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The Service Children Transition Project

Final Report

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Matt Blyton
Professor Patrick Alexander

Contents

Executive summary

Key ideas:

- *Holistic student profiling*
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This research project provides insights into the experiences and support needs of Service children in England during school transitions, through interviews with both school leaders and parents. The first aim of the research is to capture a snapshot of transition challenges for Service children, their families, and their schools, while also capturing gaps in provision as well as evidence of existing good practice. The second aim is to offer a conceptual model for developing a digital portfolio that will provide more complete information about Service children transitioning between different educational settings. In summary, the project involved six interviews with senior leaders from six schools, three secondary and three primary, and eight interviews with parents who had experienced recent school moves with their children. The interviews were conducted in December 2024. All data represented below has been de-identified, including the names of participants and the schools involved. A follow-up consultation exercise with key stakeholders (school leaders, non-profit organisations, MoD representatives) took place in March 2025, where further insights and feedback were gathered. While the intention was not to produce generalisable results from this relatively small sample of participants, the project does offer insights from across all areas of the Armed Forces. The project was funded by the MOD's Armed Forces Families Fund through its *Service Pupils Support Programme,* operated by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. The data collection was carried out by Matt Blyton (Oxfordshire County Council) with analysis from Professor Patrick Alexander (Oxford Brookes University).

The findings highlight the significant academic, social-emotional, and administrative challenges that highly mobile Service students face, as well as the critical importance of schools taking a comprehensive, flexible, and relationship-focused approach to supporting them. While limited by our small sample size, the findings also support the conclusion that in the absence of statutory guidance or more comprehensive legislation, there is an inconsistency of school approaches to record transfer during school-to-school moves. Drawing on the data, we propose a digital portfolio model (the RELAYS model) that can build on existing good practice in a way that offers a more comprehensive, child and family-focused approach to transition.

This executive summary offers a high-level overview of findings under the following key themes:

Holistic, Personalised Understanding of the Child: A dominant theme across the school interviews was the need to develop a holistic, personalised understanding of each Service

child, going beyond just academic data. School leaders recognised that supporting these students requires detailed knowledge of their unique strengths, needs, interests, social-emotional wellbeing, classroom experiences, and family/background context. This personalised approach was seen as essential for addressing the complex challenges Service children often face.

Continuity of Curriculum and SEND Provision: A key issue identified was the significant disruption to curriculum continuity, leading to curriculum gaps or duplication, and to gaps in SEND assessments/support that Service children receive when moving between schools. The schools shared numerous examples of students repeating topics they had already covered, or missing out on essential learning due to differences in curricula, systems, and expectations. Addressing this curriculum discontinuity and gaps in SEND provision was viewed as crucial to prevent disengagement and setbacks in academic progress.

Empowering Student Voice and Agency: Another key theme was the importance of empowering Service children to actively share their own perspectives, needs and experiences as part of the transition process. School leaders recognised that facilitating student voice and sense of agency was crucial for developing a truly holistic understanding of the child and ensuring support is centred on individual needs.

Formalising and Systematising Transition Processes: A common thread across the interviews was the desire to move beyond ad-hoc or informal transition practices to create more formalised, consistent systems and processes to support Service children. Formalising transition processes was seen as crucial for ensuring equitable, sustainable, and more effective support, regardless of staff changes or differences between schools.

Collaborative, Relationship-Focused Approach: Underpinning many of the themes was a recognition of the importance of fostering collaborative relationships and a "relational approach" to supporting Service children during transitions. School leaders emphasised the value of building strong connections with families, developing trusted partnerships with previous/receiving schools, and encouraging whole-school ownership of supporting this student group.

The Parent Perspective: The parent interviews provided invaluable insights into the unique challenges and support needs of Service children from a family perspective. Key themes included the significant disruption to academic continuity and SEND support (as above), the social-emotional impact of repeated moves, and the perceived lack of comprehensive understanding from new schools about their children's needs. Parents were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the idea of a comprehensive digital transition portfolio that could travel with the child, seeing it as a vital tool enabling schools to have a nuanced, holistic picture of arriving pupils. They provided numerous recommendations on the types of information that should be included to give teachers a clear picture of the "whole child."

Recommendations for Supporting Service Children: Drawing on the insights from both school leaders and parents, the key recommendations for supporting Service children better during transitions include:

1. Develop a holistic, personalised understanding of each Service child, capturing their strengths, needs, interests, social-emotional wellbeing, and family/background context.
2. Minimise curriculum discontinuity, gaps and repetition through passing on better records of what a child has already covered, including teacher, parent/guardian, and student perceptions of this learning, and tailoring the curriculum accordingly where possible. This should include more complete evidence of SEND assessments and support.
3. Empower Service children to actively share their own perspectives, needs and experiences through the transition process.
4. Formalise and systemise transition processes to ensure equitable, sustainable, and effective support, ideally with more comprehensive statutory guidance.
5. Foster a collaborative, relationship-focused approach that builds strong connections with families and between schools.
6. Implement a comprehensive digital transition portfolio that travels with the child to provide a nuanced, holistic picture for new schools.

The RELAYS Digital Transition Portfolio: Relational, Empowering, Longitudinal, Action-Oriented, Youth-Led, Scalable

In response to recommendation 6, here we put forward the model of a RELAYS Digital Transition portfolio. In what follows, we outline the design principles of this portfolio, suggestions for content, modality, and quality assurance, at all times keeping in mind children, families, and schools. The RELAYS approach is proposed as an effective, simple, and inclusive means of better supporting Service children (and indeed all children) in the school transition process.

Acknowledgements

1. Literature Review and Research Scoping Exercise

Research on armed forces children's educational experiences sits at the intersection of military family studies and educational transition literature. This review synthesises key findings from both domains to understand the unique challenges faced by Service children. The review is not intended to be exhaustive but rather offers a broad picture of the different areas of academic and policy research that inform work in this field.

The educational experiences of Service children are significantly shaped by transitions between schools due to military-related postings. Service children often attend multiple schools. Moves between schools often occur at non-standard times during the academic year, creating additional challenges for integration and learning continuity. These transitions present distinct challenges that differentiate Service children's educational experiences from their civilian peers, affecting both academic progression and psychosocial development (McCullouch and Hall, 2016; Walker et al., 2020). Research indicates that Service children face unique challenges during these transitions (DfE 2010), which impact their academic progress, identities, and social-emotional wellbeing. Almost ten years ago, McCullouch and Hall (2016) established that Service children experience significantly more school transitions than their civilian peers, with some changing schools up to six times during their education. Their research highlighted how these transitions create both academic and social discontinuities. Hogg et al. (2014) also demonstrate that while Service children often show remarkable resilience, the frequency of moves can impact their emotional wellbeing and academic progression. Here we might add that a discourse of 'resilience' runs the risk of placing the burden of managing multiple transitions on the shoulders of individual children, rather than calling for systemic change (Lee 2025; Yarwood et al 2021).

The broader transitions literature provides important theoretical frameworks for understanding these experiences. Evangelou et al (2008), for example, identify five key factors for successful school transitions: social adjustment, institutional adjustment, curriculum continuity, parental involvement, and support systems. When applied to Service children, Noret et al. (2014) suggest that these factors become more complex due to the additional challenges of parental deployment and geographic mobility. Complimentary to this perspective, mobility research by Strand and Demie (2007) demonstrates that frequent school moves generally correlate with lower academic achievement. However, the picture for Service children is more nuanced. Hall's (2019) comprehensive study suggests that Service children often develop sophisticated coping mechanisms and social skills, though these positive adaptations can mask underlying difficulties. This perspective is complicated by Clifton's (2007) observations of armed forces children, which suggest that successful transitions often depend on institutional understanding of military culture and lifestyle.

The social impact of transitions, examined by Weller (2007), becomes particularly relevant for Service children. Lucey and Reay's (2000) analysis of transition anxiety resonates strongly with the experiences documented in Service children studies, where the anticipation of moves can affect current school engagement. This framing of transition is a reminder that while Service children experience discrete, punctuated moments of transition between

schools, their entire educational career can be coloured by a more enduring sense of transition as an inevitable and ongoing part of military family life.

The relationship between school transitions and pupil outcomes is complex for Service children (Lee 2025). The evidence demonstrates several key interconnected themes. Noret et al. (2014) found that while armed forces children generally demonstrate academic 'resilience' (or the ability, borne of experience, to navigate the complexities of academic success notwithstanding the upheaval of transition), curriculum discontinuity still presents significant challenges. Their study of army children identified particular issues with missing or repeating curriculum content, variations in examination boards and assessment timing, and disrupted GCSE coursework completion. These findings align with Strand and Demie's (2007) broader research on pupil mobility, which established clear links between frequent moves and academic disruption. Hall (2019) also points out that Service children can often develop strong self-advocacy skills and adaptability that can partially mitigate these challenges - although such a claim should not be the basis for placing responsibility on Service children to develop 'resilience' to such challenges, simply by virtue of their circumstances.

With the above points in mind, the emotional impact of transitions is well-documented. Hogg et al. (2014) identify several key stressors, such as anticipatory anxiety about future moves, managing parental deployment alongside school change, disrupted friendship networks, and adapting to new school cultures. Jindal-Snape and Miller's (2008) work on transition processes, mentioned above, demonstrates how these stressors can accumulate over time, particularly when children experience multiple moves within short periods. Identity development during transitions also emerges as a crucial theme. McCullouch and Hall (2016) also suggest that Service children often develop a distinct identity tied to their military connection, which can both support and complicate school integration. Corroborating this point, the House of Commons Defence Committee (2013) report highlights how these issues interact, in so much as academic performance can be affected by wellbeing concerns, while identity stability influences social integration. In a linked finding, recent research as part of the *Supporting All to Thrive* project (2024-25) suggests that Service families were consistently less satisfied with all aspects of school transitions compared to non-Service families. The findings also suggest that Service Children are disadvantaged across a range of factors relative to non-Service peers.

