might these inform the development of the Toolkit?**

- a. How does best practice differ across different types of early years settings?
- b. How might a toolkit reflect the unique complexity of early years settings and build in evidence-based features of best practice in the early years?



## 2. METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) was commissioned to explore and document what is currently known about the early life and educational experiences of young children (aged Birth to 5 years old) from Armed Forces families, an under-researched cohort of children. The research aimed to evaluate published data and collect first-hand knowledge about the strengths, challenges and early educational support experienced by Service children and their families. This approach was guided by the ethical principles set out by the European Early Childhood and Education Research Association (EECERA) code of ethics.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that little published evidence was found on the strengths of Service children, and rather more on their challenges; It should be stressed that this does not mean that young children from Armed Forces families do not have strengths, only that these are currently under-reported.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

The study adopted an appreciative and collaborative approach, seeing young children from Armed Forces families as highly competent in navigating their lives and recognising the professionalism of the early years practitioners who worked with them and their families. The research aimed to ensure that the voices of participants, including children, parents and practitioners, were visible and carefully represented in the findings. It was intended for the voices of young Service children to be directly included in this process, however timeframes and ethical considerations precluded this from happening. Permissions to conduct research with parents accessing provision from providers operating on MOD estate also limited the capturing of parent voice. To offset these limitations additional data collection was conducted with early years providers as a proxy for parent and child voice.

The research had five methods of data collection which were conducted across the UK and successfully included all four nations with the exception of the parent interviews, which only took place at one site in England.

- i. **Rapid Evidence Review**
- ii. **Online Survey of early years settings across UK**
- iii. **SCIP Alliance Early Years Advisory Group and Steering Group Consultation**
- iv. **Focus Groups**
- v. **Interviews**

The five methods are set out in more detail below.

i. **Rapid Evidence Review (RER):** this consisted of a short, focused review of published academic papers and grey literature regarding research, programmes and toolkits of a similar scale and scope. Mindful of budget and timeframes it operated to strict parameters agreed at project inception and primarily focused on:

- Data in key bibliographic data bases such as: British Education Index; ERIC; EBSCOHOST; CoRE; ProQuest; CREDOREFERENCE; and Google Scholar;
- Existing reviews, meta-analysis and toolkits relating to service families and children in the early years;
- Evidence from 2018 to 2025;
- Evidence from the UK, including where available, all four nations.

The purpose of the RER was to generate an evidence base which could both contribute to the research questions directly but also help shape and refine the subsequent primary research. The data collection topics and questions in each of the four methods set out below were informed by identified themes in the RER and through consultation with key stakeholders represented in the Advisory Group.

<sup>6</sup> Bertram T, Pascal C., Lyndon H., Formosinho J., Gaywood D., Gray C. and Whatley M. (2024) EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 33(1), 4-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2024.2445361>

- ii. **Online survey:** A short online survey for early years practitioners from across the United Kingdom was used to provide a set of high-level responses to the research questions (see Appendix 1 for online survey questions). This was circulated through CREC's extensive early years networks and through engagement with regional and national early years membership organisations and providers to circulate amongst their own networks.
- iii. **Advisory group consultation:** To support this research phase we consulted with the established Advisory group for this project, comprising early years provider chains, Armed Forces Families representative groups, early years / family liaison staff at the three Armed Forces, and civil servants within UK and devolved government departments. This group, chaired by the Early Years Specialist Lead in the MOD, was engaged online at two project milestones (following the evidence review, and following the qualitative data collection). Emergent learning was shared and responses were recorded.
- iv. **Focus Groups:** Two online focus groups with early years providers from across the United Kingdom provided a set of high-level responses to the research questions. These groups covered a set of semi-structured questions using sensitive interview techniques but also allowed us to explore any emergent learning from the RER and target any gaps in the evidence that the RER had identified (see Appendix 2 for focus group questions).
- v. **Interviews:** In-person and online interviews took place with a very small number of parents as well as practitioners from early years settings where there was an identified high number of service family children being supported. These interviews combined, provided an in-depth and granular response to the research questions specifically capturing the lived experiences of children, families and practitioners. The interviews covered a set of semi-structured questions using sensitive interview techniques (see Appendix 2 for interview questions).

## ETHICAL APPROACH

All CREC's work adheres to the EECERA Ethical Guidelines for Early Childhood Research<sup>7</sup> and is underpinned by strong ethical principles relating to the dignity and safety of participants, and which is constructed around the following set of principles to ensure all research actions should:

*"[b]e done with, not to, participants; Be open and honest, and secure informed consent; Be collaborative and inclusive; Be empowering and developmental; Have utility; Be respectful; Protect all participants from harm; Keep confidentiality and anonymity; Provide feedback."*<sup>8</sup>

All participants were asked to provide their informed consent which guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Data was kept securely for the duration of the project in line with CREC's data protection and security policy. An information sheet was distributed to participants to ensure that there was awareness and understanding of the research, its purpose and its timescales. CREC was in possession of relevant, up to date and valid policies for carrying out this work, and all staff involved in this project held disclosure and barring service clearance and recently completed safeguarding training which was employed to ensure the safety of all participants. CREC believes that through this ethical approach, the highest level of quality and integrity in the research and evaluation activity was ensured.

7 Bertram T, Pascal C., Lyndon H., Formosinho J., Gaywood D., Gray C. and Whalley M. (2024) EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 33(1), 4-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2024.2445361>

8 Pascal C., and Bertram T. (2005) *Effective Early Learning Programme*. Amber Publications and Training: Worcester.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data was gathered through each method using a layered set of questions/prompts (see Appendices 1-3) and was filed, collated, curated and analysed to present robust and systematically processed evidence for the three overarching research questions set out previously. The qualitative data collected by the RER, online survey, focus groups and interviews were read, re-read, collated and thematically coded using Reflective Thematic Analysis.<sup>9</sup>

The following six-phased analysis procedure (based on Braun and Clarke<sup>10</sup>) was utilised upon handling each piece of data throughout the data collection period. The process also included member checking,<sup>11</sup> peer scrutiny and supervision, increasing trustworthiness by maintaining credibility.<sup>12</sup>

1. **Familiarisation with data:** *Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.*
2. **Generation of initial codes:** *Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.*
3. **Searching for themes:** *Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.*
4. **Reviewing themes:** *Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.*
5. **Definition and naming of themes:** *Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.*
6. **Producing the report:** *The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back the analysis to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. Verbatim quotes are included in the report to illustrate themes and to foreground the lived experiences of participants.*



9 Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

10 *ibid*

11 Robson, C. (2024) *Real World Research: A resource for users of social research methods in applied settings* (5th ed.) Wiley; London.

12 Guba, E. G., and Lincoln, Y. S. (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Sage Publications: USA.

## 3. RAPID EVIDENCE REVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews current published evidence on the needs and experiences of young children from Armed Forces and their families. It also explores evidence on the current capacity and effectiveness of early years education and care services (catering for children from birth to five years) in responding to these needs. In particular, the evidence review has explored three overarching issues which are linked to the three review research questions:

1. The needs and experiences of Service children and families;
2. The knowledge and capacity of early years practitioners;
3. The principles of effective early years practice

Specifically, the analysis investigated what is known about:

- the main challenges faced by Armed Forces families in accessing early education and care (RQ1)
- the support needed for Armed Forces families in the early years (RQ1)
- how the needs of children from Armed Forces families differ from those of other children in the early years (RQ1)
- the support needed for Service children in the early years (RQ1)
- practitioners' understanding of the needs of Armed Forces families and children (RQ2)
- current practice work with Armed Forces families and its responsiveness to their needs (RQ2)
- barriers to practitioners' ability to support Armed Forces families and children (RQ2)
- best practice in supporting Service children in early years settings. (RQ3)

In searching for literature to explore how military families experience support available for the youngest children, the following keywords were utilised across searches which included:

- Military families; children of Armed Forces families; Service children;
- Early years; early childhood; ECEC;
- Toolkit; curriculum; framework; programme

Potential areas for review included: deployment, mobility, uncertainty, parental absence

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### FINDINGS

The Rapid Evidence Review (RER) set out to evaluate what is known about the experiences of an under-reported cohort of young Service children and their families. It focused on what shapes their early experiences at this formative time, as they start to move through the educational system. The evidence was analysed thematically and has been organised into two key areas which map against RQ1 (families' and children's experiences) and RQ2 (early years practitioners), with sub themes identified within each area. Best practice (mapping to RQ3) drawn from the literature is woven into these two key areas where it exists.

This chapter ends with an evaluation of the quality and coverage of the current evidence base and highlights areas where further research and knowledge generation is needed.

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# 1 THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

This section of the evidence review focuses on published knowledge about the early childhood experiences and consequent needs of children from Armed Forces families. It sets out current knowledge about the early life experiences of young Service children and their wellbeing as a consequence of these experiences; the experiences and needs of their parents and families; how multiple transitions are felt and the impact of these on both children and families. Finally, it examines published evidence on the extent to which Service children are visible within early years policy and practices and able to realise their rights and voice within their daily lives.

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## 1.1 SERVICE CHILD EXPERIENCES AND WELLBEING

The evidence reveals that the experiences of children from Armed Forces families in their early years differ from other children, and that these experiences can have a significant and long-term impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Research shows that young Service children experience multiple deployments, frequent moves, separations from parents, and early years setting turbulence which can lead to emotional instability, anxiety, attachment issues, behavioural changes and emotional regulation challenges. The impact of these experiences is particularly strong in children's early years of life and can have lasting consequences.<sup>13</sup>

There is some evidence in the literature that Service children may experience disturbing and stressful experiences in their early years. These include elevated experiences of bereavement, divorce, trauma, domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse, family mental illness, racism, poor nutrition and inadequate housing compared to the population at large.<sup>14</sup> These challenging early experiences may impact on Service children's wellbeing and mental health during their formative years of life. However, as previously noted, research into the early childhood experiences of Service children remains limited in appreciative enquiry, so these findings should be regarded as potential areas of concern rather than definitive characterisations of all Service children's experiences.

