

Service Children's Progression



# LISTENING TO LEARN: THE VOICES OF SERVICE CHILDREN



THE FINAL REPORT OF THE **YEAR OF THE SERVICE CHILD VOICE:**

a programme of investigation to improve our understanding of how those supporting the children of armed forces families and veterans put children's voices at the heart of all they do.



The SCiP Alliance is a partnership of organisations focused on improving the educational progression of children from UK Armed Forces and veterans' families.

The Alliance is working for our vision of Thriving lives for Service Children.

The Alliance helps researchers, policymakers and practitioners work more effectively together to target evidence-based support at identified needs in a coherent system. We pursue these goals by leading collaborative work to develop a robust evidence base, connecting and supporting practitioners and influencing policy to help those supporting Service children.

For more information, visit the SCiP Alliance website: [www.scipalliance.org](http://www.scipalliance.org)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks go to Jilly Carrell and the Army Families Federation, who inspired the Year of the Service Child Voice. Thanks also go to Ernie Rowe and Tim Humphries at the British Forces Broadcasting Service for their support in publicising the project.

Finally, our huge appreciation goes to all those who have taken the time to submit examples of their listening activities, and for working to put the voices of Service children at the heart of all they do.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Michael Hall is a researcher for the Service Children's Progression Alliance and the co-author of the foundational study that led to the establishment of the Alliance. He lectures in education studies and leads on evaluation for the Widening Participation team at the University of Winchester. His research interests include the educational experiences of Service children, graduate employability and inclusion in education.

---

May 2020

©University of Winchester on behalf of the SCiP Alliance. Please get in touch for press or other enquiries: [info@scipalliance.org](mailto:info@scipalliance.org).

# CONTENTS

04 FOREWORD

---

05 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

08 INTRODUCTION: PROMOTING LISTENING

---

09 WHY LISTEN?

---

11 HOW DO WE LISTEN, AND WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

---

29 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

---

# FOREWORD

The children of armed forces personnel have huge potential. However, they are at risk of under-achieving, and there is more that could be done to ensure that those who support them are equipped and confident to do so.

In response to this need, the SCiP Alliance has established a partnership approach. Its goal is to help researchers, policymakers and practitioners work more effectively together to ensure that evidence-based support is targeted at identified needs.

Listening to the views, experiences and priorities of Service children is central to the SCiP Alliance's partnership approach. Our vision is for policymaking and practice to be informed by evidence at the heart of which are the voices of Service children.

This approach is also predicated on partners being willing and able to share their practices, their successes and their challenges. The SCiP Alliance works to create opportunities to do so.

We know that SCiP Alliance partners listen to Service children through a multitude of ways and for a multitude of purposes. The purpose of this report is to collate examples of how partners are listening and what impact this listening is having on policy and practice.

Impactful listening does not necessarily require highly innovative approaches or large-scale investment. Rather, what unites the examples presented in this report are: a willingness to make the effort to listen; an openness to what Service children have to say; a willingness to be led by Service children; and a genuine willingness to transform practice and policy.

I hope that this report offers something of value to all those who support Service children wherever they are on their journeys – whether they engage Service children on a regular basis or merely periodically, or indeed if they have never, until now, seriously engaged with the distinct perspectives of Service children.

To listen is to learn. It is my hope that, through sharing our collective listening, we might enhance our collective learning.

**Sarah-Louise Collins**

**Chair, Service Children's Progression Alliance**



To listen is to learn. It is my hope that, through sharing our collective listening, we might enhance our collective learning.

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents examples of how we might listen in a meaningful way to the experiences of Service children. Service children are those whose parents are currently serving in the armed forces or have served at some stage during their lives. Such listening is a critical part of engaging seriously with Service children's educational journeys in a way that promotes constructive change to practice and policy. It is also central to ensuring that decisions about practice and policy are underpinned by evidence. The examples presented here are not exhaustive, but are representative of the wide range of work undertaken by SCiP Alliance allies across the country and beyond.



At the heart of listening to Service children is an ethical imperative to ensure that they are able to express their views in all matters affecting them<sup>1</sup>. In order to do this, we must firstly listen to and affirm the diversity of Service children's experiences. This is essential in order to avoid reducing Service children to a homogeneous group. Secondly, we must listen as a means of promoting inclusion. It would be unsatisfactory to consider Service children as a group that experiences specific disadvantages that need to be fixed. Rather, we should explore how the diverse strengths and qualities of Service children can be drawn upon in practice. Thirdly, we must listen in order to transform practice and policy, in a way that views Service children as partners in improvement.

The examples presented here represent a range of listening activities that are oriented towards a range of purposes. These include general intelligence gathering, empowerment of and advocacy for Service children, and the continuous improvement of practice. It is important to note that these purposes are not mutually exclusive, nor is there a hierarchy of purposes that places any one above all others in importance. The same listening activity may serve multiple purposes simultaneously.

Drawing on the work presented here, four overarching principles of listening can be discerned. For effective and impactful listening we must be deliberate, open, child-led and willing to change:

<sup>1</sup> United Nations (1989). Convention on the rights of the child. New York, NY: United Nations.

## BE DELIBERATE

---

Effective and impactful listening does require deliberate effort, though this does not necessarily imply revolutionary changes to practice. This means committing time and resources to listening, and creating specific ways to engage directly with Service children;

## BE OPEN

---

Effective and impactful listening requires openness on the part of the educator or policymaker – to Service children's experiences and the possibility that we still have more to learn. This means letting go of any preconceptions we may have, and accepting that we do not necessarily have all of the answers;

## BE CHILD-CENTRED

---

Effective and impactful listening requires a child-led approach, particularly as a means of fostering Service children's agency. This means creating opportunities for children to steer the conversation, to express what matters to them in their own terms.

## BE WILLING TO CHANGE

---

Effective and impactful listening requires a genuine willingness to transform practice and policy, which needs to be evidenced by genuine and visible change. That means: beginning from the presumption that practice or policy will change as a result of listening; making changes; and communicating that change, or communicating why such a change cannot be made.

It is hoped that these examples will be helpful for organisations that wish to engage more closely with their Service children's experiences. The principles derived here are intended to be the foundations that inform and support meaningful and impactful listening that is oriented towards improved practice and policymaking.