This brief review suggests that the impact of mobility on Service children's education is well-documented in the literature. The Department for Education's (DfE) 2010 report concluded that while "service children perform at least the same as, if not better than their peers across the Key Stages," their attainment decreases as the number of schools attended increases. This finding was reinforced by Ministry of Defence (MoD) research which found that at Key Stage 2, 78.9% of Service children who attended four or more schools reached expected standards compared to 85.3% of those who attended one school (MoD, 2016b). Several key challenges emerge from the grey literature regarding school transitions. Continuity of learning is one such challenge. Service children often experience gaps in learning and repetition of topics due to curriculum differences between schools or education systems. Social integration is another common challenge, including making and maintaining friendships during transitions. The Defence Select Committee (2006) notes that,

"moving schools is stressful for all children and frequent moves can have a significant detrimental impact on young people, particularly on their willingness to form friendships with their peers" (p.8). This is particularly challenging when children join mid-year when friendship groups are already established. Perhaps a more accurate representation of this challenge is that presented by the *Supporting All to Thrive* project led by Claire Lee, which instead suggests that friendship is in fact the top priority for Service Children, even if structural conditions may at times make this more difficult.

There are also issues with information transfer. Despite the introduction of initiatives like the Pupil Information Profile (PIP) in 2014, the transfer of educational information between schools remains problematic (see also Defence Select Committee 2006), particularly at the local authority level. The Children's Commissioner's 2018 report identified that schools were not using the PIP adequately, leading to challenges in accurately assessing and supporting newly arrived Service children. This can lead to compound issues around consistency of in-school support for students, especially for those with additional needs. Findings from Ofsted (2011) indicate varying levels of support provided during transitions, often correlating with the proportion of Service children in the school. Schools with larger Service child populations tend to have more embedded support systems and understanding of Service children's needs (Ofsted, 2011). However, schools with smaller numbers of Service children can also provide effective targeted support through buddy systems, small group 'catch-up' learning, pre-entry school tours, dedicated staff members for Service children, or Service children's clubs.

The Service Pupil Premium (SPP) provides funding for such support, though its effectiveness has been questioned. Walker, Selous & Misca (2020) characterised the SPP as "poorly understood and poorly used," highlighting the need for better guidance on supporting transitions effectively. Recent policy-focused research (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2013) highlights the need for systematic support mechanisms. The Armed Forces Covenant (Ministry of Defence, 2020) has established principles for educational support, but as the research above suggests, implementation varies significantly across regions. Despite policy initiatives such as the Pupil Information Profile (PIP) and Common Transfer Form (CTF), the effective transfer of educational information remains problematic (DfE, 2018a; Children's Commissioner, 2018). This can result in inappropriate academic placement and delayed support provision (Walker et al., 2020). The literature indicates significant variation in transition support provision across schools, often correlating with the proportion of Service children enrolled (SCISS, 2021). While schools with larger Service child populations typically demonstrate more embedded support systems (Ofsted, 2011), recent research suggests that schools with smaller Service child populations can provide effective targeted support through various mechanisms (Robinson, 2024). The Service Pupil Premium (SPP), introduced in 2011, provides targeted funding for support provision. However, critical evaluation suggests its implementation and effectiveness vary considerably across settings, particularly where schools are insufficiently aware of the potential needs of Service Children (Walker et al., 2020). This variation is particularly notable in schools with lower numbers of Service children, where understanding of Service children's needs may be more limited (Hall, 2019).

Gaps in Current Research

While existing grey literature and academic research provides insights into transition challenges, several gaps remain, namely: 1) limited research from children's perspectives (the work of Claire Lee as a notable exception); 2) a lack of longitudinal studies tracking long-term impacts of multiple transitions; 3) limited evidence on effective transition support strategies; 4) the need for more research on schools with Service children. These gaps suggest areas for future research to better understand and support Service children's school transitions. A number of these themes are surfaced in the findings that follow and in the recommendations from the research, specifically around the value of an inclusive, digital approach to transition.

2. School interviews: Thematic Summary

Overview

The analysis of the six school interviews reveals themes and insights that are critical for supporting the transition of Service children between educational settings. These schools were selected due to their sizable Service children cohorts and their strong prior engagement in projects aimed at supporting Armed Forces families. While there are some nuanced differences based on the specific Armed Forces context of each school, there are also significant commonalities in the challenges faced and the strategies employed. More detail on each school interview can be found in Section 5.

Holistic understanding of the Child

A dominant theme across the interviews was the importance of developing a holistic understanding of each Service child, going beyond just academic data. The school leaders recognised that supporting these highly mobile students requires detailed knowledge of their unique strengths, needs, interests, social-emotional wellbeing, and family/background context. As Sarah from Forest Juniors stated, a transition portfolio could provide a "holistic picture of the child" that captures their "pastoral details, learning interests, curriculum coverage, and examples of best work." Similarly, Angela from Canter Community College highlighted the value of including a comprehensive SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to gain a multi-dimensional view. This personalised approach was seen as essential for addressing the complex challenges Service children often face, such as forming attachments, navigating social-emotional change, and dealing with parental deployment. By better understanding the "whole child," schools could provide more tailored, relationship-based support to facilitate a smooth transition.

Continuity of Curriculum and SEND Provision

A key issue identified across the interviews was the significant disruption to curriculum continuity and SEND assessments/support that Service children often experience when moving between schools. The schools shared numerous examples of students repeating

topics they had already covered, or missing out on key learning due to differences in educational systems and expectations. Margaret from Cooper Primary provided a poignant example of a student who "missed out on the year 2 curriculum completely" when transferring from England to Scotland and back again. This, sadly, is not uncommon, as the *Supporting All to Thrive* project findings clearly demonstrate. Roger from Lancaster Primary noted that some children had covered "the Tudors...four times" as they moved between schools. This curriculum discontinuity was seen as particularly problematic, as it could lead to significant gaps in student learning, disengagement, and setbacks in academic progress. Findings from the *Supporting All to Thrive* project echoes this concern, indicating that Service students' grades at GCSE are squeezed into the middle, with students significantly less likely to get the very highest and lowest. Curriculum discontinuity could contribute to students' ability to get the highest grades. Sarah from Forest Juniors also highlighted the challenge of "discontinuity in SEND assessments and provision" when Service children move, further compounding the issue for this vulnerable sub-group. The school leaders emphasised the need for greater national-level alignment and flexibility in curriculum content and SEND processes, to ensure Service children can build upon their prior learning and receive tailored support as they transition between settings.

Facilitating Student Voice and Agency

Another key theme that emerged was the importance of supporting Service children to actively share their own perspectives, needs and experiences as part of the transition process. The school leaders recognised that giving students a voice and sense of agency was crucial for developing a truly holistic understanding of the child and ensuring their support was centred on their individual requirements. Sarah from Forest Juniors suggested that a transition portfolio could include "the child's own summary of themselves" - allowing students to directly communicate their strengths, interests, and any concerns. Another participant Carrie from Wellington discussed the value of student voice through the school's "community circles," where Service children could openly share how they were feeling and any challenges they were facing with their peer group and tutor. This emphasis on student voice was seen as particularly important given the often-observed reluctance of Service children to open up about their needs. Providing structured opportunities for self-expression was viewed as a way to build trust, better understand the child as an individual, and tailor support accordingly.

Formalising and Systematising Transition Processes

A common thread across the interviews was the desire to move beyond ad-hoc or informal transition practices and create more formalised, consistent systems and processes to support Service children. The school leaders acknowledged that their current approaches, while often effective, were not always fully documented or embedded within their wider policies and procedures. Angela from Canter Community College, for example, noted that their current approach was "not formalised" and "documented," relying heavily on the knowledge and relationships of specific staff members. One school raised GDPR concerns as the main reason it rarely received transfer information from Service children's previous schools ahead of the children's start dates following a school move. Similarly, Margaret from

Cooper expressed a need for "consistency across schools" in how they support Service children, rather than the current "hit and miss" nature of provision and record transfer. Formalising transition processes was seen as crucial for ensuring equitable, sustainable, and effective support for Service children, regardless of staff changes or differences between schools. This could involve creating standardised documentation, mandating information sharing, and building Service children support into whole-school systems, training, and accountability measures. The helpful cross-nation Pupil Information Profile transfer document, created by the MOD in the past, was never mandated. Its adoption has therefore stopped in most schools that initially used it.

Collaborative, Relationship-Focused Approach

Underpinning many of the themes was a recognition of the importance of fostering collaborative relationships and a "relational approach" to supporting Service children during transitions. The school leaders emphasised the value of building strong connections with families, developing trusted partnerships with previous/receiving schools, and encouraging a "whole-school" ownership of supporting this student group. Roger from Lancaster Primary, for example, highlighted that "it's that relationship stuff" that is at the heart of their approach, noting the importance of meeting new students and families *before* arrival. Again, there could be a particular need to address this issue at the local authority as well as school level. Carrie from Wellington similarly discussed the school's "relational practices," including daily tutor sessions, regular "community circles," and ensuring all staff are trained in relationship-building strategies. This collaborative, relationship-focused approach was viewed as essential for navigating the complex challenges faced by Service children, such as forming attachments, dealing with parental deployment, and overcoming social-emotional difficulties. Fostering trust and a sense of community through positive relationships helped the schools to better support the wellbeing of these highly mobile students.