These experiences mean that Service children may struggle with loneliness and difficulties in forming long term friendships, thus needing extra support in emotional regulation and social skills.<sup>15</sup> Evidence shows that Service children often express a desire for belonging, connectedness and close relationships. It is interesting to note the evidence that many young Service children actively use social media, special objects and favoured spaces to create meaningful personal experiences. It is suggested that these personal strategies used by young Service children could be a means to counter their sense of isolation and disrupted relationships.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Logan, 1987; The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Hill, 2019; Huxford, 2022; Baverstock, 2023; Hinojosa et al 2023; Mogil et al, 2022; Rogers, 2022; Tupper et al, 2020; Walsh and Rosenblum, 2018; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2023

<sup>14</sup> Hinojosa et al 2023; Tupper et al, 2020; McGill et al, 2022; Bauer et al, 2021; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Gribble and Fear, 2022

<sup>15</sup> Huxford, 2022; Mogil, 2022; Rogers, 2022; Tupper et al, 2020; Normile, 2023; Normile, 2023; McGillett et al, 2022; Dodge et al, 2022; Gribble and Fear, 2022

<sup>16</sup> Tupper et al, 2020; Normile, 2023; Dodge et al, 2022; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Gribble and Fear, 2022; Lee 2020

## 1.2 PARENT AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS

It is well established that Armed Forces parents and families, like others, are the foremost influence on a child's developmental progress and wellbeing<sup>17</sup> but that Service families have a more diverse and complex range of needs, relationships and parenting approaches.<sup>18</sup>

Research shows that establishing close relationships with parents and families can provide vital information to support a Service child to navigate their lives well and thrive.<sup>19</sup> Empathy, compassion, communication and effective listening by staff can foster a parent's confidence in the setting's ability to support their child.<sup>20</sup> It is evident that support and care for parent and family wellbeing by early years staff, and encouraging positive warm parenting approaches, can facilitate a stable and nurturing home environment for the child.<sup>21</sup>

informed practice and that identifying Service children on entry to a setting, and ensuring that staff are informed about children's individual life experiences and transitions, enables support for the child to understand and navigate their transitions with more resilience.<sup>23</sup>

It is also evident that liaising closely with parents and families for information about a child's life experiences enables staff to better support the child.<sup>24</sup> Careful induction and exit processes for a child on entry to, and exit from, provision (which involves previous and new settings), smooths disruptions and minimizes turbulence for the child.<sup>25</sup> Well-timed, individualised and collaborative induction processes, with secure daily arrival and leaving routines, encourage a positive experience for the child.<sup>26</sup> In addition, helping children to talk about and express their feelings about their past, present and future life experiences and transitions can contribute to child wellbeing and positive self-esteem and identity.<sup>27</sup>

## 1.3 TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

There is evidence in the literature reviewed that children from Armed Forces families can experience multiple, and often fast-paced, transitions from their earliest days of life, leading to experiences of loss, separation, grief and recovery.<sup>22</sup>

Research has revealed that regular staff reflections on their provision for Service children leads to more consistent and

## 1.4 CHILD RIGHTS AND VOICE

There is a growing call in the evidence to acknowledge that it is vital that children from Armed Forces families are heard and their rights and voices are responded to actively from their earliest days.<sup>28</sup> It has been shown that Service children benefit from being actively involved in decisions that affect them<sup>29</sup> and failure to listen or respond can result in an increased sense of isolation and powerlessness.<sup>30</sup>

17 Chesnut et al, 2022; Hinojosa et al, 2023; Tupper et al, 2020; Dodge et al, 2022; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Gribble and Fear, 2024; Blakenship et al, 2024

18 Classen et al, 2019; The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Bauer et al, 2021; DiPietro-Wells et al, 2020; Tupper et al, 2020; Mogil et al, 2022; Lakey, 2022; Dodge et al, 2022; Rogers et al, 2021; Lee, 2020; Walsh and Rosenblum, 2018; Hajal et al, 2020; Classen et al, 2019; Mogil and Paley, 2019; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020; McGill et al, 2022; Blakenship et al, 2024).

19 Classen et al, 2019; Lakey, 2022; Rogers et al, 2021; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Rogers, 2022; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020

20 Classen et al, 2019; Blankenship et al, 2024; Rogers et al, 2021; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Lakey, 2022

21 Classen et al, 2019; Rogers et al, 2021; Lakey, 2022; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020

22 The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Walsh et al, 2018; Hill, 2019; Lee, 2020; Di Pietro-Wells, 2020; Huxford, 2022; McGill et al, 2022; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020

23 Hill, 2019; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Dodge et al, 2022

24 Hill, 2019; Rogers, 2021; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Tupper et al, 2020; Dodge et al, 2022

25 The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020; Lakey, 2022; Huxford, 2022

26 The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Hill, 2019; Huxford, 2022; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020; Rogers, 2022; Dodge et al, 2022; Tubbs et al, 2019; Nolan and Misca, 2018

27 Bowes, 2018; Walsh et al, 2018; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Dodge et al, 2022

28 The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Lee, 2020; Lakey, 2022; Rogers et al, 2021; Bowes, 2018

29 The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Lee, 2020; Bowes, 2018; Lakey, 2022; Rogers et al, 2021; Baverstock, 2023; Tupper et al, 2020; Nolan and Misca, 2018

30 Bowes, 2018; Lee, 2020; The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Tupper et al, 2020; Nolan and Misca, 2018

## 2 THE KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY OF PRACTITIONERS

This section of the evidence review focuses on the quality and capacity of current early years settings and practitioners to support the needs of Service children and families. It sets out evidence on how far and in what ways policies and practices are age and cohort appropriate; the system knowledge of the developmental pathways of Service children and their early experiences; the professional development opportunities offered to develop expertise in supporting Service children and their families; and how far Service families are able to access their entitlements to early education and care.

### 2.1 AGE AND COHORT APPROPRIATE POLICIES AND PRACTICE

The evidence advocates that settings serving children from Armed Forces families should adopt a strategic approach which considers all children from birth as competent and capable and a child's rights-based approach which is more inclusive and participatory for Service children.<sup>31</sup> It also suggests that strategies and policies that are collaborative and nurture partnerships with other early years sector providers lead to more cohesive and developmental experiences for Service children.<sup>32</sup> It is evident that the creation of age-appropriate spaces, resources, experiences and programmes that are tailored for children from birth to five, and catering specifically for Service children, enables them to better flourish and thrive.<sup>33</sup>

Research shows settings that use dedicated Armed Forces funding to provide additional support for birth to five age phase groups, and targeting this support particularly on the under threes and those with additional needs, benefits

Service children at a critical stage in their development.<sup>34</sup> In addition, early years settings that undertake systematic evaluation and development planning with Service children in mind have also been shown to lead to better quality early experiences for all children.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.2 CHILD DEVELOPMENT KNOWLEDGE

There is a call in the evidence for a greater commitment to support children from Armed Forces families to enable them to develop and flourish to their full potential and to make this a priority.<sup>36</sup> In particular, the development and learning of Service children with additional and complex needs, including neurodiversity, can be affected by frequent relocations which hinder access to assessments and support.<sup>37</sup>

There is clear evidence that the emotional stress of deployment and separation experiences can affect all Service children's learning and developmental progress.<sup>38</sup> Transition impacts on Service children's development in many ways, including the continuity of their learning experiences.<sup>39</sup>

It is also evident that learning experiences and guidelines are often not geared to younger Service children.<sup>40</sup> More positively, research has also shown that maintaining daily routines in settings to protect children from stress and uncertainty can mitigate the turbulence and disruptions of Armed Forces life and enable the child to better engage in learning opportunities.<sup>41</sup> In addition, offering learning opportunities that encourage social interaction and the development of friendships enhances Service children's learning and development.<sup>42</sup>

31 Rogers et al, 2021; Bowes 2018; Normile, 2023; Rogers and Boyd, 2020; Bowes, 2018

32 Mogil et al, 2022; Rogers, 2022; Tupper, 2020; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020

33 Rogers et al, 2021; Chesnut et al, 2022; Rogers 2022; Hajal et al, 2020; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020

34 Chesnut et al, 2022; Rogers, 2022; Hajal et al, 2020

35 Chesnut et al, 2022; Classen et al, 2019; Dodge et al, 2022; Hall et al, 2022

36 Walker, Selous and Misca, 2023; The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Hall et al, 2022; Normile, 2023

37 Classen et al, 2019<sup>38</sup>

38 Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020; The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Hall et al, 2022; Normile, 2023

39 Dodge et al, 2022; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020; The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Hill, 2019; Hall et al, 2022

40 The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009; Rogers et al, 2020; Rogers et al, 2021; Rogers, 2022; Classen et al, 2019

41 Nolan and Misca, 2018; Rogers et al, 2021

42 Nolan and Misca, 2018; Rogers et al, 2020; Rogers et al, 2021, Normile, 2023

Working closely with parents to support a child's home learning is seen as significant in securing Service children's learning progress.<sup>43</sup> Building learning experiences around the child's life experiences also enables their inclusion and access to learning.<sup>44</sup>

An important point to note in the evidence is that play is a powerful means for all children's learning, but with outdoor play being especially important for Service children experiencing stress, dislocation and separation.<sup>45</sup> The centrality of play in a setting's pedagogy is evidenced as a factor in the ability of the setting to cater for the more complex needs of many Service children.