---



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 01

---

All stakeholders should reflect on the four key principles of effective and impactful listening presented here. They should consider how these might play out in their own contexts and therefore how their engagement with Service children might be strengthened as a result.

### 02

---

Stakeholders with well-developed practices should consider how they could share their expertise with other schools, for example through peer-to-peer networks, developing briefing materials, CPD resources, or through their local authorities' governor training networks. They should also consider engaging with their local SCiP Alliance Hub in order to support the wider community of professionals and policymakers that support Service children.

### 03

---

Stakeholders with less well developed practice should consider how their existing methods for student engagement could better capture and reflect the views of Service children. This could involve proactively identifying and engaging with their Service child population and their families, as well as seeking support from organisations with more developed practice.

### 04

---

Stakeholders should seek opportunities to develop listening activities in partnership with other organisations. This can help the learning that can be gained through listening to Service children to have a wider impact on support for Service children. It can also be an opportunity to promote more coordinated approaches to supporting Service children.

### 05

---

Stakeholders should develop robust and systematic mechanisms for capturing the voices of Service children and for responding to the priorities identified through this listening. Rigorous approaches to listening and its translation into action can enhance the impact of listening on Service children's outcomes. When undertaken collaboratively, such efforts can improve the cost-effectiveness of investments made and provide invaluable insights about the different strengths and needs between organisations, as well as improvement priorities for local partnerships.

# INTRODUCTION: PROMOTING LISTENING

A central pillar of the SCiP Alliance is that our work is informed by evidence. One of the most important sources of evidence about Service children's educational experiences is Service children themselves. The SCiP Alliance encourages and supports partners and stakeholders in engaging with the perspectives of Service children through multiple means.

The foundational piece of research<sup>2</sup> that led to the establishment of the Alliance engaged with the voices of Service children in schools and higher education through a formal piece of academic research, and promoting further academic research continues to be an important pillar of the evidence base. Just as important, however, is the learning to be gained through listening as part of our everyday work. It is this kind of listening that is the focus of this report.

The SCiP Alliance's central team has also promoted listening through ensuring Service children are represented on its governing board, and through a national roll-out and evaluation of Creative Forces events (discussed later in this report). However, it is the collected efforts of allies across all types of stakeholders that can generate informative and meaningful listening – including what stakeholders can learn from each other through, and about, listening to Service children.

As our armed forces continue to serve the country in diverse ways, listening to the perspectives of Service children has never been so important. The work of organisations such as the three families federations continue to identify issues of ongoing concern for families, many of which relate to children's education. Such concerns – such as over the support available to Service children and the impact on their wellbeing – can play into decisions as to whether to continue in the Services. The collective listening of the SCiP Alliance is therefore oriented to ensuring that Service children are supported as effectively as possible in order to fulfil the spirit of the Armed Forces Covenant<sup>3</sup>.

The collected examples of listening described in this report exemplify an alliance approach to collective learning. While they are not exhaustive, they do illustrate the diversity of work being undertaken by stakeholders across the alliance.

---

<sup>2</sup> McCullough, J. and Hall, M. (2016). Further and higher progression for Service children. Winchester: University of Winchester. Available at:

[https://www.scipalliance.org/assets/files/UoW-research-paper\\_Further-and-Higher-Progression-for-Service-Children.pdf](https://www.scipalliance.org/assets/files/UoW-research-paper_Further-and-Higher-Progression-for-Service-Children.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence (2020). What is the Armed Forces Covenant? Available at: <https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/about/>

# WHY LISTEN?

Listening to children in a meaningful way is primarily a question of the ethical treatment of children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>4</sup> emphasises the importance of children being able to express their views in all matters affecting them; by necessity this extends to decisions about their education. Policymakers, educators and school leaders therefore have a significant role to play in furthering the dignity and rights of children. Service children are no exception.

## 1. DIVERSITY

Perhaps the most fundamental reason to pay attention to the individual perspectives of Service children is that they represent such a diversity of individual experiences. Service children are not a homogeneous group; the experience of being part of a Service family can depend on the nature of their parents' service, the branch of the Services in which they work, the localities in which they live, and even the geopolitical situation.

Furthermore, while Service children do experience things that are distinct aspects of Service life (such as family separation due to deployment), they also experience a range of situations that may be encountered by any child from any background. Therefore, there is the need to pay attention to how this diversity of experiences intersect and characterise the diverse lives of Service children. This means that we should be wary of inferring conclusions that relate to Service children as a single group<sup>5</sup>.

The educational experiences of Service children have historically been under-researched. There

is much that is not known about the trajectories, successes, challenges, barriers and opportunities encountered by Service children on their journey through education. As noted, Service children are not generalisable to a simple set of common descriptors.

## 2. INCLUSION

Just as it is unsatisfactory to regard Service children through narrow and reductive labels, we should not regard Service children as a group that experiences specific educational disadvantages that need to be fixed. Some aspects of Service life may come into tension with the organisation of schooling that, for example, regards geographically stable families as its point of reference. However, to regard Service children thus as a minority group that experiences particular limitations would be to ignore the many strengths, qualities and attributes that Service children possess. The opportunity therefore exists to explore how these diverse strengths and qualities of Service children can add richness to the life of the school, and thus how the school environment and professional practice can evolve as a result.

For Service children, being able to share their views and have them taken seriously is an opportunity to develop and exercise a sense of agency. Service children can potentially be regarded in overly-simplified terms such as the assumption that they can 'just get on with it' or that they automatically embody the preferred values of the Services<sup>6</sup>. Given that Service children experience a wide diversity of life experiences, such blanket assumptions

<sup>4</sup> United Nations (1989). Convention on the rights of the child. New York, NY: United Nations.

<sup>5</sup> McCullough, J. and Hall, M. (2016). Further and higher progression for Service children. Winchester: University of Winchester. Available at:

[https://www.scipalliance.org/assets/files/UoW-research-paper\\_Further-and-Higher-Progression-for-Service-Children.pdf](https://www.scipalliance.org/assets/files/UoW-research-paper_Further-and-Higher-Progression-for-Service-Children.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> McCullough, J., Hall, M. and Ellis, S. (2018). The education of children from military families: identity and agency. *Educational futures*, 9(2).

and stereotyping can lead to these experiences being misrecognised, potentially creating a sense of powerlessness. Creating opportunities for Service children to discuss their lived experiences can be a way for them to exercise a measure of agency over their school experiences.