Differences Across Armed Forces Contexts

While the key themes were broadly consistent across the school interviews, some nuanced differences emerged based on the specific armed forces context of each setting. For example, Army-focused schools like Lancaster Primary and RAF-focused schools tended to have higher numbers of highly mobile Service children, leading to a greater emphasis on robust systems and practices to identify, track and support these students. The dedicated admissions coordinator and comprehensive transition processes at Lancaster were reflective of this context. In contrast, Naval-focused schools like Wellington and Forest Juniors experienced fewer in-year transitions, but grappled more with the challenges of parental deployment and "weekending" for students. As Carrie noted, this could lead to "pressure" for Service children to be at home at weekends, limiting their engagement in school-based weekend activities. RAF-focused schools like Cooper and Canter Community College had to navigate the additional complexities of curriculum misalignment between the English and Scottish education systems (relevant also to Wales), which could lead to significant gaps in student learning when families moved between the two countries. However, the core challenges around information sharing, curriculum continuity, SEND provision, relationships, and holistic student support were shared across the different armed forces contexts. The

schools demonstrated a collective commitment to finding solutions, albeit with some variation in their specific approaches and priorities.

In summary, the school interviews raise a range of insights that can inform the development of more effective, evidence-based strategies for supporting Service children's smooth transitions between educational settings. While context-specific nuances exist, the overarching themes highlight the need for a systematic, collaborative, and highly personalised approach, with greater Government mandate, to meet the complex needs of this unique student population, ensuring greater consistency of approach.

3. Parent Interviews: Thematic Summary

Summary

The parent interviews provided invaluable insights into the unique challenges and support needs of Service children from a family perspective. Key themes included the significant disruption to academic continuity and SEND support, the social-emotional impact of repeated moves, and the perceived lack of comprehensive understanding from new schools about their children's needs. Parents were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the idea of a comprehensive digital transition portfolio that could travel with the child, seeing it as a vital tool in enabling schools to have a nuanced, holistic picture of arriving pupils. They provided numerous recommendations on the types of information that should be included to give teachers a clear picture of the whole child, which we explore in more detail in Section 4. More information on the parent interviews can be found in Section 6.

Challenges Faced by Service Children

A dominant theme was the significant disruption to Service children's academic continuity and SEND support during moves. Parents like David and Kathy described issues with curriculum alignment, exam board discontinuity, and delays in accessing appropriate SEND assessments and provision at the new school. As Kathy stated, "Accessing the right schools for meeting children's SEND needs has been the biggest issue." The social-emotional impact of frequent moves was another major challenge. Parents emphasized the difficulty their children faced in "losing friends" and "not knowing anyone" at the new school, as well as the toll it took on their mental health and sense of belonging. As Rhianna and Keila noted, their children struggled with "not wanting to be different" and experienced "school-based trauma" that made subsequent transitions even harder.

Perceptions of School Knowledge and Support

The parents generally felt the new schools did not have a comprehensive understanding of their children's academic progress, social-emotional wellbeing, and unique needs when they started. In the *Supporting All to Thrive* project, Lee notes that 58.4% of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that schools typically had a strong understanding of how Service life may affect children. As Dana expressed in this project, she was "not really sure" how well-informed the new school was, and her own proactive sharing of information suggested a lack of comprehensive record transfer. However, parents also highlighted positive examples where schools, like Canter Community College and Lancaster Primary, demonstrated

empathy, responsiveness, and a deep understanding of Service children's circumstances. As Sgt Richard Browning noted, these schools were "brilliant" in supporting his sons, even if they sometimes fell short in fully appreciating the family's challenging situation during the move.

Recommendations for Schools

Drawing on their experiences, the parents provided several key recommendations for how schools could better support Service children during transitions:

1. Ensure comprehensive transfer of academic, SEND, and social-emotional records, rather than just focusing on core subjects.
2. Provide dedicated pastoral support, such as "nurture support" and assign "trusted adults," to help Service children settle in and address their social-emotional needs.
3. Adopt a more holistic, relationship-focused approach to understanding each child as an individual, beyond just their academic performance.
4. Utilise technology and extended transition processes to facilitate more effective communication and information sharing with families.
5. Demonstrate deeper empathy and understanding of the unique challenges faced by military families.

The Transition Portfolio Concept

As stated above, the parents were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the idea of a comprehensive digital transition portfolio that could travel with the child. They saw this as a critical tool to ensure new schools have a nuanced, holistic understanding of the child's strengths, interests, challenges, and current stage of development - particularly for those with SEND. As one parent, Mika, emphasised, the portfolio should include a "traffic light system on SEND diagnosis pathway progress," academic snapshots, and details on the child's "interests, hobbies, hooks." Aimee and others highlighted the need for the portfolio to be user-friendly and "not too overwhelming" for teachers to support parents with, potentially in the form of a concise digital "snapshot."

To conclude this section, the parent interviews reflect the significant academic, social-emotional, and administrative challenges Service children face during school transitions, as well as the critical importance of schools taking a comprehensive, flexible, and relationship-focused approach to supporting these highly mobile students. The enthusiasm for the transition portfolio concept suggests it could be a valuable tool in bridging the information gap and ensuring a smoother, more supportive experience for Service children and their families.

4. Digital Transition Portfolio: Design Principles

Bearing in mind the findings of the school and parent interviews, the second aim of this project was to explore the possibility of a digital transition portfolio as the means to a more comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable approach to supporting mobile Service children. The proposed design of such a portfolio was discussed with school leaders and parents,

beginning with foundational design principles. As the interview summaries above and detailed accounts below suggest, above all both parents and teachers alike wanted to see a **simple and effective digital approach** to sharing **holistic** information during school-to-school transitions. Their emphasis was on minimising the extra workload required for all key stakeholders while maximising the richness of the picture that the portfolio provides of the child, including their own input into what information is important. Here we are therefore advocating for a series of **design principles** that can be uniformly applied across school contexts, but which may take various different forms depending on school size, capacity, resource, existing infrastructure, and existing best practice in specific settings. Such an approach is designed to play to the strengths and resources of individual schools, while maintaining a minimum standard of participation, and facilitating easy and consistent transfer of information between schools.

One paramount consideration is **Accessibility and Security.** Schools will require a secure, cloud-based platform to house the portfolio, in the first instance drawing on schools' existing IT infrastructure (for example, G-Drive, Teams, or similar). The means of storing and displaying the portfolio content should ensure multi-device compatibility, as we all role-based access controls (parents, teachers, students). It will be essential that the portfolio is GDPR compliant, which raises some challenges in terms of the protocols for how portfolio information is shared between schools. These are not, however, insurmountable, especially if parents/guardians are included in the process of data protection and sharing.

Content

It perhaps goes without saying that **academic records** would form part of the digital portfolio on the basis that if any information is shared between schools, it will be data on key areas of academic performance. However, the interviews also indicate a need for a more inclusive approach to curriculum coverage tracking (which could be a simple "tick box" system), as well as a more comprehensive set of assessment data for all subjects. This data would be supplemented by digital examples of best work selected both by the student and by teachers. Students, teachers, and families could add to this information further nuance about learning approaches that work well, and any gaps or areas needing support.

Issues with continuity of **SEND provision** were highlighted by both schools and parents. The proposed digital portfolio would therefore include formal records (professional reports and assessments) alongside a narrative of important information, including current support strategies and interventions, triggers and regulation strategies, and information about reasonable adjustments in place, whether formal or informal.

In terms of capturing **Social-Emotional** profiles of students, the proposed portfolio would include students' own summary of themselves (including hobbies and interests), and friendship-making skills and preferences. From parents and teachers, the portfolio would capture emotional wellbeing indicators, coping strategies, and key relationships and support networks.

Context

In addition to the content outlined above, the proposed digital portfolio would also include some limited Service background information, a previous school moves timeline, family circumstances, and information on support networks beyond the immediate family or participation in youth organisations.

Modality

In terms of modality, the digital format of the portfolio offers a wide means of representing the student beyond performance or attainment metrics. The portfolio content would be in part **text-based,** including student self-reflections, teacher observations, parent insights; narrative academic reports, and support plans. It would also be **audio-visual,** including, for example, student video introductions; recorded/visual presentations of work; virtual school tours; voice notes from student/family; and/or audiovisual evidence of academic performance. A more advanced envisioning of the portfolio could also include **interactive elements** via real-time progress updates, two-way communication tools, collaborative goal setting for the transition process; and regular check-in mechanisms. Most cloud-based platforms (e.g. Teams; Google) will offer a suite of platforms (chat, interactive documents, etc) that could facilitate this kind of interaction without the need for proprietary software or additional cost.