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### 2.3 PRACTITIONER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Evidence suggests that early years settings with practitioners who are knowledgeable, nurturing and trained are better able to support all young children's development and learning, and especially young Service children. The case is strengthened further by the evidence that where there is whole setting knowledge and understanding of Service children's lived experiences there is more consistent support for these children. Setting leaders and staff teams who understand the complex and diverse needs of Service children and families can make a vital difference to children's development, learning and wellbeing.<sup>46</sup>

Supportive and well-informed practitioners with regular access to Armed Forces focused professional development can be a protective factor for children, especially during times of transition and separation from the parent.<sup>47</sup> In addition, it is important to note that staff teams who adopt a warm, nurturing and compassionate approach to Service children and families can make an important and positive difference to their lives.<sup>48</sup>

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43 Rogers et al, 2021; Classen et al, 2019; DiPietro-Wells et al, 2020; Chesnut et al, 2022; Blankenship et al, 2024; Mogil et al, 2022; Tupper et al, 2022

44 Rogers et al, 2021; Classen et al, 2019; DiPietro-Wells et al, 2020; Chesnut et al, 2022; Blankenship et al, 2024; Mogil et al, 2022; Tupper et al, 2022

45 Bauer et al, 2021

46 Baverstock, 2023; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2023

47 *ibid*

48 *ibid*

### 2.4 ACCESS, AFFORDABILITY AND INFORMATION

Research has shown that availability, affordability and flexibility of childcare and early education are significant concerns of Armed Forces families.<sup>49</sup> Service children with additional and complex needs are particularly vulnerable to experiencing exclusion and can be adversely affected by variations in early education and care access.<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that early childhood settings have been shown to require additional funding to fully meet the needs of Service children and ensure equitable access.<sup>51</sup> In addition, Armed Forces families often have less access to funding, eligibility information and financial benefits for early education and childcare due to frequent movements, living overseas and the unpredictability of military life and deployment.<sup>52</sup>

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### 3 QUALITY AND COVERAGE OF EVIDENCE

The published evidence base to support greater understanding of the early experiences and needs of children from Armed Forces families and the capacity of early years settings to respond to these needs is under-developed but growing. This is in response to an increased acceptance of the significance of the early years of life in determining mental health and wellbeing, success within the school system and lifetime achievement. Currently there are gaps in both the coverage and methodological strength of current research, but this is changing and over the last five years more studies focusing on Service children in the early years is being funded and published. This review has aimed to capture the main findings from these studies but also identify where there are gaps and limitations to what is known.

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49 Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Gribble and Fear, 2019; Dodge et al, 2022

50 Nolan and Misca, 2018; Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020; Dodge et al, 2022; Classen et al, 2019

51 Gribble and Fear, 2019; MoD, 2022, Armed Forces Strategy 2022-2032; Rogers, 2022; Hall et al, 2022; Huxford, 2022

52 Rogers et al, 2021; Classen et al, 2019; Gribble and Fear, 2019

### 3.1 GAPS AND LIMITATIONS

When the evidence is evaluated, some gaps and limitations in rigour, depth and coverage was observed. This highlighted where more research and investigation is required to build a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the lived realities of Service children, both at home and in early years settings. The gaps and limitations in the current evidence base identified in this review include:

- A focus on the negative and detrimental impacts of Armed Forces family life as opposed to child and family resilience and the positive aspects of military life that may be shown by more affirmative enquiries;
- A lack of learning from relevant international experiences;
- A lack of research around the early years sector and its response to Armed Forces families;
- The missing voice of early years practitioners and young Service children;
- The prevalence of models/cycles and understanding from adults/older children which appear to have been applied (e.g., to deployment) without research mapping/ matching the applicability to the youngest children;
- Few studies that look at the educational attainment of young Service children;
- Few studies about cross-service considerations for supporting young Service children;
- Few studies on the impact of trauma on young Service children.

53 Huxford, G. (2022) 'School is everywhere'? British military children, 'turbulence' and the meanings of post-war mobility, *History of Education*, 51:5, 731 DOI: [10.1080/0046760X.2022.2083241](https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2022.2083241)

54 Baverstock, A. (2023) 'What were the processes and associated impact of enabling Education students to increase their awareness of the specific educational issues of Service families?', *Education 3-13*, 51:2, 212-228, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2021.1958892](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1958892)

55 Bowes, E. R. (2018) *Researching the experiences of children and young people from Armed Forces families*. University of Stirling.

56 Normile, G. (2023) 'Service children's wellbeing in the context of three- to four-year-old Army children experiencing a parental deployment' *Early Years* Volume 44, 2024 - Issue 3-4

57 Lee, C. A. (2020) *Not "just another school day": An arts-based dialogic inquiry into the learning lives of children from armed forces families in a UK primary school*, Doctoral Thesis sponsored by ESRC 29 Sept 2020, University of Bristol

### 3.2 STRENGTHS AND DEVELOPMENTS

On a positive note, the early years sector is beginning to recognise Armed Forces families and the support their children may require and this has been highlighted in early years professional press and journal platforms. These short and professionally focused articles have been successful in raising awareness for the sector as a whole.

When we look at peer reviewed, academically focused research there is very limited evidence of the youngest children in military research specific to the UK context, with only Huxford<sup>53</sup> providing an historical overview and Baverstock<sup>54</sup> raising awareness of the need to make military children visible in educational training. Bowes<sup>55</sup> provides an overview of the context in Scotland and calls for children's own experiences to be central to future support. This thesis is one of several, such as Normile<sup>56</sup> and Lee<sup>57</sup> that spotlight the experiences of children of Armed Forces families through qualitative research methods and seek to understand the complexity of their lived reality.

There is some research from US, Australia and New Zealand which has been included in this review regarding early years children and their families, that may be applicable to the UK context. This research outlines the complexity and need for age and culturally relevant support (Rogers).<sup>58</sup> Much of the research is also qualitative, smaller scale case studies (Hill<sup>59</sup>; Classen et al.<sup>60</sup>) providing descriptive narratives and calling for further research.

58 Rogers, M. (2021) 'Contextualised, Not Neoliberalised Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care: Effects of Prescribed Notions of Quality on Educator Confidence in Australia', *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 13(4), pp. 549-564. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1297875> (Accessed: 7 March 2024).

59 Hill, L. M. (2019) *A Descriptive Qualitative Study of Parental Perceptions of the Influence Deployment Has on Their Child's Academic Performance*, Online Submission. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED600437> (Accessed: 7 March 2024).

60 Classen, A.J., Horn, E. and Palmer, S. (2019) 'Needs of Military Families: Family and Educator Perspective', *Journal of Early Intervention*, 41(3), pp. 233-255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815119847235>

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## 4. PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

### INTRODUCTION

The Primary Research findings presented in this chapter set out to address the gaps in the published evidence base, particularly with regard to the voices of young Service children and their parents, and of sector practitioner knowledge and understanding, about their experiences and the support they offered within early years settings.

This chapter presents our primary research findings drawn from an analysis of data collected through an online survey, interviews and focus groups with Armed Forces families and early years stakeholders and staff. The findings explore the three overarching research questions which set out to

1. Identify young Service children and families' experiences of early education and care;
2. Explore the extent of knowledge and understanding of Armed Forces families and their needs by practitioners
3. Investigate current and best early years practice.

The coverage of research participants for each method is summarised and then findings from the total data set are presented in three sections, reflecting the three study research questions, and grouped thematically within each section.

### COVERAGE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 sets out the coverage of participants for each of the data collection methods with regard to number, country, branch of the Armed Forces represented, participant type and provider type. Across the whole data set there is representation of parents and providers, with all types of early years providers represented and all four devolved nations represented to some degree, although most responses were from England. Additionally, all three branches of the Armed Forces were well represented.

Disappointingly, due to challenges in obtaining necessary ethical approval within the project timeline parameters it was not possible to access the perspectives of the Service children themselves and accessed a much smaller group of parents than was hoped. This gap remains which can be noted as a continuing deficit of the evidence base which further research might beneficially address.

However, the strong and broad representation of the early years sector (providers and practitioners) in this data set enables us to be confident that the findings represent a cross section of stakeholders serving Service children and families, both nationally and militarily, and indicates that the findings from the primary research go some way in addressing the gaps in knowledge about practice and experience in the early years sector.

TABLE 1: COVERAGE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

	# PARTICIPANTS	# SETTINGS REPRESENTED	COUNTRIES REPRESENTED	SERVICES REPRESENTED	PROVIDER TYPES REPRESENTED
ONLINE SURVEY	278	278	England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales	Army, RAF, Royal Navy & Royal Marines	Childminder, Private, Voluntary, Independent (PVI) and School based
PARENT INTERVIEWS	5	1	England	Army, RAF	PVI
PRACTITIONER INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS	21	25	England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales	Army, RAF, Royal Navy & Royal Marines	Childminder, PVI, School based
ADVISORY GROUP DISCUSSIONS (sector representative)	12	N/A	England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales	Army, RAF, Royal Navy & Royal Marines	PVI, School based

## FINDINGS RELATED TO THE EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF SERVICE CHILDREN AND FAMILY

### **Finding 1:**

***Service young children and their families have life experiences which profoundly disrupt their daily lives and affect their mental wellbeing.***

***They experience separation from parents through detachments, separation from extended family through military posting, multiple transitions due to frequent moves.***

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

The evidence from both providers and parents sharply testifies to the unique nature of military life which means young Service children and their families often experience frequent moves and instability due to postings, deployments and training. The nomadic nature of military life requires the child and family members to deal with periods of separation from each other and their wider family and friends, to navigate multiple transitions in their daily life and manage ongoing disruptions to their established routines of living. These features of military life can be positive but for some Service children lead to higher levels of emotional dysregulation, developmental delays, isolation, stress and anxiety resulting in mental and physical health issues in both children and their parents. Respondents reported that establishing a consistent, calm and nurturing home environment can be very difficult for many Armed Forces families meaning high levels of consistent school and community support for both child and parent is vital, yet not always available. Recurrent themes in the evidence are:

**Separation and Emotional Dysregulation:** Service children experience frequent separations from parents due to deployments and training, and providers and parents testify that this can often lead to anxiety, attachment issues, and emotional regulation challenges in the children.