Engaging with the voices of Service children is therefore a means to fostering their meaningful participation in education. For students to participate in their education, the use of their voice “is much more than simply speaking. It means that it can and should have an effect.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the notion of participation implies direct involvement in decisions that impact them. This implies a responsibility upon adults to listen seriously with the genuine intent of improving and developing policy and professional practice.

### 3. TRANSFORMATION

---

Just as we know that Service children exhibit a great diversity of life experiences, we know that policymakers, teachers and school leaders possess a vast range of experience in working with Service children. For some schools, particularly those in the vicinity of major armed forces facilities, working with Service children is part of the institutional DNA. We know of teachers who have built up a substantial amount of experience, strategies and tacit knowledge through working with the Service community. But we also know that Service children can be widely distributed across the school system. For example, in England almost half of schools will have only one or two Service children on roll at any given time. We also know that some local

authorities have longer-established structures for supporting Service children that are better integrated into their overall decision-making processes.

For professionals working directly with Service children, a serious and reflective engagement with children’s voice can open possibilities for enhanced engagement and a greater sense of inclusion<sup>8</sup>, thus yielding opportunities to improve the quality and character of their educational experiences. This is particularly significant for schools that may see only small numbers of Service children pass through their communities, yet it is important to recognise that there is always something to be learned from a meaningful engagement with students.

Meaningful listening may not be revolutionary, but it can be transformative. In the field of school improvement, for example, the sort of listening that is transformative locates students as partners with adults in improvement rather than as passive beneficiaries whose views are sought in order to rubber-stamp adults’ ideas<sup>9</sup>. The value of listening lies not in knowing how to fit Service children into our education systems, but in how to fit our education systems to Service children – and, indeed, all children – so that they genuinely value all students equally, increase participation, and respond to the diversity of their students<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Bron, J., Emerson, N., and Kákonyi, L. (2018). Diverse student voice approaches across Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 53(3).

<sup>8</sup> Keddie, A. (2015). Student voice and teacher accountability: possibilities and problematics. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 23(2), pp.225–244.

<sup>9</sup> Fletcher, A. (2005). *Meaningful student involvement: guide to students as partners in school change*. Olympia, WA: SoundOut..

<sup>10</sup> Booth, T. and Ainscow, M. (2002). *Index for inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools*. Bristol: Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education. Available at: <https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index%20English.pdf>.

# HOW DO WE LISTEN, AND WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

This section describes a range of work undertaken by SCiP Alliance partners across a breadth of fields. The case studies presented here illustrate a variety of initiatives that engage with the views of young people and demonstrate how the perspectives of Service children might directly inform the support available to them. Some of the cases described report on individual self-contained projects, while others report on ongoing or embedded processes.

The case examples were submitted through an open call to SCiP Alliance stakeholders during the second half of 2019. Those wishing to submit examples were invited to reflect on: their purposes for, and approaches to, listening; the sorts of things that Service children said; the impact that the listening has had, including the major learning points for their work; and advice or guidance for other organisations wishing to engage in similar activities.

Notable among the examples listed here are both the variety of approaches to listening and the variety of purposes for that listening. Many of the examples sought to build on Service children's perspectives in order to improve service provision either by directly informing front-line practice or

ensuring that Service children's voices were heard at the strategic and policy levels. Approaches used included traditional face-to-face forums, online platforms, film, and the use of art and storytelling.

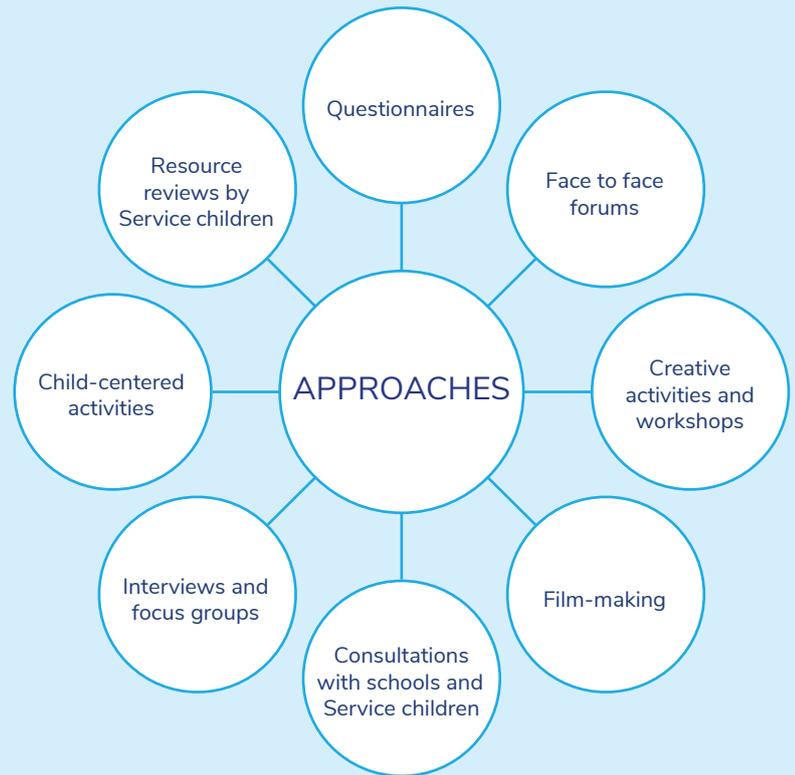
The examples emphasise the importance of an open, genuine and receptive approach to listening to Service children's perspectives, free of preconceptions and prior agendas. There is also the need for a committed approach to ensuring that children's views are translated into impact.

It is important to note that these are examples of the listening being undertaken across the sector. They do not comprise an exhaustive survey; there is likely much that goes on that is not covered in this report. However, they do present an invitation to reflect on the possibilities and potential of meaningful listening.