User Experience Features

For Students, it will be essential to ensure age-appropriate interfaces, age-appropriate choice in how to present themselves, control over personal content, the ability to highlight their own achievements; their own space for expressing concerns, in order to feel visible, heard, safe, and supported in the transition process. **For Parents,** the portfolio will need to offer easy updating mechanisms, clear communication channels, and progress tracking measures or milestones. Ultimately, the portfolio needs to reassure parents that their child is seen, heard, thriving, and happy in the transition process. **For Teachers**, the portfolio needs to offer quick access to key information alongside a depth perspective on the student in question. The portfolio should provide standardised transfer protocols, while offering flexibility to accurately represent each individual child. As for students and parents, the portfolio needs to offer the means for easy communication between schools involved in the transition process.
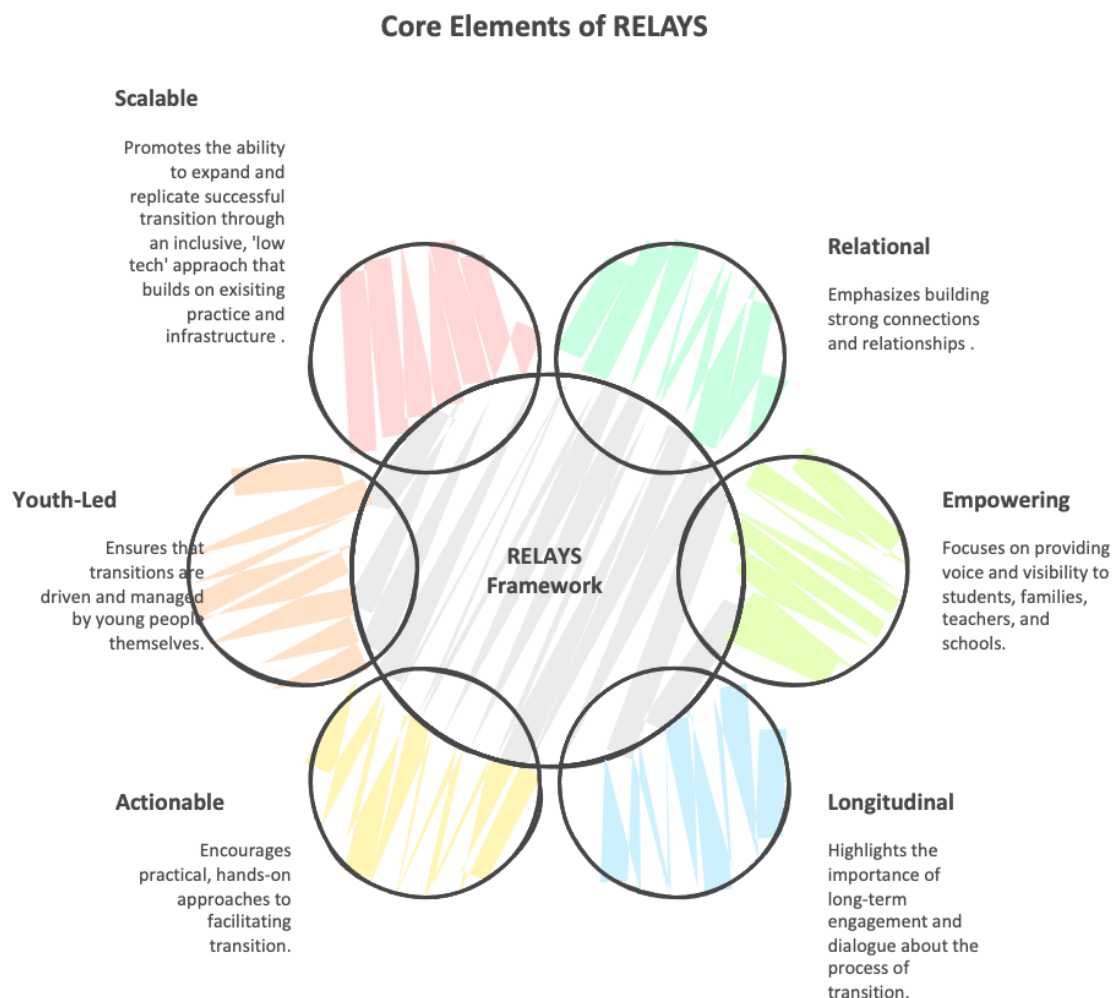
Quality Assurance

A key issue in the interviews above was the need for an approach to transition that is consistent and sustainable across schools. This will require quality assurance in terms of the required minimum content, the need for regular update prompts, some information verification where needed, and clear feedback mechanisms or lines of communication.

Finally, the portfolio should incorporate impact monitoring (communication and social contract between schools, teachers, family, and students), recognising that transition is not a discrete process at a moment of time, but rather an extended process that can span a child's entire educational career.

RELAYS: Relational, Empowering, Longitudinal, Actionable, Youth-Led, Scalable

With the above design principles in mind, here we propose the RELAYS approach to designing a digital transition portfolio. The RELAYS framework emphasises: Relational design; Family empowerment; Continuous "narrative" documentation; Practical utility; Student agency; and a 'low-tech' and scalable digital solution.

Core Elements of RELAYS

Scalable

Promotes the ability to expand and replicate successful transition through an inclusive, 'low tech' appraoch that builds on exisiting practice and infrastructure .

Relational

Emphasizes building strong connections and relationships .

Youth-Led

Ensures that transitions are driven and managed by young people themselves.

RELAYS Framework

Empowering

Focuses on providing voice and visibility to students, families, teachers, and schools.

Actionable

Encourages practical, hands-on approaches to facilitating transition.

Longitudinal

Highlights the importance of long-term engagement and dialogue about the process of transition.

RELATIONAL

Based on the interview findings, we propose that the RELAYS approach encourages schools to adopt a relational approach from the outset, recognising transition as an ongoing process that takes place between students, families, teachers, and schools. This emphasises the ongoing relationships and social contract between schools and families to champion the best interests of children in transition. It also recognises that meaningful relationships in school, and in school transition, are foundational for enduring experiences of belonging and safety. The practical process of supporting transition should include opportunities and activities that build lasting relationships, and in turn support the wellbeing of individual students and school communities.

EMPOWERING

This enables parents to be proactive partners in transitions and provides agency in how information is shared and presented. It also allows schools to quickly understand and respond to needs, gives voice to student strengths and interests, and supports SEND advocacy across different authorities. An explicit focus on the inclusion and empowerment of students and families helps them maintain continuity of support, and to feel visible and heard in the process.

LONGITUDINAL

A key issue addressed in the interviews was the need for a consistent approach to transition over time. A longitudinal approach tracks curriculum coverage across multiple moves, documents SEND assessment and support journey, and records social-emotional development over time. A long-term view captures transition history and impact, and maintains a history of strategies that work. Such an approach also chronicles academic progress across settings, and presents clear, consistent system for tracking SEND support needs assessment/support provision

ACTIONABLE

Schools and parents alike signalled the need for a transition portfolio to offer clear, actionable recommendations. This can be achieved by providing specific information about learning approaches, identifying triggers and effective regulation strategies, and specifying successful pastoral support strategies. The portfolio offers parents and teachers a space to outline practical transition support requirements.

YOUTH-LED

Essential to the portfolio is the voice and agency of the student. This can be achieved through incorporating students' summaries of themselves and what can be done to meet their needs. A portfolio that enables students to express concerns and hopes also allows them choice in how to present their story. It provides space for personal goals and aspirations, and facilitates student voice in transition planning. It empowers sharing of lived

experiences of transitions not only as single events but as a linked trajectory through each student's educational career.

SCALABLE

A digital transition portfolio can only be successful if it is scalable and sustainable in its design. For this reason, we propose the above design principles, with the starting point that the portfolio is built on standardised but flexible templates, is designed for easy adoption across settings, supports different armed forces contexts, enables consistent information sharing, facilitates system-wide implementation, and allows for ongoing development.

MAIN REPORT ENDS

5. School interviews

Case Study 1: Forest Junior School

The interview with Sarah, the Family Link Worker/ELSA/DSL/Mental Health Lead at Forest Juniors School, provided valuable insights into how the school identifies, tracks, and supports Service children during school transitions.

<u>Identifying and Tracking Service Children</u>
The school relies heavily on its admissions form, which "explicitly" asks if a child is from an armed forces family. As Sarah explained, "that is where we get most of our data from...and we have found so far that is accurate." When Service children transition in, the school depends on "parents or the previous school to tell the school key information." When Service children leave, Sarah noted, "we will always highlight that they are the Service child."

<u>Strategies and Programs to Support Transitions</u>
While the school does not have any "specific programs," they have established "routines" to welcome new Service children. Sarah shared that she meets with the family, provides a tour, and assigns an older "buddy" to help the child integrate. She noted that a key challenge is "delays in receiving student records and data from previous schools," which can impact teachers' ability to "quickly understand a student's needs." The school tries to be proactive, such as "accelerating any external assessments" before a child with SEND moves to avoid starting the process over.

<u>Communicating Student Information</u>
If no information comes from the previous school, the school will "make a phone call to the school before they arrive to get an idea what sort of child they are." Sarah explained that this is often done by her or the SENCO, as they want to ensure they have the necessary "pastoral" information. When information is received, the ELSA shares it with the class teacher to facilitate a smooth transition.

<u>Challenges for Service Children</u>
Sarah identified several key challenges, including "forming those attachments" and relationships when frequent moves are expected, the "discontinuity in SEND assessments and provision," and issues with "curriculum coverage between schools." As she noted, "a child could have just spent, you know, six weeks [studying a topic] on space and they arrive here and they're back to another six weeks of space."

<u>Ideal Smooth Transition</u>
Sarah envisioned an "ideal world" transition involving a "personal pack that moves with the family" to provide a "holistic picture of the child." She suggested this could help address the "rapid and effective data transfer" issue and avoid "curriculum repeats and gaps."

<u>Sharing Student Voice and Perspectives</u>
Sarah was enthusiastic about the idea of a transition portfolio, stating it was a "great idea" as it would create a "holistic picture" of the child. She suggested including "the child's own

summary on themselves" and leveraging "different mediums" for students to share their voice, perspectives, and needs.

<u>Professional Development Needs</u>
Sarah emphasised the importance of "whole-staff training to raise awareness and understanding of Service children's unique needs." As she explained, this would help ensure "everyone has ownership of these children" rather than just the designated roles, as "it is not always seen by the whole staff."