***The challenges faced by children during the relocation process are many, including anxiety, regression in toileting, and emotional distress. Parents often underestimate the impact of these changes on their children, and that reassurance, resources, and understanding are crucial for the children's well-being.***

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

**Frequent Moves, Transitions and Instability:** Service children experience regular moves and military deployments which disrupt friendships, early education/care and support networks. Children also often move between settings, making it difficult to track their development, access support, and maintain stability. Some experience gaps in learning or repeat curriculum content.

***It can sometimes take [Service children] a little longer to settle at nursery, with moving house, a parent [being] away and only [being] posted for a short period of time.... [You] need a strong keyperson and parent partnership.***

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**Parent Stress and Isolation:** The parent left behind during deployment by Armed Forces personnel often faces stress and isolation and can struggle to manage their daily responsibilities. Lone parenting, financial struggles, and lack of family support contribute to stress. Some parents are reluctant to seek help or engage with offered support.

***It's difficult. There aren't many neighbours and I have no-one to talk to.***

(Parent Focus Group; England)

***We're 'one big family' but you have to figure it out on your own.***

(Parent Focus Group; England)

***You have to hope you get on with your neighbours.***

(Parent Focus Group; England)

●● *Isolation is a big issue for families – they can move from the north, or sometimes from overseas and their family and support network is far away.*

(Interview; PVI Nursery; England)

**Distanced Family Support:** Many service families live away from their wider family, leading to increased reliance and pressures on external childcare and community support.

●● *Social media can be helpful. I use Facebook groups for community connections. Taking the first step into a community is really hard.*

(Parent Focus Group; England)

●● *We encourage networks between staff, and other support services, and parents. There's nothing worse than forever being 'that' parent in the queue at the school gate not knowing anyone, it can feel like your own first day of school.*

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; Scotland)

**Inconsistent Support:** Armed Forces parents felt that they were offered variable support for relocated families and inconsistency of experience between bases and services and rank.

●● *There's a welfare team. I've never spoken to them. You have to take the first step, it feels secretive but it shouldn't be.*

(Parent Focus Group; England)

●● *People can tell we're military families. I don't want them (the children) singled out because they're military.*

(Parent Focus Group; England)

●● *The support from the military to families varies depending on which garrison you are based in. Levels of support varies depending on whether you operate on or off base.*

(Online Survey; Maintained Nursery School; England)

**Finding 2: Attachments and relationships often suffer as a result of frequent moves and deployments**

●● *A lot of children struggle with being uprooted here, there and everywhere and this can cause children to struggle in their personal, social and emotional skills.*

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; Wales)

The particular features of military life, especially its nomadic nature, are recognised by providers and parents as impacting significantly on the opportunities for Service children and parents to establish secure attachments and relationships. Friendship bonds have to be made quickly and then may have to be broken, leading to many Service children and parents finding it difficult to feel safe and able to commit to relationship building and develop their social and emotional competencies. Providers express a need to focus primarily on supporting this aspect of children's learning and development. Strong themes in the evidence were:

**Attachment Issues:** Frequent moves and parental deployments may disrupt the formation of stable attachments with caregivers and peers. This can affect Service children's social and emotional development.

●● *Forming positive attachments are important as children may not have extended family for support.*

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; Wales)

**Building Relationships:** Quick relationship building was deemed essential due to the transient nature of Service families' lives. The importance of establishing strong bonds between staff and children, and amongst peers, was highlighted.

●● *The children can be social and easily make friends, but on the other side some children find change so hard, [they] become shy and quiet.*

(Interview; Primary School with Nursery; England)

### ***Finding 3: The experiences of military life impact on children's developmental progress***

**●● Many of our young service children have a range of additional needs, including attachment issues, developmental delays and speech and language delays. We find some of these needs are quite fluid, for example support with attachment issues tends to be required more at times of deployment.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Scotland)

It is important to note that many young Service children make sound progress developmentally in their foundation years, and some can benefit from these unique life experiences. However, for many others their early experiences lead to developmental delay or disruption, particularly in terms of their social and emotional development – a prime area of learning at this stage of life. There is also consistent evidence from practitioners that communication and language development can also be impacted by the dislocation and isolation of military life at this critical stage of language development. The evidence highlighted that these two prime areas of development can be particularly affected in young Service children, signalling a need for early intervention and support. This finding also suggests that Service children are less likely to arrive at school with the expected levels of development and are often perceived not to be 'school ready'.

**●● A high number of service children are developmentally delayed and need more support.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; Scotland)

**●● The children can have poor language and communication skills when starting... poor oracy skills.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; England)

**●● Service children have emotional needs... to understand feelings and self-regulate... They need strong attachments with the important people in their life and key person. They often need speech and language support.**

(Online Survey; Nursery School; England)

**●● Often, they have English as an additional language. Their social and emotional development can be affected, especially if deployment of a parent occurs.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery, England)

**Emotional and Behavioural Development:** Practitioners indicated that some Service children struggle with separation anxiety, emotional outbursts and changes in behaviour when a parent is deployed. Some display attachment issues or require extra reassurance. Practitioners stated that Service children's behaviours can often change due to the absence of a parent, including increased aggression, withdrawal and emotional dysregulation.

**●● Military children have many challenges, particularly in emotional regulation, and I see the differences in parenting approaches between military and non-military families. While military children perform well academically, they often struggle with emotional regulation due to parental expectations to 'man up' and not show emotions.**

(Interview; Childminder; Scotland)

**Social Development:** Service children may struggle with forming long-term friendships and need extra support in emotional regulation and social skills. For these children, supporting their personal, social and emotional development is viewed as a priority.

**●● Children become withdrawn and isolate themselves from making friends as they begin to see that it's only a temporary place of staying before they get up-rooted again to somewhere new.**

(Interview; Primary School; England)

**Communication and Language Development:** Providers reported that Service children often have weaker communication and language skills than their peers when starting at new settings, necessitating additional support.

*I believe certain gaps like language and communication are to be expected from any family that have moved area/country. Gaps in social and communication [skills] can be found in any child if they have not accessed childcare before the age of 3 which was when the funding used to kick in and families could access childcare at a reduced rate.*

(Online Survey; Nursery School; England)

**Finding 4: Service children with additional and complex needs experience more exclusion and more barriers to accessing support**

*Children with additional needs from service families find gaining support incredibly difficult. 12% of children in my nursery are service children - far higher than the average for the UK and it is very clear that moving around every 2-4 years, or more frequently, disrupts the help and potential waiting lists for support that they need.*

(Interview; PVI Daycare; Wales)

A strong theme in the evidence, from providers and parents, was the added challenge that children with complex and additional needs and their parents, experienced; it would appear that these families are among the least well supported in the early years system. The wider evidence indicates that exclusion is a common experience of young children with additional needs and their parents. For Service children and parents, the challenges of accessing support are magnified, especially when they move into different local authorities or to other countries. Providers also indicated that there appears to be more prevalence of children with additional needs in Service families, yet this group found it harder to access the support and specialist interventions which would enable

them to thrive, particularly in the areas of most common developmental delay (Social and Emotional Development and Communication and Language Development), further disadvantaging them in the school system.

**Incidence of Children with Additional and Complex Needs:**

There is a suggestion of increased incidences of additional and complex needs among young Service children, including developmental delays and the need for specific interventions like speech and language therapy.

*Armed Forces children with SEND [Service children with additional needs] are particularly affected due to the difficulty in transferring records from one local authority to another to access the support they need. If our Local Authority knows a child's family is going to be moving on, they won't even start the process.*

(Online Survey; Nursery School; England)

**Delayed and Limited Access to Support:** Frequent relocations hinder families and children accessing consistent assessments and receiving support for children with additional needs, speech delays, or developmental issues. Waiting lists for assessments and health services are long, and information transfer between settings is inconsistent, leading to delays in getting children the help they need.

*We often end up 'resetting the clock' in terms of gathering evidence for children with emerging complex needs concerns when moving out of area, which can delay diagnosis and support. It is important to maintain contact with the previous provider and transfer relevant documents to the new provider. There is also the issue of children being put back on waiting lists after moving, and the need for a medical assessment to determine their position on the list.*

(Interview; PVI Day Nursery; Scotland)

**Cultural and National Differences:** It was widely felt that local authority and country borders caused problems, particularly for Service children with (emerging) additional and complex needs.

●● *Parents often struggle with the differences between various healthcare systems and the potential need to restart their children's care when moving.*

(Online Survey; PVI Day Nursery; Wales)

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**Finding 5: Supporting parent and family needs is vitally important**

●● *Loneliness is a big factor. It comes down to how well the parent left behind is supported – if they are not coping that comes out in the behaviours of the child in nursery. When that happens, we know to reach out to the family and offer support.*

(Online Survey; PVI Day Nursery; England)

There was an overwhelming acknowledgement in the evidence that the wellbeing and progress of Service children and families cannot be separated and that early years providers have a responsibility to work with both the child and their family. Providing high levels of support for parents was seen as an essential element in the education and care of the child and this went beyond ensuring parents were engaged by the settings through information giving and dialogue about their child. The Armed Forces parent (those at home and those deployed away) often need specialist and intense support in their own right. Child and parent wellbeing were seen as intertwined and a clear responsibility of the early years setting.