---

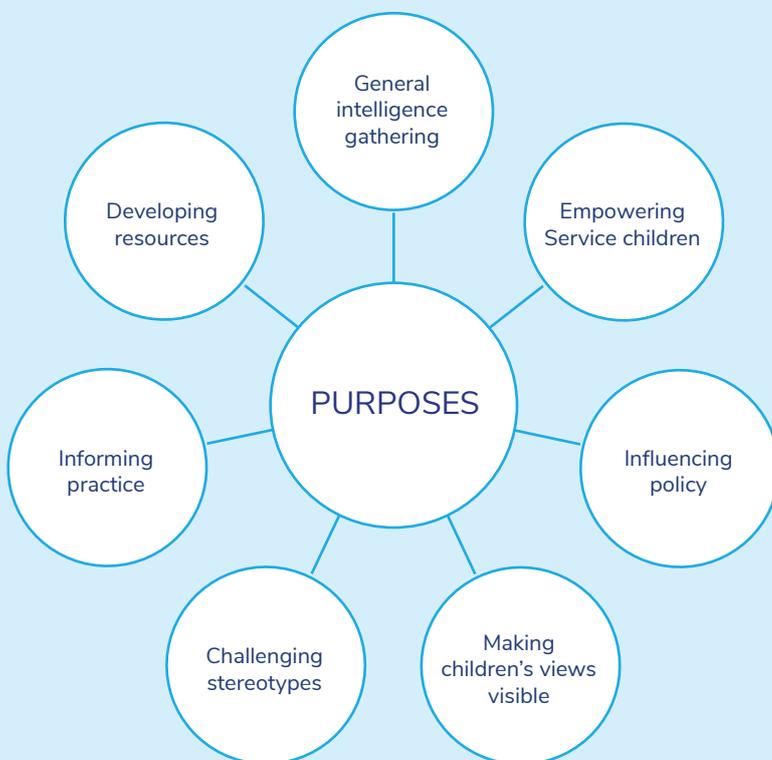
## APPROACHES TO LISTENING

The examples of listening presented in this report demonstrate a range of approaches, ranging from the more conventional (such as questionnaires and forums) to the more creative and complex (such as film-making). The intention here is not to compare the efficacy of such approaches, but to illustrate a range of possibilities for those seeking to develop their work.



## PURPOSES FOR LISTENING

The purposes listed here are representative of the examples presented in the report. It is important to note that the same listening activity can pursue multiple purposes simultaneously. These are also not the only purposes for listening to Service children, nor is any purpose intrinsically more important than another.



## THE EXAMPLES HERE ARE PRESENTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER BY ORGANISATION.

1.	PAGE-14
<hr/>	
British Forces Cyprus Youth Service: enabling young people to have a voice	
2.	PAGE-15
<hr/>	
University of Central Lancashire: Stories Outside the Wire	
3.	PAGE-17
<hr/>	
FutureHY, part of OfS-funded Uni Connect: Lost in Translation	
4.	PAGE-19
<hr/>	
North Yorkshire County Council: Dandelion Blog	
5.	PAGE-21
<hr/>	
Lucy Robinson, postgraduate researcher: the educational experiences of Service children	
6.	PAGE-23
<hr/>	
Royal Caledonian Education Trust: Youth Participation Project	
7.	PAGE-25
<hr/>	
SSCE Cymru: Listening to our Service children	
8.	PAGE-27
<hr/>	
University of Winchester: Creative Forces	

## BRITISH FORCES CYPRUS YOUTH SERVICE:

### ENABLING YOUNG PEOPLE TO HAVE A VOICE

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

To identify and address the needs of young people accompanying their serving parent in British Forces Cyprus (BFC). The aim is to empower our young people to make positive choices and changes in their communities.

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

We have a young people's forum in each of the four stations in BFC. Through these, youth workers listen to the views, needs, aspirations and wants of the young people and facilitate members of the groups in taking positive actions.

#### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

Young people gave a range of views on the kinds of services that would be more available to them in the UK. Issues affecting all young people are also prevalent here – including alcohol, relationships, mental health, body image, the environment, bullying, online bullying, places for teenagers to meet etc.

#### HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?

They contributed to giving young people opportunities for building confidence and self-esteem, developing leadership skills, delivering

nationally accredited awards, and facilitating the bringing of services and opportunities to young people (e.g. medical services and opportunities to develop life skills).

#### WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT

Increased skills and confidence; resilience; nationally accredited awards; young people making positive, informed choices; young people having a voice; increased awareness of the needs of young people; political awareness.

#### WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION?

This is on-going work which is reviewed regularly and evaluated on a sessional basis.

#### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR?

Create space for young people to be listened to, heard, their opinions and inputs valued, and supported in following up on issues. If a change is not possible in response to a highlighted need, a full explanation needs to be given and young people empowered to support alternative options

---

## UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL LANCASHIRE:

### STORIES OUTSIDE THE WIRE

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

To ensure the voices of military children are represented and that these children have the opportunity to identify and raise concerns that are important to them and their educational experiences in military life.

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

We worked collaboratively with Year 6 at Weeton Primary School, the youth club and the Service families of staff at Weeton and Fulwood Barracks in Lancashire. We engaged children via art and storytelling to create a fun, confidential environment where they felt comfortable to talk and trusted us with what they said.

We created a fictional storytelling book based on the bases where the military children live, including themes and illustrations completed by children on camp and written by a military spouse on base. The book is an information, advice and guidance resource on the camp and includes extracts and narratives from Year 6 and children of all ages participating in the youth club with Army Welfare on base. The children participated in arts engagement sessions, focus groups and outreach to contribute to the book.

#### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

Children talked about: the amount of times they had moved (14 was the greatest number); where they had lived (Cyprus featured heavily); what happened when parents were deployed; who their role models are, and; what their future ambitions are. Children also discussed issues including low self-esteem and confidence, and increased worry and anxiety when a parent is on deployment or training exercise.

#### HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?

Their views are central to the information, advice and guidance (IAG) provided and narratives developed in the book. Place featured heavily as a theme. The views gave us honest, unbiased insight into issues experienced by Service children, we were pleasantly surprised that some Service children had significantly better resilience and coping strategies and mechanisms than their civilian counterparts.

#### WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT?

A storytelling book is set to be published in December 2019 and distributed as an IAG resource to military families and teaching staff in schools. We are also expanding the project to deliver additional activities in 2020.

#### WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION?

A key learning point was the lack of youth engagement and need to develop a youth voice for the military community. As part of phase 2 of the project we have secured funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop The Lancashire

Camp Followers, all about raising the role and expectations of military families. This links to our Lancashire and the North West SCiP Alliance Hub youth participation strand to ensure military children have a say in the services in our area. We are working with the council, university and military community to develop an education strategy as part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme and HE partners' access and participation plans.

Another key point was not to assume that all Service children experience and deal with issues the same due to some having greater resilience than others. A common root cause can be how the parent deals with change which influences the behaviours of the child. Whilst a programme of support can be given, we need to be mindful sometimes an unexpected issue crops up so a single one-size-fits-all approach isn't entirely effective.

#### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR?

Whilst we may consider what activities we are going to deliver or assume we know what issues will be raised by Service children, a blank-page approach is best and let the children identify what they want to do activity-wise then facilitate and support that to get greater interest and involvement.

We created arts sessions based on a day in the life of a military child, role models and place. We then developed focus groups based on the subjects that had come out of these areas of discussion. I think a resource that teachers could use in schools would work well. A lot of the themes link to the MoD's HARDFACTS.

---

## FUTUREHY, PART OF OFS-FUNDED UNI CONNECT:

### LOST IN TRANSLATION

Lost in Translation is a project working with young people who live in Colburn, near Catterick Garrison in North Yorkshire, to co-produce a film to challenge stereotypes about young people.

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

To spark a debate and challenge stereotypes about young people, shining a light on the context of the environment young people are growing up in, with high levels of poverty and deprivation and lack of opportunities.

The young people we work with often talk about the aspirations they have for their future. However, somehow these seem sometimes to be misunderstood by adults. The Lost in Translation project has given the young people the chance to tell us about how they feel about their hopes and plans and how they fit in with the communities around them. By articulating their ideas through this project, we will hopefully enable them to put together a road map to achieve the future they deserve.

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

A series of interactive workshops over the summer holiday, during youth club sessions. They then co-produced the film that was shown a launch event on 5th December 2019 at Empire Cinemas in Catterick Garrison.

### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

*"We believe in second chances. We all have dreams for our futures: to get para fit, to become Marines, to work with animals, to go to college, to do apprenticeships, to make it to university."*

*"We are seen as cheeky and intimidating. We are really just shy, scared and hurt by life. We believe respect works both ways."*

*"If we aren't ready for the real world it's going to hit us like a train. There needs to be more support for people who struggle with mental health; it affects you, your friends and your family."*

*"We just want to be understood and respected in this world. We just want the support to create a positive life and a brighter, happy future. If we could change the world it would be how we look after the environment and how people treated each other."*

See the full film at: <https://youtu.be/dubxysqyMwk>

### HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?

This is the start of the process. We invited important local people to watch the film at a launch event. These included local councillors, youth workers and the Commander of Catterick Garrison. By bringing them together with the young people, we hope that this film will start to spark much needed support for young people who live in Colburn.

*WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT?*

It's too early to say. Those that attended the event were blown away by the film and what the young people were saying.

*WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION?*

We are proud of the film and excited to see if it makes any difference. As a university project, we know that providing evidence and commissioning research is something we can do to help people listen to what Service children are saying.

*WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR?*

It's a lot of work, but completely worth it. It's important that you have a proactive and committed youth worker to help you deliver the programme to the young people. We also worked with a local filmmaker to produce a high-quality film.

---

## NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL:

### DANDELION BLOG

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

We wanted to give the Service children in North Yorkshire an outlet to speak about their experiences as being a part of the military and share this with numerous people in education and the military around North Yorkshire. We already manage a monthly blog giving out any relevant information surrounding North Yorkshire's Service children – anything that might help support them or showcasing any events that they have been involved in – and we thought it would be a fantastic next step to what we already do, to hear from Service children directly.

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

We already have fantastic links with so many schools with Service children on their roll in North Yorkshire, and we have contacted the schools directly to ask them to email us with the children's views on recent events that have been important to them – such as the Ripon Cathedral Service for Remembrance that took part in November and had over 700 Service Pupils in North Yorkshire in attendance.

#### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

The Service children spoke about how special they felt being a part of such a huge event, and how important it is for them in particular to remember the men and women who gave their lives in defending our country all those years ago, when they have parents who are doing such a brilliant and vital job currently serving our country. They talked about how proud they are of the community they are part of.

#### HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?

The role of Service Pupils' Champion has been ongoing for 8 years now, having been created by North Yorkshire County Council in order to provide extra support for Service children in the county. We are so passionate about giving the Service children a voice. We know how special these children are and the challenges that they face being a part of the military, and we endeavour year on year to spread awareness of these unique and amazing children in North Yorkshire. Hearing their views has solidified the fact that the Service children have so much to say, and this Dandelion blog is a fantastic way for them to be heard.

#### WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT?

The first Service children's blog went live on our website, [www.servicepupilschampion.co.uk](http://www.servicepupilschampion.co.uk), in March 2020. We are expecting the impact to be that the Service children will have a fantastic outlet to share their own personal experiences. The feedback we have had so far from the pupils, teachers, head teachers and military personnel has been super positive – all are very much looking forward to reading the children's perspective.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR  
LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR  
ORGANISATION?

We have learnt that the Service children's voice is absolutely invaluable when looking to support them better. What the children have to say will absolutely inform what changes we need to make for the better moving forward. Service children often do not have control over things that happen in their lives such as house moves, school moves, parents deployed etc. We have realised it is so important to give them a place that their voice can be heard.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO  
OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING  
SIMILAR?

Listen to the Service children - find out what they need and what they want to change. Work with likeminded people to spread awareness and find support.

---

## LUCY ROBINSON, POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER:

### THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE CHILDREN

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

In the two schools I undertook my research in, I was looking to support and develop their practice when it comes to spending the Service Pupil Premium (SPP).