<u>Recommendations:</u> Throughout the interview, Sarah provided thoughtful insights and practical examples to support the development of strategies to better meet the needs of mobile Service children during school transitions. The interview data offers the following implications for practice: Utilise school admissions form to explicitly identify Service children; Establish rigorous and carefully followed welcoming routines like meeting with families, assigning buddies, and conducting baseline assessments as needed; Prioritise rapid and effective data transfer between schools to avoid delays in understanding student needs; Address challenges around forming attachments, SEND discontinuity, and curriculum repetition; Implement a personalised transition portfolio that travels with the family; Encourage student and family voice in the portfolio, using different mediums; Provide whole-staff training to raise awareness and ensure shared ownership for supporting Service children.

Case Study 2 - Lancaster Primary School

The interview with Roger, Headteacher, and the Deputy Headteacher and Service Children's Lead, provided valuable insights into the school's robust systems and personalised approach to supporting Service children during transitions.

<u>Identifying and Tracking Service Children</u>
The school has a dedicated admissions coordinator, Kirsty, who "spends most of her time" proactively gathering information about incoming Service children and supporting pupil departures from the school. As Roger explained, "Kirsty would - generally get a phone call" where she collects basic details and "alerts various different professionals in school" to prepare for the new arrival. This includes using the school's own detailed admissions form which captures Service numbers and regiment information. Kirsty then liaises with previous schools to obtain the Common Transfer File (CTF) and other records, though Roger acknowledged "the quality/depth of information received is variable." To supplement this, the school conducts baseline assessments within the first 3 weeks in English and mathematics, as Roger noted: "we use GL assessment...within the first 3 weeks of arriving in school" to understand academic starting points.

<u>Transition Strategies and Support</u>
The school places a strong emphasis on relationship-building, with Roger describing how new students are given a tour and meet with the Headteacher/DHT prior to starting. As he explained, this allows the school to "gather more holistic information about the child" beyond just academic data. A key element of effective practice is the Admissions Meeting held with parents and child by a senior leader prior to a new child starting, when admission form gaps

are completed and the next layer of information, including curriculum, is gathered. The meeting is aimed at putting families at ease whilst gathering as much information on the family as possible. Once enrolled, students are allocated buddies, with plans to "enhance this through virtual systems." Teachers also make a point to "have a bit of a touch base with the family" in the first couple of weeks. Roger highlighted the importance of this, noting "it's that relationship stuff" that is key. The school also utilises learning mentors and pastoral specialists to provide additional support as needed.

Challenges for Service Children
The interviewees identified significant challenges faced by Service children, including "changes in educational systems/expectations, curriculum discontinuity, and social/emotional" difficulties". However, they felt these issues are "generally 'hit and miss' in how well they are addressed across the system."

Ideal Smooth Transition
In an ideal scenario, the school would always have "sufficient notice of moves to enable a comprehensive transition process" with the removal of short-term notice postings. When Service children leave, the school uses a leavers' form to get early notification and important details from parents, a parent exit questionnaire, the national Pupil Information Profile (PIP) transfer form for the next school, and it shares all assessment/tracking data from its online tracking system.

Traveling Portfolio Concept
The school leadership was very enthusiastic about the portfolio idea, with Roger stating: "I think the bit that would make it successful is people sticking to it." The leaders highlighted the need to make it "user friendly" and "engaging for parents to invest in it." Key information they would want to include are "pastoral details, learning interests, curriculum coverage, and examples of best work."

Supporting Student Voice
The school utilises strategies such as "buddies/ambassadors, giving students roles/responsibilities, and ensuring access to teams/opportunities" to enable Service children to share their voice and perspectives.

Professional Development Needs
Rather than one-off training, the school recommended "online guidance and video resources sharing effective practice" - with Roger suggesting they could contribute by saying "we've got these examples here" of effective transition support. While these are available via SCiP, this suggests that there is an issue communicating resources to schools.

Recommendations: The interview highlights Lancaster's extensive, proactive and personalised approach to supporting Service children's transitions. As Roger summarised, "it's that relationship stuff" that is at the heart of their approach. The school is highly receptive to the portfolio concept and provided valuable insights on how to ensure its successful implementation.

Case Study 3 - Cooper Primary School

The interview with Margaret, Headteacher, and the Deputy Headteacher and Service Children's Champion, provided valuable insights into the school's comprehensive approach to supporting Service children during transitions. As experienced Service spouses themselves, the leaders demonstrated a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by this student group. The interview highlights significant gaps in current transition practices and the need for a more comprehensive, personalised and systemic approach to supporting highly mobile Service children during school moves. The school demonstrates a willingness to improve but faces structural barriers that need to be addressed.

Identifying and Tracking Service Children
Cooper has proactively developed its own "Pupil Transfer Form" which is sent to previous schools for requested completion as soon as they are aware a new Service child is arriving. However, the leaders noted that "many schools don't respond" and they can't insist that previous departing schools complete it. Upon arrival, the school conducts baseline assessments in key academic areas with new children within the first week, as well as holding a one-to-one meeting with a Learning Support Assistant to understand any social-emotional needs.

Transition Strategies and Support
The school has an "ARK" provision that offers group support sessions, one-to-one nurture sessions, and a weekly "Military Children's Club". All new arrivals are also assigned a "study buddy" for the first two weeks to provide peer support, and are encouraged to join the club. As Margaret explained, this wraparound support is vital, particularly for vulnerable students like a child in care whose father was recently deployed.

Challenges with Curriculum Continuity
A key challenge identified was the inconsistency in curriculum coverage between schools, especially when children move between the English and Scottish education systems. As Margaret shared, one student "missed out on the year 2 curriculum completely" when transferring from England to Scotland and back again. The school tries to mitigate this by using new arrivals as "expert" resources when covering topics they have already studied and through timetabling variations for the child.

Ideal Smooth Transition
In an ideal scenario, Margaret envisioned a system with greater "consistency across schools" in core curriculum content, "so that the continual small steps of building that knowledge can continue without having to pre-teach all of the things that should have been taught in the prior years." She acknowledged this is unlikely to be achieved through complete prescription but suggested more specification on essential topics to be studied in each year group would help.

Traveling Portfolio Concept
The school leaders were generally positive about the portfolio idea, with Carol noting it could be "brilliant for staff, families and children." However, they expressed concerns about the time commitment required by both schools and families, and the challenge of engaging

some parents. Successful components could include coverage of core texts, broad curriculum topics, samples of the child's work, and their own reflections.

Recommendations: The interview suggests a series of recommendations, resonating with those above, namely: Advocate for greater national-level prescription and consistency in core curriculum content across schools, to avoid repeated gaps for highly mobile Service children; Develop a standardised, mandated record transfer system beyond the simplicity of the CTF to ensure comprehensive information sharing between schools; Provide training and resources to help all school staff better understand the lived experiences and unique needs of Service children (changing mindsets); Involve Service families directly in co-designing the content and format of any transition portfolio to ensure it is practical and meaningful; Dedicate time and resources to supporting families in curating a quality portfolio that captures the child holistically. The interview highlights Cooper's strong foundations in supporting Service children, but also the systemic barriers that prevent a truly seamless and consistent transition experience. The school's SEND Pupil Passport provides an excellent example of personalised, holistic record-keeping that could be built upon in a national-level approach.

Case Study 4: Rollins School

The following excerpts from the interview support a consolidation of findings around the following themes:

Identifying and Tracking Service Children:
Interview participants first identified the fact that system level change is required to create a positive impact for Service children. As the interviewee put it, "I really think there's a lot more in place than there is for any other pupils - but the school currently lacks robust systems and processes beyond the basics". The interviewee recognised that GDPR issues make it difficult to obtain detailed information from previous schools without consent: "We've got a bit of a hand tied behind our back anyway because of GDPR."

Transition Strategies and Processes:
In terms of process, participants recognised that there was often a drive to react quickly to changing conditions rather than prepare for an organised transition process. As the interviewee noted, "We tend to just get them stuck into lessons as quickly as possible" with minimal baseline assessment or information from previous schools…Sometimes we don't even know what school they're going to when they've gone when students leave". These conditions clearly have the possibility to hamper effective transition.

Challenges for Service Children:
Resonating with the findings in the literature above, in this interview it was clear that friendships and family remained a key concern for Service Children. "Leaving friends behind...worrying about their families" and "curriculum gaps" are key issues.

Ideal Smooth Transition:
Participants noted that, "The pre-work would have been done" to obtain consent and information from previous schools in order to create the conditions for a smoother transition. Some suggestions for the process included meeting with parents and students before

starting, curriculum gap analysis, and introducing new students to Service Child "ambassadors".

<u>Traveling Portfolio Concept:</u>
Again there was enthusiasm for the idea of a digital portfolio. As the interviewee suggested, "In principle it's an absolutely grand idea", but there were concerns that without mandatory participation, vulnerable students would run the risk of missing out. The interviewee suggested that key information could include "tick box curriculum coverage", SEND needs, languages, interests/hobbies, and school history.

<u>Supporting Student Voice:</u>
Establishing Service Child ambassadors and involving students in the school council were two means identified for ensuring consistent inclusion in pupil voice activities.

<u>Professional Development Needs:</u>
The interviewee recognised that teachers did not only need awareness training, but practical strategies for using transition information and embedding processes. As they put it, "If we don't build it into all of those systems and processes...it's no good as just a one-off training session."

Case Study 5: Canter Community College

The interview with Angela, SENCO, and Diana, the Sixth Form and Service Pupil Administrator, provided valuable insights into Canter Community College's approach to supporting Service children during school transitions. While the school has strong provision in place, the leaders acknowledged that the processes are not yet fully formalised or documented.

<u>Identifying and Tracking Service Children</u>
The school relies on a meeting between the Deputy Headteacher and new Service families to gather "soft intelligence" about the child, including their interests and experiences. As Angela explained, "that information is passed to the whole-school and then unique bits of information to different pockets of people." The school also utilises digital communication channels like a Service child Google Classroom and a Parent Hub channel to quickly integrate new arrivals.