**Children and Family Needs are Intertwined:** Providers and parents highlighted that addressing the needs (wellbeing) of the Armed Forces family is as important as addressing the needs of the child, particularly during times of relocation and deployment. Providers also suggested that Armed Forces parents require 'support' not just 'engagement'.

●● *My husband's deployment happened when I was suffering post-natal depression. The children were not at the nursery at this point. My older son also had communication issues and just screamed at this point. There was no additional support. It resulted in my husband changing roles within the military to avoid longer term deployment. The youngest children don't notice but it was me that needed the help.*

(Parent Focus Group; England)

●● *When children are youngest [sic] it's the mums that need help. There's very little support. Life ends and you're never out of that rut. It's a vicious cycle, childcare, job, no-one helps. In early years there's a need to support the parents more than the kids. As a military parent it's ten times harder. It's worse for parents than kids.*

(Parent Focus Group; England)

●● *Without this nursery I don't know what I would have done.*

(Parent Focus Group; England)

●● *It's important to provide support not only to children but also to families by offering practical assistance and building relationships. We also use strategies such as deployment packs and activity boxes, to support children whose parents are away.*

(Online Survey; Primary School; England)

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## FINDINGS RELATED TO PRACTITIONER AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE

***Finding 6: Providers have a developing awareness of the unique needs of Service children and families but often struggle to meet them***

**●● Sometimes they need more support when they are new to the area and nursery. If parents are deployed, whether training or actual deployment, we have special packs, books, and other resources to familiarise us and them, and we do our best to try and help them through the process with extra attention to activities they love, toys, books... more one-to-one attention sometimes.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

There was strong evidence from those providers who participated in this research of a growing awareness of the unique life circumstances of Service children and families but also an acknowledgement that there remains a need for more awareness and detailed knowledge of its complexities across the sector. In addition, it was acknowledged that the significant impact of military life on Service children's development and the stresses on family life can be underestimated. Providers were generally aware of the complex needs of Service families and recognised the need for flexible, responsive, multi-layered and individually tailored support for both children and families but often felt under-prepared and under-resourced to offer the level of support required. It should also be noted there is a dilemma created by the strong commitment in many settings to a universal and inclusive approach for all children and families, and the demand for programmes and resources targeted specifically at Service children and families.

**Unique Pattern of Military Family Life:** Providers expressed a need for more awareness of the unique challenges faced by Armed Forces families, including the complexities and hierarchical nature of military life and the nature and impact of frequent changes and separations. It was acknowledged that while some children are highly resilient, others struggle significantly. Most providers felt that more understanding and structured support is required across education and military systems.

**●● Our military families often move (from one military site to another) quickly and without notice. In my experience, those who are Officer Class expect efficient communication and priority treatment based on their rank. Lower ranking families may not use their military status to their advantage. We have a dedicated admin team, many of whom are military wives, to help manage these expectations. We also receive occasional notifications from army welfare officials about upcoming deployments.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; England)

### **The Need for Tailored and Multi-layered Support:**

Providers emphasised the importance of supporting Service children's emotional well-being and stability, and recognised the need to tailor support to help Service children and families cope with the unique challenges of military life, including financial and legal advice.

**●● We provide discreet financial and logistical support for families facing relationship difficulties or financial hardship. We assist families with paperwork for funding and support English as an additional language.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● It's an old-fashioned phrase but we have an open-door policy and we become a one stop shop for everything the family needs.**

(Online Survey; Nursery School; England)

**Demand for Additional Resources:** There is an expressed need for resources and support that reflect the experiences of Armed Forces families and children, such as books and materials that show military life, but limited capacity for settings to fund these additional resources.

●● *Lots of extra support and resources are needed and we have to source this ourselves and also through the local authority. No extra help or support is given to us by the Armed Forces. I needed to contact them to ask if I could acquire any support through the welfare officer, but I was told that there would be no funding available at all.*

(Online Survey; Primary School; England)

**Finding 7: Providers emphasise the need to offer high levels of emotional support to both Service children and parents, and help with children's self-regulation**

●● *Our children need more support for their mental wellbeing, as they can suffer from anxiety when their parent is on deployment. This also adds additional stress to the partner who is left behind. Therefore, additional support and continuity of care is vital to make sure that our routine does not change and children and parents are able to rely on us for the support they need.*

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Wales)

Those at the front line of practice in this research were well aware of their responsibility to respond to the higher levels of emotional support they identified in Service children and parents, particularly at times of deployment and relocation. They noted that during these periods of turbulence and instability both Service children and their parents often responded emotionally and behaviourally, demonstrating dis-regulated responses within their daily life and interactions. This demanded high levels of sensitive

and nurturing responses from the practitioners to ensure the wellbeing of the family unit and to sustain positive parenting strategies for the child during these periods. The evidence reveals the emotional toll on the triad of practitioner, parent and child but also how the nurturing, compassionate responses of practitioners can enable the development of child and family resilience in the face of these life challenges.

**Emotional Needs:** Many respondents highlighted the increased emotional needs of children, especially when a parent is deployed. This includes the need for reassurance, dealing with separation anxiety and managing emotions such as anger and frustration.

●● *We made sure we were there for regular reassurance if needed. She was allowed her comforter when needed to support her emotions.*

(Interview; Childminder; England)

**Behavioural changes:** Providers reported that children's behaviours often changed due to the absence of a parent, including increased aggression, withdrawal and emotional outbursts which required an individual and empathetic response.

●● *I give them extra time for talking it though and we talk about it as a whole group. Explaining to everyone how a child may be extra sad that their parent is away. Also giving the child a little more leniency if they are having trouble with expressing their emotions.*

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

**Support for families:** There was a significant emphasis from providers on the need to provide emotional support, not just for the children, but also for the remaining parent, typically the mother, and for the family unit as a whole.

●● *To support the parents experiencing separation from their loved ones we put photos and observations on our 'Family' system so all parents can access seeing the development and shared experiences.*

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

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**Finding 8: Providers offer vital continuity and stability to Service children and families**

●● *The children need continuity of care with a staff team who know them and their families well and at times help with attachments, particularly around times of separation. This can be long deployments and the working week away but [also] at home for weekends. These deployments are hard for young children with loved ones coming and going all the time.*

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

Both providers and parents emphasised the importance of consistency, stability and continuity of care in ensuring Service children and families could feel secure, safe and enfolded during times of stress and turbulence. The regularity, familiarity and comfort of attending an early years setting, and being with knowledgeable and nurturing professionals on a daily basis who know and understand the impact of the lived experiences of military families cannot be emphasised enough. The evidence makes visible the contribution of the early years setting to ensuring military life can be benefited from, and enjoyed by, young children and their families. The testimonies in this study indicate that regular access to a responsive and knowledgeable early years setting is fundamental and vital to the wellbeing and ability of military families and their young children to realise their potential.

**Need for Consistency:** Providers and parents universally stressed the importance of providing a stable and consistent environment for the children, and their parents, to help mitigate the disruptions caused by frequent moves and parental absences.

●● *Consistent daily routine, not offering too many choices as this becomes overwhelming.*

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Northern Ireland)

**Continuity of Care:** Maintaining continuity in care and education was seen to be crucial for both Service children and their families. This included having familiar staff who know the family well and a stable routine which transfers from one setting to another.

●● *Consistency matters. Universal inclusive approaches reduce stigma and support peer integration. Children themselves rarely notice 'difference' when practice is consistent and inclusive.*

(Focus Group; Primary School with Nursery; Scotland)

●● *We create strong key person links including help to families with picking up and dropping off.*

(Focus Group; Nursery School; England)

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**Finding 9: Armed Forces parents need tailored practical and logistical support to access their early years entitlements**

●● *We have more children with additional need than we ever had before. To get help and support in place from the local authority can take quite some time. If the assessment and support process has been completed and the families are being posted, not each county will accept what has been put in place and therefore parents and children will have to go through the whole process again. This is very frustrating for all involved.*

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

The logistical and practical demand on Armed Forces parents to access good-quality early education and care for their child is often overwhelming. The most accessible settings can be limited (waiting lists were frequently cited), meaning that many young Service children are unable to

attend a high-quality early years setting at all or have, at best, sporadic and poor-quality experiences. Given the reality of military life, parents with young children may have additional hurdles to navigate compared to other families with more predictable circumstances and with whom they are often competing for places. Parents in this study really struggled with securing their entitlements to early education and care for their child. The expanded offer for younger children (England) announced from September 2025 to children of 9 months suggests this might get more difficult, thus disadvantaging the Service child even further. The different entitlements across the four devolved UK nations makes it even more complex for families to navigate. This places an additional burden on early years providers to ensure information and support about entitlements, and how to access them, is made available. This need is most acute for those children with additional and other complex needs. The barriers to access for military families are deep, complex and culturally embedded in the system.

**Access to Childcare and Nurseries:** Providers were aware that accessing childcare and early education entitlements can be challenging for Armed Forces families, especially with short-term postings and long waiting lists. This impacts the family's ability to work and maintain stability.

**There are many challenges faced by military families, particularly those with rural postings, with issues such as the lack of access to childcare due to limited transportation options and the difficulty for these families to meet the financial criteria for childcare funding. It is often the husband employed by the armed forces and the wife who moves without work. We make great efforts to help these families, including providing information on tax-free childcare, exploring funding options, and offering sessions to support children with additional needs but these families often struggle to access early intervention services due to frequent moves and unfamiliar healthcare systems.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

**Cultural and Institutional Barriers:** Some military families avoid disclosing their child's additional needs to the setting due to fears of career impact. Language barriers and different policies across locations and countries create additional challenges.