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

As a key stakeholder of the funding, Service children's views were an integral part of my research. I gathered qualitative data through child-centred approaches. These included drawing, vignettes, props, storybooks and group discussion.

#### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

Children spoke in great detail about the challenges that service life (mobility and deployment) brings to their education both academically and with regard to their social and emotional development. Most notably, the children I spoke to felt that their Service background plays a significant role in their self-perception and social interaction.

#### HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?

The children's perspectives on their experiences in schools guided my recommendations on how the SPP could be more effectively spent in my two case study schools. I have prior experience of researching with children, so I knew what to expect and had strong, pre-existing beliefs about the benefits of researching with children. If anything, the experience further reinforced the need in educational research to involve children. I think it also made me further appreciate that young children (my sample was Reception to Year 6) can hold sophisticated and developed viewpoints and can be very eloquent in sharing them.

#### WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT?

I have been able to share my research at three conferences and intend to look to publish to ensure wider dissemination. I am working with the schools involved in my research to help develop their practice.

#### WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION?

The major recommendations for the SPP funding allocation are as follows:

- Schools should have a dedicated staff member to support the admission of Service children. This post would necessitate a thorough understanding of the admissions process for the area and be able to support, or signpost support for a range of admission queries, particularly for Service children with additional needs;

- Once a place has been confirmed, contact with the child's previous school should be made and complete educational records provided;
- A buddy system should be implemented for new Service children. Due to high mobility and the possible loss of a buddy during the settlement period, Service children should be introduced to a small group of 'buddies'; a mixture of Service and non-Service and those with similar interests;
- Ongoing formative assessments should be conducted on new Service children and if required, entry into intervention support groups. This should extend to Service children assessed at working above age-related expectations to ensure their academic potential is not stifled due to mobility;
- Schools should ensure that Service children feel that their Service identity is acknowledged, celebrated and welcomed as part of the wider school community;
- When Service children leave, opportunities should be made for them to say goodbye to friends and peers and where permissible, contact information should also be exchanged so children are able to retain some form of communication;
- The designated staff member should be informed of upcoming deployments and other periods of leave through their link with the welfare officer at the local garrison. Parents should also be encouraged to contact the school regarding such instances;

- The designated staff member should run a Service children's group with a focus on parental absence. The club should serve as a space for children to share their feelings with their Service peers and the designated adult alongside providing opportunities to write to serving parents or make crafts for them.

#### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR?

The most challenging aspect to my research was lack of engagement from schools with Service children. I approached numerous schools in the region where my Faculty is based and did not receive any responses. I also spoke to the coordinator of the training schools for the PGCE course but they were not aware of any schools in the partnership with Service children. In the end and due to time constraints, I had to use pre-existing family connections to schools.

It is essential that researchers are able to access schools in order to undertake research. Researchers should allow plenty of time to gain access to schools, be persistent and try to phone or visit schools and speak to head teachers directly. Making the most of pre-existing contacts and colleagues in schools or trusts can also be helpful.

---

## ROYAL CALEDONIAN EDUCATION TRUST:

### YOUTH PARTICIPATION PROJECT

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

At its core, RCET's Youth Participation Project aims to empower children and young people in Armed Forces families, both serving and veteran, to influence and improve development of services and policies to meet their needs. In establishing our Youth Participation Project we were striving to ensure our work was more directly informed by the voices and experiences of children and young people. We were also seeking to address the lack of attention given to the participation and engagement of Armed Forces children and young people and to give them greater opportunities to share their experiences and inform positive change in practice and policy.

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

So far our project has developed seven local forums across Scotland and one national forum for Armed Forces children and young people. These forums were developed in partnership with the MoD community development workers. These forums provide a range of opportunities for children and young people to express their views and voice their experiences. The children and young people very much take ownership of the forums and are supported to develop and take forward their own action plans.

#### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

The children and young people engaging in our Youth Participation Project have spoken very openly about their experiences of belonging to an Armed Forces family. Many have told us that Armed Forces life can be hugely rewarding, bringing a sense of belonging and pride, and opportunities to travel and experience different cultures. However, many have also told us of the significant challenges they can face primarily arising from high levels of mobility, coping with parental deployment and once the serving parent leaves the Armed Forces, issues associated with the transition to civilian life. They have told us that these challenges can have a considerable negative impact on their health and wellbeing, education, and relationships with both their peers and families. Many of them have also told us that they feel there is a significant lack of understanding of their experiences. This lack of understanding extends across their civilian peers, professionals they encounter, and decision-makers at all levels.

#### HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?

The views of the children and young people participating in our project are central to RCET's work. Our Youth Participation Project is working with the children and young people belonging to our forums to share their experiences and take forward their action plans with them. Their views have also directly informed development of our services including a successful funding bid for a Wellbeing Project in response to the issues they have raised with us around their mental health and wellbeing. Their views have also shaped and informed our policy priorities, policy positions and responses to consultations/inquiries.

### WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT?

Our project has already demonstrated notable impact. For example, we were successful in securing significant funding to launch a wellbeing project in direct response to issues raised by children and young people. The direct positive impact of our participation work for the children and young people taking part is also evident with 92% of our forum members telling us that:

- they feel listened to
- they feel that taking part in the forum will help them in other areas of their life
- they feel that they help to decide things like the project rules and activities
- they feel they have had the opportunity to talk about their experiences
- they feel that being part of the forum has had a positive influence on their lives

### WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION?

For RCET our Youth Participation Project has served to confirm and demonstrate the importance and value of engaging in meaningful participation and engagement with children and young people and indeed the broader importance and value of striving to take a children's rights based approach to all aspects of our work. To deliver positive change for Armed Forces children and young people, we must first listen to them and put their voices and experiences at the core of all decisions we take affecting them.

### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR?

We would highlight that embarking on a project which aims to undertake meaningful participation and engagement with children and young people is a process which takes sustained commitment in terms of time and resources. It is a lengthy process and change will not happen overnight. Sustained commitment is therefore vital and participation and engagement cannot be tokenistic. The development of relationships with children and young people is crucial and their ownership of the project is what makes it work. Projects such as ours have the potential to bring benefits to both the children and young people taking part and the organisation itself, and are most certainly worth the effort of making such a commitment.