<u>Transition Strategies and Support</u>
Canter has a well-established system of Service buddies in KS3 and ambassadors in KS4/5 to provide peer support. They are also in the early stages of developing a "welcome/farewell passport" to capture each child's strengths, needs and background. When curriculum gaps are identified, the school tries to make adaptations, as evidenced by a Y11 student who was given one less GCSE and extra 1-to-1 support to create timetable space to study a key text for his English GCSE which he hadn't covered at his previous school.

<u>Challenges with Obtaining Information</u>
The interviewees expressed significant concerns about the lack of academic and background information received from previous schools, even for children arriving from MOD

schools overseas. As Angela noted, for one new Y11 student, "we literally just have his admission form...no records received at all in paper form from this MOD school." This severely hampers the school's ability to fully understand and meet the child's needs quickly.

Ideal Smooth Transition
In an ideal world, the school leaders envisioned a fully formalised and documented process, with consistent procedures across all schools. They stressed the importance of schools working closely together to ensure a seamless transition, with comprehensive records and SEND information following the child.

Traveling Portfolio Concept
Both Angela and Diana were highly enthusiastic about the portfolio idea, seeing it as "brilliant for staff, families and children." They felt the key to success would be ensuring it is "easy to use and online and EVERYBODY doing it (non-negotiable)." In terms of content, they highlighted the value of including a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis for each child.

The interview highlights Canter Community College's strong foundations in supporting Service children, but also the need for more robust, formalized and systemized practices - aligned with a national-level approach - to truly meet the complex needs of this highly mobile student group.

Case Study 6 - Wellington School, Portsmouth

The interview with the CEO and Director of Education and Director of Relational Practice at Wellington School, provided valuable insights into the school's thoughtful and proactive approach to supporting Service children during transitions.

Identifying and Tracking Service Children
Wellington School has relatively few in-year Service child transitions, with the majority arriving in the standard Y6 to Y7 transition. They use a specific question on the enrolment form to identify Service children, which then gets recorded on their Arbor MIS and SISRA data analysis systems.

Transition Strategies and Support
When Service children do join mid-year, the school has a robust process - an in-depth interview with a senior pastoral leader to gather information from the previous school and understand the child's needs. New students are then allocated a tutor group and a peer 'buddy' to aid integration. The Director of relational practice also meets with each new Service child shortly after their arrival.

Challenges Faced by Service Children
Wellington's leaders cited deployment and parental separation as bigger challenges for their Service children than the school-to-school in-year transition, which they felt their relational approach helped to mitigate. They also noted some issues around 'weekending' where students feel pressure to be home at the weekends when a parent returns from the week

away. Their limited experience of academic record transfer from other schools is that it is very inconsistent, especially when the child comes from out of the area.

<u>Ideal Smooth Transition</u>
In an ideal scenario, The CEO emphasized the importance of comprehensive family meetings ahead of the child starting, to gather detailed information on their academic, social and emotional needs. This proactive relationship-building was seen as critical.

<u>Traveling Portfolio Concept</u>
Both leaders were highly enthusiastic about the portfolio idea, seeing it as a way to "fast track" transitions by capturing the whole child. They felt the key to success would be ensuring teachers contribute to the content, as parents may have a "skewed view" of curriculum coverage. Potential challenges include the time commitment required from busy families. They made the following recommendations for portfolio content: Attainment/progress data for all subjects; Attendance; Pastoral information (praise, sanctions); Subject-specific coverage (languages, interests); Parental engagement preferences

<u>Encouraging Parental Engagement:</u>
Wellington's "Team Wellington4Life" ethos could help demonstrate the ongoing support available, even after a child leaves. The school's relational approach means they are adept at building trust and lowering barriers with families.

<u>Professional Development:</u>
Regular pastoral staff meetings are used to share information and strategies for supporting specific vulnerable children, including some key Service children. Building in some specific training sessions on the unique needs of Service families was acknowledged as being a useful next step.

The interview highlights Wellington's comprehensive, relational approach to transitions, which provides a strong foundation for further enhancing support for Service children through initiatives like the traveling portfolio.

6. Parent Interviews

Summary

The parent interviews conducted as part of this research project provide invaluable insights into the unique challenges and support needs of Service children, and their parents, during school transitions. Several key themes emerged across the different interviews, highlighting the complex and multifaceted experiences of these highly mobile students.

Challenges Faced by Service Children

A dominant theme was the significant disruption to Service children's academic continuity and SEND support during moves. Parents like David Sackler and Aimee described issues with curriculum alignment, exam board discontinuity, and delays in accessing appropriate SEND assessments and provision at the new school. As Aimee stated, "Accessing the right schools for meeting children's SEND needs has been the biggest issue." The social-emotional impact of frequent moves was another major challenge. Parents emphasized the difficulty their children faced in "losing friends" and "not knowing anyone" at the new school, as well as the toll it took on their mental health and sense of belonging. As Cheryl and Keila noted, their children struggled with "not wanting to be different" and experienced "school-based trauma" that made subsequent transitions even harder.

Perceptions of School Knowledge and Support

The parents generally felt the new schools did not have a comprehensive understanding of their children's academic progress, social-emotional wellbeing, and unique needs when they started. As Dana expressed, she was "not really sure" how well-informed the new school was, and her own proactive sharing of information suggested a lack of comprehensive record transfer. However, parents also highlighted positive examples where schools, like Canter Community College and Lancaster Primary, demonstrated empathy, responsiveness, and a deeper understanding of Service children's circumstances.

The Transition Portfolio Concept

The parents were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the idea of a comprehensive transition portfolio that could travel with the child. They saw this as a critical tool to ensure new schools have a nuanced, holistic understanding of the child's strengths, interests, challenges, and current stage of development - particularly for those with SEND. As Mika emphasized, the portfolio should include a "traffic light system on SEND diagnosis pathway progress," academic snapshots, and details on the child's "interests, hobbies, hooks." Aimee and others highlighted the need for the portfolio to be user-friendly and "not too overwhelming" for teachers to support parents with, potentially in the form of a concise digital "snapshot."

The parent interviews underscore the significant academic, social-emotional, and administrative challenges Service children face during school transitions, as well as the critical importance of schools taking a comprehensive, flexible, and relationship-focused approach to supporting these highly mobile students. The enthusiasm for the transition portfolio concept suggests it could be a valuable tool in bridging the information gap and ensuring a smoother, more supportive experience for Service children and their families.

Parent Interview 1

The interview with Stanley, a parent with two daughters at school, provided valuable insights into the unique challenges and experiences of Service children during school transitions.

<u>Challenges Faced by Service Children</u>
Stanley identified several key challenges his children have faced, including:
- Anxiety and lack of support network when moving to a new area and school where they "literally know nobody." As he stated, "there's very few people we know there, so again, they didn't have the opportunity to go and explore and make friends."
- Frustration with having to move frequently, especially when their "non-military counterparts" are able to stay in the same school. As Stanley noted, "they don't understand why we move as frequently as we do."
- Curriculum discontinuity when moving from independent to mainstream schooling, with his older daughter facing "a little bit of a change" in teaching approaches and content.
- Adjustment to larger class sizes, with his younger daughter struggling to move from "a class of 8 to 30" students, leading to "a bit of a drop" in her performance initially.

<u>Positive Transition Experiences</u>
Stanley highlighted a couple of positive experiences that helped his children during transitions:
- The school offered a special "transition day" for his older daughter to attend with the prospective Year 7 starters, even though she was joining in Year 8, which allowed her to "see the school before the rest of the classmates."
- He also appreciated the "less homework" requirements at the new school allowing the family time, 'to breathe' in the evenings.

<u>Parental Involvement and School Support</u>
Stanley noted that having both parents involved in the transition process was helpful, as they could "both interject at the appropriate time to sit there and explain everything" to their children. However, he felt the schools did not always have a comprehensive understanding of his children's needs, especially during the summer holidays when moves often occur. Positively, one school offered a "meeting about her academic process, her emotional well-being" a few weeks into the child's start, which Stanley found "very useful and actually quite reassuring."

<u>Thoughts on a Transition Portfolio</u>
While initially unsure, Stanley expressed general support for the idea of a transition portfolio, stating "absolutely everything" should be included to give teachers a holistic picture. However, he was cautious about overburdening teachers, preferring a "mandated template for some transfer information" rather than extensive documentation. Stanley emphasised the importance of schools having "more empathy and understanding of the military lived experience" to provide effective pastoral support and meet individual needs. He felt schools with higher proportions of Service children were better able to do this. The interview highlights the significant social-emotional and academic challenges Service children face during transitions, as well as the value of proactive, empathetic support from schools that understand the unique context of military families.

Parent Interview 2

The interview with Cheryl and Lola, both office staff and parents at Rollins School, provided valuable perspectives on the unique challenges and support needs of Service children during school transitions.

Challenges Faced by Service Children
The parents highlighted several significant challenges their children have faced. Both Cheryl and Lola emphasised the difficulty their children experienced in "losing friends" and "not knowing anyone" when starting at a new school. As Lola noted, her son "doesn't want to be different" but struggles with the social-emotional upheaval of transitions.

Academic and SEND Discontinuity
The parents expressed concerns about the lack of continuity in academic records and SEND support when their children moved between schools, especially when crossing local authority boundaries. As Lola shared, her son sometimes had "no SEND records passed on" by previous schools. Her son attended 7 different primaries including being educated in Wales.

Unique Personal Needs
Cheryl and Lola's children have faced additional complexities, such as Cheryl's son's anxiety related to his diabetic condition, and Lola's son's suspected autism and neurodiversity that schools have struggled to understand and support.