**Many parents can be in denial regarding their children's needs. We would never refer a child for further support if it wasn't in the child's best interest, however some parents are unwilling to accept their child needs further support and will not give consent for various referrals.**

(Interview; Primary School with Nursery; England)

**Access to Support for Additional Needs:** Providers were also aware that Service children with additional needs or the need for specialist support, often missed out on the support they needed and were entitled to.

**The challenges faced by military families, particularly in terms of healthcare and social connections are significant. Military families often use military healthcare facilities and may therefore have limited interaction with the local civilian community e.g. not using the local GP surgery and therefore [not] seeing notice boards of mother and baby groups or other community events. There might be a gap in awareness about local services and activities.**

(Interview; PVI Nursery; Scotland)

**Flexibility in Services:** Respondents highlighted the need for flexible childcare and education services that can accommodate changing schedules, shift patterns and the unique demands of military life. Providers indicated that this requirement can impact on their sustainability and operational capacity.

**We try and accommodate all the needs, offering deployment bags, being flexible on rotas, adding extra sessions and just being flexible.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

## CURRENT AND BEST EARLY YEARS PRACTICE

The findings on current and best early years practice reflect and build upon what was shared about Service children and families' experiences and needs, and practitioner knowledge and awareness of these needs. These findings make a strong case for further development of early years curriculum and pedagogy; for more specialist support and programmes designed to support both Service children and their families; and the urgent need for professional development for those who work within the sector.

***Finding 10: Mainstream pedagogy and practice needs to be flexible and capable of being geared to the needs of Service children within mainstream provision***

***Our approach is very much about what each individual child needs – we go with each child's interests. We don't do anything different for Service children.***

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

Early years practice is shaped by a commitment in all four nations to cater for the needs of the unique child, to adopt play-based and relational approaches, and to provide first hand experiences of all areas of learning and development, but with a special focus on children's social and emotional health, their wellbeing and their sense of belonging. The respondents in this research expressed a reluctance to separate out Service children and families in their practice, preferring to aim to provide an inclusive, individualised approach for all children. They were, however, clear that individualised approaches which responded to the particular challenges of military life were needed.

**Curriculum and Pedagogy:** With regard to early years curriculum and pedagogy it was pointed out by many providers that good early years practice for all children within a setting is good practice for children from Armed Forces families. This usually involved an individualised approach recognising the unique needs of all children and promoting a relationship-led model with play-based approaches preferred.

***We use a personalized approach to support each child, as it cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution.***

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

***Personalised support for children, regardless of their military status, is very important. Whilst our setting caters for a large number of service families, I am clear that they we do not do different things for these families, but instead give good early years practice for all families, noting the effectiveness of this approach for all children.***

(Focus group; PVI Daycare; England)

**Routine and Consistency:** Maintaining stable routines in the day were felt to enable Service children to feel secure and supported and that this was firmly believed to be an important element in their work with Service children.

***I emphasise the importance of stability and routine as these children often struggle with emotional regulation.***

(Focus Group; Childminder; Wales)

**Individualized and Flexible Support:** Providers reported a range of individualised support for children from Armed Forces families which was flexibly offered and shifted in response to the particular needs expressed by the child at any one time. This support included extra one-on-one time, flexibility in settling-in periods, providing quiet spaces, and adapting care based on each child's emotional needs. Parents suggested that empathy and understanding of Service circumstances (waiving rules/offering flexibility) by early years providers was helpful and appreciated.

●● *We have also developed an eco-garden, and sensory areas inside and outside the nursery, to give us the space to work closely with small groups/individual children who need some additional care/nurture. Over the coming months we hope to also arrange children's massage and yoga training to help us to support the wellbeing of the children in our care.*

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

**Focused Emotional Support:** Creating a nurturing environment and offering extra care during transitions were seen as central pillars of support for young Service children. In addition, some settings provide specialist emotional literacy support strategies, and some providers added trained Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA) into their team capacity.

●● *I understand the unique challenges faced by military children, particularly in emotional regulation and coping with parental deployments. I use various strategies and resources in my practice to support these children, including mindfulness techniques, breathing exercises, yoga and visual aids like family pictures and Lanka Kade wooden figures as small world toys which are affordable and versatile in representing various occupations, including army and navy figures.*

(Interview; Childminder; England)

**Resources and Activities:** Most providers in this study expressed that they had developed specialised and dedicated activities and resources for use with Service children and their families. The many examples of these included deployment bags, memory books, storybooks, countdown charts, and interactive tools like photo albums and world maps to help children stay connected with deployed parents.

●● *We have created deployment bags and maps for the children, we work closely with the parents to support them and the child and we have many resources to help support them through different changes.*

(Focus Group; PVI Nursery; England)

**Providing Parental and Family Support:** Early years providers generally viewed their work with parents as central to their responsibilities towards the child. They offered regular check-ins with Armed Forces parents, flexible childcare hours, organised support networks and provided signposting to relevant services. Keeping open communication through apps, journals, and letters; encouraging discussions about deployed parents; involving parents in activities; and celebrating military family experiences were some of the ways parents were supported to keep connected.

●● *I develop strong parent partnerships in my early years setting and as we are a small size with no more than 15 children this allows for strong relationships with parents through regular communication and monthly updates.*

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; Wales)

**Collaborative Approaches:** Providers emphasised the need for, and benefits of, better coordination between military welfare services, local authorities and early years providers to ensure smoother transitions and cohesive support networks. Some providers expressed a desire for a simple national 'service child transfer pack' or 'passport' (education + health/additional needs essentials) to ensure continuity and reduce delay.

●● *Information flow painpoints are many. Crossborder transfers (e.g. England < > Scotland, UK < > overseas) and NHS waiting lists lead to lost time and duplication; risk of assumptions about existing referrals.*

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Scotland)

**Finding 11: Specialist Armed Forces programmes can support the development of mainstream practice to the benefit of all children**

**●● We run a variety of support programmes for communication, language and literacy development – ‘Talk Boost’, ‘Mr Tongue’, ‘Blast’ and ‘Signing’. We don’t run a rolling snack as our children like a more structured day to help them feel secure.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

Respondents in the study indicated that military-specific programmes were popular and could be used to support the development of all the children in the setting. For example, settings used and valued resources like Little Troopers, Reading Force, and Royal Navy Family and People Support. In reverse, they felt mainstream programmes could also be used to support children from Armed Forces families, especially in the area of communication and language. Common programmes mentioned that helped Service children were Talk Boost, WellComm, NELI, and I-Can; these were used to address communication delays for all children in the setting. In the area of emotional development initiatives like Emotional Literacy Support Assistants, Five to Thrive and Bucket Time were implemented to help with emotional regulation.

**Finding 12: There is a need to invest in practitioner professional development and additional resources to better support Service young children and families**

**●● Lots of extra support was needed and we had to source this ourselves and also through the local authority. No extra help or support was given to us by the Armed Forces. I needed to contact them to ask if I could acquire any support through the welfare officer, but I was told that there would be no funding available at all ... [not for] physiotherapy, sensory impairment, visual impairment, medical support, just to name a few.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

Provider respondents in this study indicated that they felt under-supported and under resourced to provide the high level of specialist care and education that Service children need. Many felt that the quality of support offered depended on their goodwill and ability to work within mainstream funding and resourcing and that this was often inadequate. A lack of awareness of what support is available to settings was also reported.

**Reliance on practitioner good will and self-help:**

Overall, while some specialised programmes exist, many practitioners rely on experience, informal networks, and self-sourced materials to support service children.

**●● There is very little support, especially from the Local Authority and I was heavily reliant on my own experience with service personnel across all forces and their families.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

**Lack of Funding and Resources:** Many settings face difficulties in securing funding for additional support, especially for children with additional needs or those requiring extra emotional care. Some settings accessed funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust and local authorities to provide additional support. Many educators believe early years settings should receive Pupil Premium (additional funding for less advantaged children in England) to better support service children, similar to schools.

**●● We are underfunded and currently have a recruitment crisis in our sector so any help that is free for us to access would be amazing please.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**Limited Awareness of Available Support:** Many providers are unaware of available training and support services for supporting military children and families, making it difficult to offer targeted help. Many settings used books like *The Invisible String*, *My Daddy's Going Away*, and *The Colour Monster* to help children process emotions but finding and accessing dedicated resources was raised as a challenge.

**●● They need more funding to help support the teachers in proper training on how to support under-fives with emotional needs that are much more complicated than your ordinary families. They are unique with unique circumstances which needs to be known and understood by all.**

(Interview; Primary school with Nursery; England)

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### **Finding 13: More specialist professional development is needed**

**●● Unfortunately, the training offered has always been during my working hours, so I was unable to attend.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● No training so far but would love to have further info on ways to support.**

(Online Survey; Childminder; Wales)

**●● There is no official training that has been offered to me other than what I have learnt on the job as well as my own experiences.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

There was an almost universal desire and hunger for more specialist professional development aimed at early years leaders and practitioners who work daily with Service children and their families. The experience, expertise and professional practice revealed in the evidence was impressive but practitioners all reflected a deep desire for more specialised professional development to support them in their complex work with Service children and families to enable them to work more effectively, and with more insight. Most practitioners had received little training and had learned 'on the job' often with the help of practitioners with personal military experience.

**Limited Formal Training:** The majority of respondents in the Online Survey had received no specialist training to work with children from Armed Forces families. Practitioners reported they relied on personal experience rather than structured training, with some unaware of available resources. Many settings expressed a need for more accessible training and resources tailored to military children but were uncertain how to access this.