---

## SSCE CYMRU:

### LISTENING TO OUR SERVICE CHILDREN

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

SSCE Cymru works with education professionals and Service families across Wales to gain an understanding of the experiences of Service children face in education. The 'listening to our Service children' project was an important way to capture information directly from Service children, which will enable a more evidence-based approach to supporting them in the future.

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

SSCE Cymru engaged in a number of one-to-one and small group discussions with Service children in their schools. The aim of the project was to find out what they felt about being a Service child, including what they found positive and enjoyed and the things they found challenging. It was explained that there are no right or wrong answers. The children were assured that they did not have to share any details they did not want to, and that all of their responses would be anonymous.

The discussion groups engaged 115 Service children (66 primary and 49 secondary) from 14 schools across eight local authorities in Wales.

#### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

The discussions centred around three broad topics: experiences of mobility, of deployment, and of living in Wales. The children's responses

suggest that many aspects of an armed forces lifestyle can be viewed both positively and negatively, as in many cases the number of positive and negative comments related to response type were similar in numbers.

One consistent message that is seen throughout the discussions regarding mobility, is the importance of the support Service children receive from friends and family, and the negative view of leaving/being away from them. Despite some very positive comments from Service children regarding their experiences of moving home and living in different places, participants made clear that the complexity that this aspect of their life can add may have a negative impact.

With regards to deployment, the majority of comments and views were negative. This is consistent with the findings of the SSCE Cymru school survey (2019)<sup>11</sup>, where the top answers from Primary schools regarding the challenges Service children face were all in relation to the emotional impact of separation due to deployment. A wide range of coping mechanisms are used by Service children to deal with their emotions and feelings during deployment. Some mechanisms are distinctly individual, while others are achieved through support from others.

Discussions about their experiences of living and being educated in Wales, prompted responses and comments that were both positive and negative but were primarily positive. Some participants highlighted the benefits of the landscape of Wales (including beaches and countryside). However, some Service children in English-medium schools expressed mixed comments regarding the learning of the Welsh language.

<sup>11</sup> SSCE Cymru (2019). SSCE Cymru School Survey. Available at: [https://www.sscecymru.co.uk/files/SSCE%20Cymru%20school%20survey%20\(2019\)%20findings%20\(E\).pdf](https://www.sscecymru.co.uk/files/SSCE%20Cymru%20school%20survey%20(2019)%20findings%20(E).pdf)

### HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?

The responses help stakeholders to understand the challenges Service children face and what support Service children feel is the most beneficial. The findings from this project will provide evidence which may impact policy in Welsh Government and in the Ministry of Defence. It will also support policy and system changes in schools and local authorities and contribute to new SSCE Cymru resources.

### WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT?

The findings of the conversations will inform the content of SSCE Cymru resources, including a range of toolkits to be launched in 2020.

To view the full report please visit: <https://www.sscecymru.co.uk/research/sscecymruevidence/default.htm>

### WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION?

The views of Service children are vital and should be at the heart of everything the SSCE Cymru programme aims to achieve. The network of stakeholders that we work with contribute an unmeasurable amount of knowledge and support to the work we do, but our Service children want to have the opportunity to contribute directly to conversations that affect their future. SSCE Cymru will now be looking at ways that we can involve Service children in even more of our activities and events.

### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR?

Listening to our Service children is not only vital in providing an evidence base for change in systems and policies that will have a lasting benefit to their education; it is also a lot of fun. Service children have many unique experiences and views and it is incredibly interesting to speak to them directly and see them discuss with each other how their families' lives have impacted their education and future.

---

## UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER:

### CREATIVE FORCES

#### WHAT CHANGE WERE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

In collaboration with Hampshire County Council, the University of Winchester has developed Creative Forces. A Creative Forces Day gives higher education institutions an opportunity to bring Service Children from a variety of schools together to experience a day on a university campus and explore their identity as Service Children. It is also an opportunity to build the capacity of schools to understand and support their Service Children. Creative Forces was initially developed in response to evidence that Service children were less likely to progress to higher education than their non-Service peers. It has since evolved to also address questions of Service children's identity and agency in education, in addition to building their awareness of higher education and the importance of their own educational progression.

From its initial beginnings at the University of Winchester in 2015, Creative Forces has since been delivered by five universities in England and Scotland. More universities are set to deliver their own versions, although this has been delayed somewhat due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

#### HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS IN THE PROCESS?

The format for each Creative Forces event can vary, but common to all events are opportunities for Service children to express views about their own experiences of education and the chance to

feed back to their teachers. For example, some events include a "top tips" session whereby Service children are asked to identify some priorities for improving their experiences at school, which they then present to their teachers. Such sessions are opportunities for teachers to devote their attention to their Service pupils and for pupils to engage in meaningful dialogues with their schools.

The national roll-out of Creative Forces is accompanied by a national evaluation process led by FutureHY. This enables participants to share their perspectives on their own ambitions, knowledge and capabilities, and is intended to inform the further development of Creative Forces events.

#### WHAT SORTS OF THINGS DID THEY SAY?

In the 2015 and 2017 iterations at the University of Winchester, participants raised a number of learning points for their schools, including:

- The importance of raising awareness of Service life amongst their civilian peers;
- The need to settle mobile children on arrival, including the importance of transferring records and of helping children to keep in touch;
- Supporting emotional needs when a parent is on deployment; and
- Helping to build bonds with other Service children.

Participants highlighted the importance of teachers and parents engaging in genuine dialogue with Service children, as opposed to making assumptions about their feelings or experiences.

In addition, Service children also offered advice for other Service children, including: realising that others have similar experiences; talking about their situations with teachers, family and friends; and socialising with children from other schools.

Time and again the participants highlighted the importance of dialogue, emphasising the importance of teachers engaging in genuine listening and of Service children being willing to discuss their feelings.

#### *HOW DID THEIR VIEWS INFORM YOUR WORK?*

Findings from the events have helped inform the development of Creative Forces events and wider work within the SCiP Alliance. For example, the emphasis placed by participants on communication and dialogue has reinforced the importance of the views of Service children in the work of the SCiP Alliance. Furthermore, the national evaluation of Creative Forces for 2019 has indicated a strong latent level of aspiration to educational success among Service children, which has reinforced the importance of addressing the systemic environment around Service children in education.