Factors that Helped
The parents identified several factors that seemed to help their children during transitions. Having "lots of other Service children at the school" was seen as an important source of community and belonging for the children. Cheryl and Lola both emphasised the value of having staff who "get it" and understand the unique needs of Service children. Lola's son found it "really reassuring" that his mother worked at the school.

Nurture and Transition Support
The parents highlighted the importance of schools providing dedicated "nurture support" and identifying a "trusted adult" to help Service children settle in and address their social-emotional needs. However, experiences of these across schools were very variable.

Perceptions of School Knowledge and Support
When asked about their experiences, the parents generally felt the new schools did not have a comprehensive understanding of their children's academic, social-emotional, and unique needs when they started. As Lola stated, "often no, especially moving between areas - although experiences in this school have been much better." However, they noted that the transition from primary to secondary (Year 6 to Year 7) at Rollins was more positive, as the parents were "on it" and proactively engaged.

Thoughts on a Transition Portfolio
Both Cheryl and Lola were highly enthusiastic about the idea of a transition portfolio, seeing it as a way to provide a "holistic overview picture" of the child. They felt it should include information on the child's "triggers," social-emotional background, friendship-making skills, and curriculum coverage - with input from both the parents and the child themselves. The parents emphasised the need to ensure the portfolio is user-friendly and "not too overwhelming" for teachers, potentially in the form of a concise "snapshot" summary.

Recommendations for Schools
Based on their experiences, the parents suggested several ways schools could better support Service children during transitions: Ensure comprehensive information describing the child and SEND records are transferred, rather than just focusing on academic subjects; Provide dedicated "nurture support" and identify a trusted adult to help Service children settle in socially and emotionally; Adopt a more holistic, relationship-focused approach to understanding each child as an individual, beyond just their academic performance. The interview highlights the significant social-emotional, academic, and personal challenges faced by Service children, as well as the value of schools taking a comprehensive, empathetic, and relationship-based approach to supporting these highly mobile students during transitions.

Parent Interview 3

The interview with Mika, a parent with three children at Lancaster Primary and Rollins School, provided rich insights into the unique challenges Service children, especially those with special educational needs, face during school transitions.

Challenges Faced by Service Children
A dominant theme was the schools' struggle to adequately understand and support the individual needs of Mika's children. As she stated, "the biggest challenges have been lack of understanding of individual needs, especially pre-diagnosed / social development." This led to her eldest child being "under the radar a lot" and "now 'failing' at reading as GCSEs approach, yet this has never been picked up before." Mika felt the moves have "contributed" to these issues, with schools often failing to grasp the complexities her children face. As she explained, "one finds developing friendships really hard / generally curriculums have been similar but learning approaches are different."

Disruption to Social-Emotional Development
The interview highlighted the significant disruption to her children's social-emotional well-being during transitions. Mika shared a particularly troubling experience where her middle son received "really bad school-based trauma in Germany" that made the subsequent move to Cyprus "very hard" due to the "lack of understanding and empathy" from the school. Mika noted that "developing and maintaining friendships" has been a major challenge, with schools often lacking the insight to proactively support her children's social-emotional needs.

Positive Experiences and Support

Mika did identify one positive school which she felt was the "most understanding school attended." She credited the staff for "listening and supporting getting diagnoses" for her children, and taking a "generally kind approach" informed by their efforts to "learn about the family's circumstances." This contrasted sharply with her experiences at other schools, where Mika felt the lack of understanding and empathy was deeply problematic, alongside inflexible approaches to aspects such as behaviour management.

Perceptions of School Knowledge and Support
When asked about her children's transitions, Mika expressed significant dissatisfaction with the level of information shared and support provided by the new schools. She stated that "overall, probably not, except current primary," explaining that the moves from Germany to Cyprus, and then Cyprus to England, were all "poor" experiences. As Mika noted, "no idea what, if anything, was passed on between schools" in terms of academic progress, social-emotional well-being, or unique needs. She felt this lack of continuity and comprehensive knowledge about her children was a major issue.

Thoughts on a Transition Portfolio
Mika was extremely enthusiastic about the idea of a comprehensive transition portfolio that could travel with her children. She saw it as a critical tool to ensure teachers have a clear, holistic understanding of the child's strengths, challenges, and current stage of development - particularly for those on SEND pathways. As Mika explained, the portfolio should include "a traffic light system on SEND diagnosis pathway progress (as currently, no diagnosis is viewed as 'no help required')," as well as "where the children are at academically – snapshot – in ALL subjects" and details of "interests, hobbies, hooks etc." Importantly, Mika emphasised the need for this information to be digital rather than paper-based, to avoid it getting "lost" in the transition process.

Recommendations for Schools
Drawing on her experiences, Mika provided several recommendations for how schools could better support Service children during transitions: "Reasonable adjustments based on good parental communication" to address individual needs; "Longer induction processes – 1 or 2 days for a SEND child is nowhere near long enough, especially on top of the stresses of moving houses and areas"; Proactive sharing of information and resources, such as "electronic information sent from new school to the family to familiarise, as AF families often miss open days." (e.g. video tour of the school); Dedicated "emotional check ins and peer support groups" to address the social-emotional challenges; Parents taking copies of all records, especially medical ones, when moving areas. The interview with Mika highlights the significant educational, social-emotional, and mental health challenges faced by Service children, particularly those with additional needs. Her insights reinforce the critical importance of schools taking a comprehensive, flexible, and relationship-based approach to supporting this highly mobile student population during transitions.

Parent Interview 4

The interview with Dana, a parent with a child at Forest Juniors, provided valuable perspectives on the unique challenges Service children, especially those with special educational needs, can face during school transitions.

Challenges Faced by Service Children

Dana highlighted several significant issues her son has encountered when moving to a new school. A major challenge was the lack of continuity in SEND support and assessment. As Dana explained, the "ND (Neurodiversity) profile system is different in Hampshire" compared to the previous local authority, meaning "the new LA doesn't appear to accept the Portsmouth assessment in a way where additional support can be funded." This had resulted in "SEND support and profiling" having to be "put 'on hold' at the new school," creating significant disruption to the continuity of his care. Dana noted that her son "has found developing friends hard, especially out of school as his new school isn't the catchment school." This inability to form connections outside of the school community was a source of concern.

Positive Experiences and Support

Despite the challenges, Dana highlighted several positive aspects of her son's transition to Forest Juniors. The school "has been excellent" in providing extensive pastoral support, including "extra transition sessions (3) before the end of the summer term" to help Anthony prepare. The school has a "named Service Children contact" who provides responsive and effective communication. The overall pastoral and SEND support at Forest Juniors have been "good" and helpful in addressing her son's needs.

Perceptions of School Knowledge and Support

When asked about her experiences, Dana expressed uncertainty about how well-informed new schools are regarding her child's academic progress, social-emotional well-being, and unique needs. As she stated, "Not really sure as this was first school move – but overall, she hears from others that military parents often have a poor sense of these things when moving to new schools." Dana's own experience of proactively sharing information, including her son's end-of-term report, workbooks, and his ND profile from the previous school, suggests a lack of comprehensive information transfer between institutions.

Thoughts on a Transition Portfolio

Dana was highly enthusiastic about the idea of a transition portfolio that could travel with her child. She felt it should include a wide range of information to help teachers "really get to know and support" Anthony, including: "A sense of HOW the child learns best" and any "triggers" or strategies for supporting dysregulation; Parents' views on their child's learning and interests/fascinations; "What key topics have been covered recently". Dana emphasised the importance of this portfolio providing a holistic, relationship-focused understanding of the child, rather than just academic data.

Recommendations for Schools

Dana provided several recommendations for how schools could better support Service children, especially those with SEND, during transitions: Ensure staff are trained to understand the unique challenges faced by military families and the need for "additional support"; Avoid making insensitive comments like "Well you chose a military lifestyle," which can be "disrespectful"; Develop a deeper understanding of the "triggers to dysregulation" that many Service children with SEND experience; Provide more extensive and responsive communication with parents to address their concerns and queries. The interview with Dana highlights the significant disruption to SEND support and social-emotional well-being that

Service children can face during school moves, as well as the critical importance of schools taking a comprehensive, empathetic, and relationship-focused approach to supporting these highly mobile students.

Parent Interview 5

The interview with David Sackler, a parent with two children at Canter Community College, provided valuable perspectives on the unique challenges Service children and their families can face during school transitions, particularly around academic continuity and flexibility in admissions.

Disruption to Academic Continuity
A dominant theme was the significant disruption to David' son's GCSE studies when the family moved from Cyprus to the UK. Despite David' attempts to extend the posting to allow his son to complete his GCSEs, this request was denied as it was deemed the family "knew what they were taking on" with the initial 3-year posting. This led to issues around curriculum and exam board continuity, as the local secondary schools in the Oxfordshire area utilized different exam boards and course content. As David explained, this meant his son had to undertake significant additional catch-up work to align with the content covered at Canter Community College, including "an extra hour at school three times a week" led by his son himself, but overseen by a member of school staff.

Challenges with Admissions Processes
Another key challenge was the difficulty the family faced with admissions processes, particularly for David' daughter transitioning from primary to secondary school. Due to the family's move from Cyprus, they missed the application deadline, leading to an "appeals process" being needed as the initial offer of a school was "quite some way away" from their home (and not where the child's sibling would be going to school). David emphasized the stress and "worry" this caused, highlighting the need for more flexibility in admissions policies to account for the unique circumstances of Service families.