**●● We have had no training. We are a military family so it's just through experience.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● It is very important that Early Years has some free training and resources that we can easily access for our families.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**Training Priorities:** Training priorities identified focused on knowledge about military family life and challenges, the deployment of SENCOs and mental health first aiders, and identifying strategies to support Service children and their parent's emotional regulation.

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## 5. PRIORITIES FOR PRACTICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEMS AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will act as a beacon to look ahead, building on the evidence from published literature and primary research which has provided a significant and urgent agenda for action within the early years sector. From this baseline of current knowledge and practice the chapter is organised around a set of eight emerging priorities for action to guide practice development which are then exemplified with illustrative portraits of good early years practice. These practice portraits are presented using the voices of providers and parents to give authenticity and immediacy to the messages portrayed to those developing policy and practice.

These priorities for action recognise the need for a strategic approach to developing early years practice which balances children's wellbeing and attainment outcomes within a holistic, family centred approach. The application of these principles to those who work with the youngest children must recognise the diverse nature of the early childhood sector within each nation as well as the diversity offered across service families and their related experiences.

Furthermore, these priorities for action are presented to inform and enhance current early years practice in the four nations, not replace it, and are designed to support high quality, inclusive practices which will benefit all children, but specifically those of Armed Forces families. As they have captured practice from a diversity of providers operating in different countries and contexts, they should be relevant to any provider working with young children from birth to five years of age and should complement any statutory curriculum framework within the United Kingdom (and potentially beyond).

The aim is to shine a light on what is currently being done and how it can be strengthened to enable young Service children to thrive and flourish so that when they leave early years and transition to primary school, they do so as happy, healthy, confident children ready to take the next step on their educational journey.

Whilst conducting this research and having the privilege to hear first-hand from parents and practitioners, our open-ended methodological approach allowed us to capture some additional, wider system learning. Whilst this sits outside of the original parameters of the research and does not directly inform the development of an early years toolkit, it does provide useful insight for those whose work at regional or national level has an impact on the lives of Service children in the early years, and their families, to ensure that they are consistently and equitably supported across the UK.

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### PRIORITIES FOR PRACTICE

***Priority 1: Developing a clearly visible approach to supporting Service children which is shared and promoted***

#### WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

Realising this priority requires the early years setting and early childhood educators to make visible, in its ethos and aims, a commitment to working with Service children and families, and an underpinning philosophy in which all young children are viewed as capable. This commitment would be set out in an accessible policy which sets out the setting's approach to supporting Service children and families. In this policy, there should be a clear strategy for the targeted use of dedicated funding and resources and guidance (depending on the specific national context) to ensure that setting routines and processes have considered the needs of Service children and families. Any outward facing communications such as newsletters and websites should also reflect positively the lives and experiences of Service children and families. All curriculum and pedagogic strategies should consider Service children as a target group (much as you would boys/girls, English as an Additional Language (EAL), children with additional needs) when reviewing assessment data to ensure visibility and focus on planning appropriate activities and approaches.

## PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE

**●● We are working to develop better co-ordination between military welfare services, local authorities and early years providers to ensure better tailored support for the child and family.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; England)

**●● We are developing stronger collaboration and better tailored interventions for service children and their families. Earlier intervention is crucial to enabling the children to progress well.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Scotland)

**●● We try and ensure that the youngest children are protected through SEND processes with regards to moving regions.**

(Online Survey; PVI Daycare; England)

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### **Priority 2: Enabling child wellbeing and mental health to be supported**

#### WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

This priority sets out to ensure early years settings offer a stable, nurturing environment, with consistent routines, with extra care offered to Service children and families during transitions with a particular focus on supporting emotional wellbeing and development. The setting should ensure all practitioners have a good understanding of the range of Service children's potential experiences and emotions during different stages of deployment and separation and should provide a range of opportunities for Service children to explore their experiences and express their feelings. Practitioners could support the Service child to research and map the location of any deployed parent and offer tailored resources and activities such as deployment bags, memory books, storybooks, countdown charts and interactive tools like photo albums and world maps to help Service children stay connected with them. Individualised support such as extra one-on-one time, flexibility in settling in periods, quiet spaces and adapted care based on a child's emotional needs

should be available and smaller nurture groups that Service children can join when the parent is deployed so they can spend time with other children in the same situation should be factored into the organisation of the day. Settings should aim to achieve a close engagement with parents and families to ensure support before, during and after deployments. They should also explore the value and availability of military-specific programmes and resources such as Little Troopers, Reading Force and Royal Navy Family and People Support, which can offer bespoke additions to an early years programme.

## PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE

**●● We have special packs, books and other resources to familiarise us and them, and we do our best to help them through the process with extra attention to activities they love, toys, books and more one-to-one attention.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Scotland)

**●● We discussed when they were going away/coming back, we counted down to return, discussed pictures/photos sent to the nursery, created an online app for parents who are away, and made pictures for when parents came home.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● For the child we did a lot of stories and role play of Dads being away. We had Dad spray some ribbon with his aftershave so she could carry round his smell. We also got him to wear the same tee shirt for ages so it smelt of him then she put this on her teddy at night times. Dad was also given a small toy of hers to take with him. When he was able to video call he had the toy and could tell her all about what the toy had been up to.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Wales)

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### **Priority 3: Ensuring child development and learning is prioritised**

#### **WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE**

Realising this priority requires setting leaders to ensure that all practitioners have a strong knowledge of early childhood development and learning and understand the deep impact of early experiences in shaping long term achievement. It also requires staff to have an informed knowledge of each Service child's early and previous experiences so they are able to build on these positively with individually tailored support and carefully chosen resources. The ethos will encourage Service children's talents, skills, capabilities and achievements to be celebrated, extended and made visible through assessment and documentation. There should be a balanced focus on a Service children's emotional health, wellbeing and social connections, along with their holistic development and learning. Settings should create a nurturing environment, offering one-to-one support, flexibility in settling-in periods, and provide quiet spaces and nurture groups. They should also maintain consistent daily routines which give the Service child stability and security, securing their engagement in the learning opportunities. The setting should provide additional learning opportunities which support communication and language, emotional regulation, social interactions, and the development of friendships. These strategies may include programmes such as Talk Boost, WellComm, NELI and I-Can to support communication delays, and programmes such as Five to Thrive, Thrive Approach and Bucket Time, to help with emotional regulation.

#### **PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE**

**●● Any child's needs are individual to them. I'm a military wife and have young children myself so I know their needs are those of reassurance, being open and honest about upcoming deployments and exercises, preparing them for separation. Listening to their background stories, their own words about the 'adventures' they've been on and celebrating those within the setting.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● We purchased lots of army and navy resources, we had Armed Forces week, and we had some of our families into the setting in their uniform to talk to the children. We looked at family members in their uniforms, we built dens with army camouflage materials, we listened to bugle music and we had an assault course and practiced marching to music. We purchased different books and we made sure parents had contacts to reach out to for support. We developed our emotion/PSE area and spoke about our feelings with 'the Colour Monster'.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● I have established a military families programme throughout the whole school (2.5 years to 18 years) which involves training staff in understanding these needs and the context. We create bespoke deployment boxes for children, agree plans for communicating needs and maintaining contact, support through our online systems for parents' evenings and updates, provide and share appropriate resources from charities and we have coffee mornings for parents with guest speakers from charities who can offer different support for parents to create a school-based support network.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; Wales)

### **Priority 4: Enabling life transitions to be supported and celebrated**

#### **WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE**

This priority requires staff to engage in regular reflections on their provision for Service children and their life stories. It involves identifying children from Armed Forces families on entry to a setting, and ensuring all staff are informed about their individual life experiences and transitions which will facilitate and encourage continuity of care and learning experiences for the Service child. Settings should develop individualised and collaboratively constructed induction and exit processes for Service children and families, with

secure daily arrival and leaving routines. Practitioners should help Service children to talk and express their feelings about their past, present and future life experiences and transitions. Close liaison with Armed Forces parents and families to access information about a child's life experiences should be established on the child's entry to any setting. Special care should be taken to support the development of Service children's friendships and social identity in the peer group.

## PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE

**●● Sometimes they need more support when they are new to the area and nursery...and we do our best to help them through the process with extra attention to activities they love. Toys, books, more one-to-one attention.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● We help the child to settle following national and international moves and preparation for these if upcoming.**

(Online Survey; Childminder; Wales)

**●● We offer lots of stories, preparation, visuals of what might be happening and passing on information to the next setting.**

(Interview; PVI Daycare; England)

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### **Priority 5: Advocating children to participate in decisions and to be heard**

#### WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

Settings aiming to enhance participation and voice of Service children within their provision will benefit from being trained in Rights Respecting Practice and in listening and responding actively to children's voices from their earliest days, particularly those with additional needs and neurodiversity. Practitioners should prepare spaces and places for the Service child to express their wishes and realise their rights, and Service children should be encouraged to participate actively in decision-making about their lives. This priority will also require Service children

to have advocates for them in all setting and community forums and groups. The setting should provide Service children with opportunities to share their experiences through arts and cultural expression such as drama, music, picture books, storytelling and posters. The views of Service children should also be documented and visible in all setting documents.

## PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE

**●● The children are with us at the heart of everything we do. We adapt to meet their individual needs but most of all we make them feel welcomed and part of our community.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● As a childcare giver I try and include all children into every aspect of everyday life and help Forces children to not feel left out and discouraged from joining in. It helps them to get the support and development they need to thrive. We take time to check in with them, encourage them to talk and support making cards, pictures etc.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Wales)

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### **Priority 6: Ensuring that the family around the child is valued, engaged and supported**

#### WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

This priority requires settings to have a high level of awareness of individual family circumstances. They should offer a clear and positive welcome and induction process to new Armed Forces families to make them feel valued from the first interaction. Family support should be offered for individual parents and families, and support groups for Armed Forces parents and families should be facilitated. Settings should work hard to provide early help for parents and support which addresses family emotional health and wellbeing. They should also enable virtual communication with 'away from home' parents. Some might be able to engage an Armed Forces Family Liaison Officer, but all should actively signpost families to other sources of support.

## PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE

**●● Our Key Person develops strong links with family members by allowing additional time to talk at the beginning and end of sessions. We provide an online learning journal for a parent deployed abroad.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; England)

**●● We made sure we checked in on with mum on a regular basis and offered her a shoulder when needed and ensured she wasn't isolated. We helped to provide babysitters, so she had time for herself. This all enabled her to deal with her child better.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● Our childcare settings recognise and are empathetic to service families and the impact separation has on them all. We provide opportunities for parents to attend the settings for craft sessions and offer the opportunity for parents to come in and speak with the staff team. We use FAMLY which enables those families who are separated to have the opportunity to communicate through the system and the children can send pictures of work completed and we can include pictures of children undertaking activities within the time they spend with us.**

(Interview; PVI Nursery; England)

**●● We are currently developing an Armed Forces Community Room for family events for service families.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; Wales)

## **Priority 7: Developing staff to ensure they are knowledgeable, nurturing and trained**

### WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

This priority benefits from settings having a designated lead member of staff with responsibility for training, development and support for teams working with Service children and their families (e.g., an Armed Forces Champion). Settings should also offer all practitioners working with Service children professional development led by specialist support staff or outside experts. In addition, staff attendance at local and national conferences and events to keep up to date should be supported. Where possible, settings should draw on the knowledge of staff from an Armed Forces background. Settings should aim to provide evidence-based resources and training for all staff to be able to dialogue professionally about, and with, Service children and families. Early years settings should actively aim to work collaboratively with other early years and primary school settings and professional services that work with Service children and families.

## PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE

**●● We have highly trained staff that are able to support the children's needs. We employ a SENCO who is trained to level 4 and has a sound understanding of how to support children with additional needs. We know how to apply for additional funding and will provide resources and support where needed. The manager is a qualified Mental Health First Aider and is able to support staff and parents who are struggling.**

(Online Survey; Primary School with Nursery; England)

**●● We train all our staff on the uniqueness of military life.**

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

●● *We draw a lot of our knowledge from the military wives past and present who are employed with us. Our setting has recently received an Armed Forces Covenant Grant to fund the wages of a staff member to deliver Forest school programme to our children on a daily basis.*

(Focus Group; Nursery School; England)

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**Priority 8: Ensuring setting level barriers to accessing childcare and early education are removed**

### WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

This priority aims to establish equitable access to good quality, enriching and safe early education and care that meets Armed Forces family needs and identifies and signposts funding to achieve this goal. Enhanced capacity and knowledge to provide additional support for Service children with additional needs and their families is promoted and supported. Clear information about early education and care entitlements should be made available, and support to Armed Forces families to ensure they can access those entitlements and secure places in good quality provision is seen as an urgent mission. Settings serving Service children should ensure any additional funding allocations, such as Early Years Pupil Premium, Early Learning and Childcare fund or Service Pupil Premium (Reception age and above) are ring fenced and focused on ensuring that the Service child can fully access their early education.

### PORTRAITS OF PRACTICE

●● *Access to high quality, enriching and safe ECE [Early Childhood Education] is delivered through the Early Learning and Childcare fund (ELCF) which aims to support early years settings to meet the specific needs of the Armed Forces Families by enhancing access to provision and by creating an early years network that will share best practice and collaborate to better serve children in the sector.*

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

●● *Armed Forces families need extra wellbeing support due to parental deployment. Lots of our children are EAL so there are many language and communication needs. Commonwealth spouses often do not understand the UK system so they need help to apply for places and to get their entitlements.*

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; Scotland)

●● *We should benefit from military children receiving Early Years Pupil Premium so that more sessions can be offered to children, especially families who cannot work due to deployment so they are not entitled to government funding for childcare and early education.*

(Online Survey; PVI Nursery; England)

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEMS AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Building on the research evidence findings and the identified priorities for practice development, there is strong evidence from participants in the primary research that there are wider systemic and policy changes required. It was clear from participants that these wider systemic changes should be led by the MOD to ensure Service children and their families in the early years are consistently and equitably supported across the UK. These recommendations sit above the practice level priorities and are intended for consideration by national and local policy makers, funders, and strategic leaders within key government departments including, but not limited to, the MOD, Department for Health and Social Care, and the Department of Education.

### 1. Establish a National Policy Framework for Early Years Support to Armed Forces Families

A coherent UK-wide strategy should be developed that explicitly recognises the needs of children from Armed Forces families in the early years. This framework should:

- Require visibility of Service children in local authority early years strategies.
- Mandate consistent identification, monitoring and reporting of outcomes for children from Armed Forces families.
- Ensure that Armed Forces families are recognised in statutory early years guidance across all four nations.

### 2. Ensure Continuity of Specialist Additional Needs and Early Years Support Across Borders

Mobility is a defining feature of service life, but it currently leads to fragmentation in assessment and provision for children. To address this, government should:

- Establish a form of statutory “Service Child Passport” for 0–5s to ensure health, developmental and additional need information transfers seamlessly between local authorities and nations.
- Guarantee continuity of entitlement to assessments and interventions without families having to restart processes following relocation.

### 3. Introduce Dedicated Funding for Service Children in their Early Years

Early years settings frequently report being under-resourced to meet the unique needs of Service children. To redress this, policy should:

- Provide dedicated funding, such as the Service Pupil Premium, in the four nations to cover all early years children from birth, with ring fenced funds for targeted interventions for Service children.
- Ensure funding mechanisms are equitable across all four nations, with clear guidance on use to support under-threes and children with additional needs.
- Provide dedicated grant funding streams that early years providers can access to implement wellbeing, language and transition support programmes.

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#### 4. Develop a National Professional Development and Workforce Strategy

Service children and families benefit when practitioners are well-informed and confident in responding to their needs. To embed this, government should:

- Create a free national training offer on military family life, mobility, deployment and trauma, accessible to all early years practitioners.
- Embed Armed Forces awareness in statutory qualifications and continuous professional development frameworks.
- Fund regional Armed Forces Early Years Champions (within local authorities or multi-agency hubs) to disseminate expertise and resources across settings.

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#### 5. Improve Access, Affordability and Flexibility of Early Years Provision for Armed Forces Families

Access to high-quality provision is often compromised by mobility, cost and rigid systems. National and local policy should:

- Consider requiring local authorities to ensure flexible childcare options (including atypical hours and rolling admissions) to meet the realities of service life.
  - Provide centralised, accessible information on childcare entitlements for Armed Forces families, including those posted overseas or newly relocated.
  - Review eligibility rules for funded childcare to ensure Armed Forces families are not disadvantaged by frequent moves or residency criteria.
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## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Taken together, these practice priorities and policy and system-level reforms would create a more consistent and equitable infrastructure for children from Armed Forces families in the early years, ensuring that no child is disadvantaged by their family's service life and that every family can access the support they need from birth onwards. These reforms would also provide a more secure underpinning to the practice level priorities set out above and any early years toolkit that this research may inform.

This research has revealed that the youngest Service children have not been visible enough in planning and strategic actions to ensure no Service child is disadvantaged by the military life of their families. There is both an appetite and urgent need for action expressed by early years practitioners in all four nations who are very aware of the impact of military life on young Service children's development and life chances. This research report provides a timely and informative evidential base for that action to begin. The case for increased attention and investment in supporting young Service children and their families is very clear.

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## APPENDIX 1: ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Question 1: In which of the devolved nations do you work?

Question 2: What types of early childhood education and childcare do you represent?

Question 3: Have you within the last three years supported/taught children (aged 0-5) of Armed Forces families

Question 4: Which Armed Forces were these families connected to?

Question 5: From your work with this group of young Service children, what is your understanding of their needs?

Question 6: In what ways did you respond to these needs?

Question 7: Did you experience any challenges whilst supporting/teaching these young Service children? If so, please explain below.

Question 8: Did you access/use any specific training, programme or resource to help you support/teach these young Service children? If so, please provide details below.

Question 9: If you have any other comments relating to your experiences of supporting/teaching children (0-5) of Armed Forces Families please do share that with us below.

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## APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are Service families' and children's experiences of early education and care?

a) What are the main challenges faced by service families in accessing early education and care?

b) What support is needed for Service families in the early years?

c) To what extent do the needs of service children differ from those of other children in the early years?

d) What support is needed for Service children in the early years?

e) What makes you feel happy at nursery?

f) What makes you feel safe at nursery?

2. To what extent are practitioners in early years settings aware of Service children and families and their needs?

a) How do practitioners understand the needs of Service families and children?

b) How do they currently work with Service families and respond to their needs?

c) To what extent do practitioners feel there are barriers to their ability to support Service families and children?

3. What are the key principles of effective practice in supporting Service children and families in the early years and how might these inform the development of the Toolkit?

a) How does best practice differ across different types of early years settings?

b) How might a toolkit reflect the unique complexity of early years settings and build in evidence-based features of best practice in the early years?

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## APPENDIX 3: ADVISORY PANEL MEMBERSHIP

An Advisory Panel was convened to provide expert guidance and support throughout the research process, bringing together members with extensive professional experience in early years education, military family support, policy development and children's services. The panel met regularly during the project, offering valuable feedback on research design, methodology and emerging findings.

The group comprised 14 members from 13 organisations, representing a broad range of early years, defence, government and charitable expertise. Organisations represented included:



The expertise and commitment of the Advisory Panel were instrumental in ensuring the rigour, relevance and sector-wide applicability of the findings presented in this report.





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