#### *WHAT IMPACT(S) DID YOU ACHIEVE AS A RESULT?*

It is still too early to tell whether Creative Forces has led to lasting changes to school practice or to Service children's progression to higher education. However, the wider uptake of the event by universities in England and Scotland has indicated its value as a way for universities to develop their engagements with Service children.

#### *WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR LEARNING POINTS FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION?*

Service children value the sense of belonging and connection they feel when talking to other Service children, both those of a similar age and those who have moved on to the next stage in life. Creative Forces days are valuable not only in providing Service children with a voice and with role models, but also in educating us as practitioners, and their teachers, about the context for their lives.

#### *WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHERS WANTING TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR?*

Focus on engaging and training student ambassadors who are from a Service background themselves as these events provide an important opportunity for these Service children to reflect on and share their experiences. Student ambassadors leading the preparation of top tips for schools with as few teachers and HE staff in the room as possible encourages open sharing. Invite a wide range of schools to bring a small group each so that participants benefit from meeting lots of young people from different schools; plan opportunities to mix beyond their own school group.

---

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has presented a range of examples of how Service children are offered opportunities to have their voices heard. The organisations contributing to this report represent a range of stakeholders that are part of the educational life of Service children, both in the UK and overseas. Their examples illustrate the many ways in which a meaningful engagement with the voices of Service children can inform practice, policy, research and more. What has emerged from the examples presented here are a number of key principles for effective listening, along with some recommendations for stakeholders.

## PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE AND IMPACTFUL LISTENING

Drawing on the examples here we can discern four principles that underpin effective and impactful listening.

### 01 BE DELIBERATE

---

Effective and impactful listening does require deliberate effort. Sometimes this requires breaking with typical practice in order to offer more creative ways for children to voice their views; sometimes it just requires an acknowledgement that Service children can bring distinctive perspectives and making room for these to be expressed as part of regular practices.

In practice, deliberate listening requires the dedication of time and resource to create specific opportunities to listen. It is not enough simply to assume that Service children's views will emerge indirectly through outreach activities aimed at general audiences, nor is it sufficient to seek adults' views as proxies. Deliberate effort to engage Service children is vital in order to affirm their central role as partners in improvement<sup>12</sup>.

### 02 BE OPEN

---

Effective and impactful listening requires openness on the part of the educator or policymaker. Service children can present a diverse range of experiences; some of these will be distinct to Service life, some will not. They are not easily categorised and their identities cannot be reduced to simple labels. We must therefore remain open to their individuality, open to being surprised, open to having our preconceptions disrupted. We must be open to a continuous process of dialogue, and be open to not having all of the answers.

In practice, openness means letting go of preconceptions about Service children, their experiences and their needs. This requires careful attention to the way that listening activities are constructed and how the findings are communicated so that the risk of filtering children's views through adult perceptions is minimised.

<sup>12</sup> Fletcher, A. (2005). *Meaningful student involvement: guide to students as partners in school change*. Olympia, WA: SoundOut.

## 03 BE CHILD-CENTRED

---

Effective and impactful listening requires a child-led approach. Just as Service children demonstrate a diversity of experiences and perspectives, they can also open up a range of opportunities for thinking about policy and practice that we may never have anticipated. Creating opportunities for Service children to shape the ways in which they can contribute and make their voices heard can create opportunities for them to develop and exercise their agency as well as opening up new avenues for engagement with children more generally.

In practice, child-centredness means being willing to abandon pre-conceived notions of how and why we might listen to children, or of what sorts of knowledge is valuable. It requires a willingness to “put down the script” in order to engage in genuine dialogue<sup>13</sup>.

## 04 BE WILLING TO CHANGE

---

Effective and impactful listening requires a genuine willingness to transform practice and policy. This needs to be evidenced by genuine and visible change. There can be few more disheartening feelings than the sense that our views are falling on deaf ears; not only must we listen, we must demonstrate that we have listened and learned as a result. This might require modification of long-established practices or re-thinking what was hitherto deemed non-negotiable. Equally, where it is not possible to change policy or practice then it is important to ensure that this does not become the end of the conversation.

In practice, willingness to change means engaging in listening with the presumption that change to policy and practice will occur as a result, and of following through where the need for change has been identified. It also requires actively communicating whether and how things have changed, or clear explanations of why change is not possible.

---

<sup>13</sup> Veck, W. and Hall, M. (2018). Inclusive research in education: dialogue, relations and methods. *International Journal of Education*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 01

---

All stakeholders should reflect on the four key principles of effective and impactful listening presented here. They should consider how these might play out in their own contexts and therefore how their engagement with Service children might be strengthened as a result.

### 02

---

Stakeholders with well-developed practices should consider how they could share their expertise with other schools, for example through peer-to-peer networks, developing briefing materials, CPD resources, or through their local authorities' governor training networks. They should also consider engaging with their local SCiP Alliance Hub in order to support the wider community of professionals and policymakers that support Service children.

### 03

---

Stakeholders with less well developed practice should consider how their existing methods for student engagement could better capture and reflect the views of Service children. This could involve proactively identifying and engaging with their Service child population and their families, as well as seeking support from organisations with more developed practice.

### 04

---

Stakeholders should seek opportunities to develop listening activities in partnership with other organisations. This can help the learning that can be gained through listening to Service children to have a wider impact on support for Service children. It can also be an opportunity to promote more coordinated approaches to supporting Service children.

### 05

---

Stakeholders should develop robust and systematic mechanisms for capturing the voices of Service children and for responding to the priorities identified through this listening. Rigorous approaches to listening and its translation into action can enhance the impact of listening on Service children's outcomes. When undertaken collaboratively, such efforts can improve the cost-effectiveness of investments made and provide invaluable insights about the different strengths and needs between organisations, as well as improvement priorities for local partnerships.

BE DELIBERATE

BE OPEN

BE CHILD-CENTRED

BE WILLING TO CHANGE

Service Children's Progression



# THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN



The Service Children's Progression Alliance is led by the University of Winchester and supported by the MoD