Inconsistent transfer of records
Despite his children both transferring from two different MOD Schools, one a primary and the other a secondary, the records and information transferred by the two schools was very different. David, therefore, had to be more proactive in the transition of his older child in this regard. This highlights the inconsistency of approach to school transition even within groups of schools belonging to the same organisation.

Positive Experiences and Support
Despite these challenges, David expressed overall satisfaction with the support and communication from Canter Community College. He noted the school was "reassuring" and demonstrated "empathy and understanding" of the family's situation, even when their "hands were tied" regarding admissions. The opportunity for a face-to-face meeting with the headteacher prior to the school year starting was also seen as a positive, allowing the parents to share information about their children's academic progress and needs.

David provided several recommendations for how schools could better support Service children during transitions: Remove "red tape" and provide more flexible admissions policies to accommodate the unique circumstances of Service families; Ensure clear, early communication about available academic pathways and opportunities for the child to get a "head start" on new curriculum content; The MOD could support some families more than they do over education of their children in key exam years by having more flexible policies over the retention of quarters to extend postings. The idea of a comprehensive transition portfolio was not directly discussed, but David emphasised the importance of sharing information about academic strengths, weaknesses, and coverage of specific topics (such as the missed units for his son).

Parent Interview 5

The interview with Aimee, a parent with two children at Lancaster Primary and Rollins School, provided rich insights into the significant challenges Service children with special educational needs and / or disabilities (SEND) face during school transitions.

Challenges Accessing Appropriate SEND Provision

A dominant theme was the immense difficulty Aimee has faced in securing appropriate SEND placements and support for her children, especially her son who has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). As Aimee stated, "Accessing the right schools for meeting children's SEND needs has been the biggest issue by far & the differences in 'thresholds' regarding a special school being named on the EHCP." This has led to situations where her children have been placed in settings not well-suited to their needs, such as her son being "placed in an extreme SEND Hub which wasn't the right setting for him, with lots of sensory-room isolation." For one of her children, specialist provision was agreed to in one Local Authority only for this to be rescinded in the new Local Authority - a term of 'fighting' the system and going to mediation, successfully, followed.

Loss of Friendships and Emotional Wellbeing

Aimee also highlighted the significant impact of repeatedly leaving friends behind, noting her daughter "really struggled" with this and has become "quite withdrawn." Her son, who has experienced "school-based trauma," has found it extremely difficult to make new friends at each transition, with Aimee stating that he currently has no school-based friends at all and is on a part-time timetable as the school is unable to fully meet his needs. As Aimee explained, "Leaving friends behind – my daughter really struggled on successful moves and is quite withdrawn, and my son has school-based trauma and no friends at all."

Challenges with Information Transfer

Aimee expressed significant concerns about the lack of comprehensive information transfer between schools, both in terms of SEN records and academic progress. As she stated, "No paperwork from Wellington Academy to Rollins so wrong sets given to the child. Learning and confidence have suffered." This lack of continuity has had a detrimental impact on her children's educational experiences. Aimee further noted that the transfer of information was often poor, even within the same local authority: "Little awareness of reports even having been shared for her secondary child (she provided the current school with these)."

Positive Experiences and Support
Aimee did identify some positive experiences, particularly with the staff at Lancaster Primary, whom she described as having a "good understanding" and providing "empathetic support for families." The SENCO at Lancaster was also noted for actively "helping mum 'fight' the LA's SEND team" to secure appropriate provision.

Thoughts on a Transition Portfolio
Aimee was enthusiastic about the idea of a comprehensive transition portfolio, seeing it as particularly valuable for her son, who does not have an EHCP. As she explained, the portfolio should include a "profile of the child with all SEND records," details about "triggers re dysregulation," and information on "strengths and weaknesses." Aimee felt this would help ensure teachers have a more holistic understanding of her children, rather than relying on the often-poor transfer of formal records. As she stated, "This parent thinks a portfolio is a great idea, especially for her SEND child without an EHCP, where records have been poorer."

Recommendations for Schools
Aimee provided several recommendations for how schools could better support Service children with SEND during transitions: Prioritise emotional wellbeing support, such as a "safe space to go to" and an "emotional wellbeing club"; Provide dedicated 1:1 support to help children settle into the new environment; Ensure comprehensive transfer of SEND records and academic progress information between schools. The interview with Aimee highlights the immense challenges faced by some Service children with SEND, particularly around accessing appropriate educational provision and maintaining continuity of support during frequent moves. Her insights reinforce the critical importance of schools taking a proactive, flexible, and relationship-focused approach to supporting these highly mobile and vulnerable students.

Parent Interview 6

The interview with Richard Browning, a parent with two children at Canter Community College, provided rich insights into the unique challenges Service children and their families face during school transitions.

Challenges with School Admissions and Option Selection
A dominant theme was the significant difficulties Richard and his family encountered in securing school places for his sons, as well as ensuring a "seamless" transition in selecting their course options. As Richard stated, "the two biggest ones – securing a place and the process for seamless transitions between schools and selecting options…bumps in the road at the start." This uncertainty and bureaucratic hurdles added considerable stress, with Richard noting they "didn't know what school they'd be going to until sometimes having left the current school." The interview also highlighted the profound impact these frequent transitions can have on the family unit. Richard described how the latest move was "additionally stressful" due to both parents working full-time, with him having to live in mess accommodation while his wife and children settled into their new home.

Perceptions of School Knowledge and Support

When reflecting on the schools' understanding of his children's needs, Richard had a mixed perspective. He felt the previous and current schools were "brilliant" in terms of academic progress and SEND information sharing. However, he also noted instances where the new school seemed to only provide "lip service" to the family's challenging circumstances, rather than demonstrating true empathy and support. As Richard stated, the school's dismissive attitude of "oh, they'll be fine" revealed a lack of appreciation for the significant impact these transitions can have on Service children's social-emotional wellbeing.

Positive Experiences and Support

Despite these difficulties, Richard identified several positive elements of the transition to Canter Community College. He noted the "really helpful" communication and information transfer between the previous and current schools, especially around supporting his son's SEND needs. The opportunity for the family to attend an event at the RAF Station upon arrival also helped the boys "reconnect with some old friends" and "normalise" the experience. He also felt he got some good admissions advice and support from the RAF Family Federation, SSAFA and the MOD's EAT (Education Advisory Team).

Thoughts on a Transition Portfolio

When presented with the idea of a comprehensive transition portfolio, Richard was receptive to the concept. He felt it should include information on the children's "emotional wellbeing and signs and symptoms of their stress," as well as "what makes them tick" in terms of their learning preferences and interests. Richard sees this as a valuable tool to ensure teachers have a nuanced, holistic understanding of the child, rather than relying solely on academic data.

Recommendations for Schools

Richard provided several recommendations for how schools could better support Service children during transitions: Utilise technology (e.g., video calls, extended transition days) to facilitate more effective communication and information sharing, as he noted "with technology now exactly what we're doing now [a video call interview], there's other ways to manage that."; Demonstrate a deeper understanding of the significant challenges and "lived experiences" of military families; Proactively provide resources and support to address the social-emotional needs of highly mobile students, as Richard emphasised the importance of understanding "emotional wellbeing and signs and symptoms of their stress."

The interview with Richard highlights the complex interplay of academic, logistical, and emotional challenges faced by Service children and their families during school transitions. His insights reinforce the critical importance of schools taking a flexible, empathetic, and relationship-focused approach to supporting this unique student population.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A
Interview questions for school leaders

1. How does your school identify and track Service/armed forces children to ensure their unique needs are met during school-to-school transitions? What systems or processes are in place?

2. What specific strategies or programs has your school implemented to support Service/armed forces children during their transition into your school? How effective have these been? Can you tell me the story of an individual child that reflects this?

3. How do you ensure that important academic, social-emotional, and background information about each Service/armed forces child is communicated clearly and efficiently from their previous school to teachers and staff at your school?

4. What do you think are the biggest challenges Service/armed forces children face when transitioning between schools? How well do you think schools are addressing these challenges currently?

5. In an ideal world, what would a smooth, successful school transition look like for a Service/armed forces child arriving at a new school? What key elements need to be in place?

6. One idea for improving transitions is to have Service/armed forces children and families create a portfolio that travels with them to each new school, providing a comprehensive picture of the student's educational profile, strengths, needs, and background. What are your thoughts on this idea? What would make it successful or unsuccessful?

7. If such a travelling portfolio were implemented, what key information and components should be included to give teachers the insights they need to support the child's transition and learning?

8. How could schools encourage and support Service/armed forces children and families to put together a quality portfolio that captures the student as a whole child and learner? What challenges might families face in assembling it?

9. Beyond a portfolio, what are other ways schools could enable Service/armed forces children to meaningfully share their own voice, perspectives and needs during the transition process so that teachers really get to know them as individuals?

10. What training or professional development do you think teachers need to effectively utilise transition portfolios and to better understand and meet the unique needs of Service/armed forces children? How can schools provide this?

APPENDIX B
Interview questions for parents

1. As a parent, what have been some of the biggest challenges your child has faced when transitioning to a new school? What seemed to help them the most during those times?

 2. Can you share any particularly positive or negative experiences your child has had during a school transition? What made those experiences stand out to you?

 3. When your child starts at a new school, how well-informed do you usually feel about their academic progress, social-emotional well-being, and unique needs? Do you think the new school has a good understanding of your child as a whole?

 4. One idea is to create a portfolio that travels with your child to each new school, giving teachers a more comprehensive picture of who they are as a student and individual. This could include their strengths, interests, challenges, learning style, and so on. As a parent, what would you want to include in such a portfolio to help teachers really get to know and support your child?

5. How do you think schools could better support your child during transitions? What kind of information, resources, or support would make the biggest positive difference for your family during those times?