

# DIVERSITY MEETS COMPLEXITY: SUPPORTING ARMED FORCES YOUNG PEOPLE TO THRIVE IN POST-16 EDUCATION

RESEARCH REPORT

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**T**his report was written by The Centre for Education and Youth. CfEY is a 'think and action-tank'. We believe society should ensure all children and young people receive the support they need to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We provide the evidence and support policy makers and practitioners need to support young people.

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# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the educational experiences of Armed Forces young people, between the ages of 16 and 19, across England, Scotland and Wales.<sup>1</sup> To our knowledge, this is the first report to do so. The majority of existing research on this group of pupils focuses on their attainment and experiences throughout primary and secondary education. By extending this research to include the 16-19 phase, we aim to better enable policy makers and practitioners to understand these young people and enact the support they need to allow them to thrive.

The research examines the needs and experiences of these young people and the barriers they may face as a result of being from an Armed Forces background. Moreover, we explore what influences Armed Forces young people's decisions in post-16 and post-18 education, to what extent are leaders and practitioners in 16-19 settings aware of Armed Forces young people and their needs, and what are they key principles of good practice for supporting Armed Forces young people in 16-19 education.

We define needs as the intrinsic effects of Service life that may contribute to differential experiences and outcomes, and barriers as the structural features that may contribute to differential experiences and outcomes. We also explore the extent to which post-16 settings address these needs and barriers and how they can better support these young people.

This report draws together findings from existing literature, a UK-wide practitioner survey, in-depth interviews with practitioners, focus groups with Armed Forces young people aged 16 to 19, and consultation with an expert steering group comprised of relevant practitioners, academics and policymakers.

## NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES

We find that Armed Forces young people in 16-19 education are more likely to have needs relating to the following factors or experiences of Armed Forces life:

- **Mobility:** Frequent moves throughout an Armed Forces young person's journey in education may result in disrupted learning, a higher likelihood of unidentified or unmet needs, and struggles regarding their ability to build and sustain long-standing relationships.
- **Deployment:** Young people identify parental deployment as a significant emotional stressor affecting their performance in education and their wellbeing. During deployments some young people also deal with increased responsibilities in the home, which can sit in tension with meeting the demands of independent learning in post-16 education.
- **Independence and stress:** Experiences related to Service life appear to lead some Armed Forces young people to have a heightened sense of independence and responsibility. While there are some positive effects of these attributes, this may also increase their stress levels, impacting negatively on their educational experiences and their likelihood to request support.
- **Aspirations and decision-making:** When making decisions about their post-16 and post-18 choices Armed Forces young people are likely to consider family preferences, geographical location, continuity with staff, parental support and future family mobility. Though they may not be disadvantaged in this regard, settings may need to take account of the additional factors they may consider in other to support them.

<sup>1</sup>The terms Service or Armed Forces child or young person refers to a person whose parent, or carer, serves in the regular Armed Forces, or as a reservist, or has done so at any point during the first 25 years of that person's life.

## BARRIERS

Beyond the above needs, we identify the following system-level barriers which can also impact the educational experiences of Armed Forces young people and the likelihood that 16-19 education settings are able to effectively support them:

- **Data and identification:** Currently, there are no country-level systems in place to identify and track Armed Forces young people in 16-19 education, and varying systems across UK nations present barriers to smooth transitions. This is a significant barrier to settings' ability to target and evaluate support for these young people.
- **Financial pressures:** Being from an Armed Forces family is not synonymous with facing financial disadvantage. However, we found socio-economic status and familial financial pressure to be a key determinant of whether or not Armed Forces young people feel they experience barriers during their 16-19 education.
- **Support provision in post-16:** Some young people felt their needs were being met in their 16-19 settings while others felt that: their status as Armed Forces young people was not recognised, staff lacked an understanding of their experiences and support had decreased as they got older and moved into 16-19 education. In addition, the changing nature of the relationship between educational institutions and parents as students move into 16-19 education and become more independent was highlighted as a challenge for this group of young people whose experiences are particularly likely to be shaped by their parents' jobs.
- **Practitioner understanding and attitudes:** There is a strong impetus among practitioners to support these young people and most agreed that additional support is required. However, a lack of understanding of Armed Forces young people's needs, a lack of training and funding and competing priorities all act as barriers to the delivery of this support.
- **Funding and resources:** The lack of system-level funding for Armed Forces young people in post-16 settings in England, or at any education phase in Scotland and Wales is a barrier to settings implementing this support.

## SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

Practitioners' agreement that these young people need support and their strong motivation to provide this was a strong theme throughout this research. In addition, the young people that contributed to the research had clear ideas regarding the support they wished to receive. Thus, the findings of this research have informed the creation of a best practice framework, building on The SCiP Alliance's school-level [Thriving Lives Toolkit](#).

The title of this research report: 'Diversity meets complexity' speaks to two key contextual considerations which underpin the framework and must be understood as the work to support Armed Forces young people in 16-19 education moves forward. These considerations are: the complexity of the 16-19 sector, and the diversity and variation in the needs and experiences of Armed Forces young people as a population. These contextual factors mean there is a requirement for leaders and practitioners to consider both Armed Forces young people's access to universal provision (available to all) and the targeting of support tailored their specific needs, and to place student voice and engagement at the centre of support plans.

Beyond these underpinning considerations, the framework sets out the following seven best practice principles.

- **Data and Identification:** we know our Armed Forces young people and their families.
- **Culture:** our culture recognises and celebrates the experiences of Armed Forces families.
- **Transition:** we provide specialist support for young people from Armed Forces families as they join and leave our setting.
- **Staff Awareness:** our staff are well informed about the experiences and needs of Armed Forces young people.
- **Wellbeing:** the wellbeing of Armed Forces young people is prioritised and supported.
- **Achievement:** the achievement of Armed Forces young people is maximised.
- **Parental Engagement:** we work with and involve parents from our Armed Forces community.



## 2 INTRODUCTION

The existing body of evidence on the experiences of Armed Forces children during compulsory school finds that they are more likely to face challenges affecting their education, including issues arising from frequent school moves, emotional stress and family pressures during parents' deployment. However, a paucity of comprehensive, comparable data is a persistent barrier to attempts to make cohort-wide, reliable comparisons of Service pupils' attainment. Thus, it is difficult to draw conclusions about whether, and how, these barriers impact on educational outcomes.

The latest Department for Education (DfE) analysis from the annual Armed Forces Covenant Report (2021) suggests broad parity in attainment at school-level between Service pupils and non-Service pupils, though it also reveals a negative impact of frequent school mobility. However, this data is drawn only from England and uses a narrower definition of Service child status than is broadly accepted,<sup>2</sup> limiting the strength of the conclusions. Indeed, Walker et al. (Walker, Selous, Misca & Ministry of Defence [MoD], 2020) highlight that comparisons and generalisations about Service pupils' attainment 'need to be treated with considerable caution' (p.19). They acknowledge that while there is a growing consensus that mobility-related educational disruption has an impact on attainment, the factors affecting Service children's attainment are complex and further research is required to build a full picture of the impact of Service life on attainment.

Similarly, previous research has suggested small but consistent disparities in higher education (HE) progression, with Service pupils being slightly less likely to enter HE after post-16 education (Armed Forces Covenant, 2019) but again, challenges with available data make generalisations problematic and Walker et al. advise 'considerable caution' (2020, p.20).

The issues with attainment and progression data highlight a principal challenge in the study of Service children and young people's education: inconsistent identification and tracking of this cohort. This is further discussed throughout this report with particular reference to data in the post-16 sector.

●● This research aims to build a greater understanding of the experiences of Armed Forces children in 16 to 19 education settings, to raise awareness of their needs and the barriers they may face, and to identify and share good practice that will enhance support for these students.

Notably, there is a paucity of research on Armed Forces young people's post-16 experiences, routes and outcomes. Therefore, there is a lack of understanding of how barriers experienced at school play out when young people are aged 16 to 19 and how post-16 experiences contribute to their experiences and underrepresentation in HE. Scoping research on this education phase found that many post-16 settings do not hold data on or monitor the outcomes of their Armed Forces students (Hall, 2021). Despite this, the research identified a strong will within the sector to provide support for these young people.

This research aims to build a greater understanding of the experiences of Armed Forces children in 16 to 19 education settings, to raise awareness of their needs and the barriers they may face, and to identify and share good practice that will enhance support for these students.

Specifically, the aforementioned scoping research on Armed Forces young people in post-16 education identified the following gaps in the evidence base, which this research seeks to address:

<sup>2</sup>The Department for Education (DfE) uses Service Pupil Premium (SPP) to identify Service pupils in this analysis. Not all Service pupils have accessed the SPP and eligibility is based on parental service in the previous 6 years whereas The SciP Alliance's definition includes parental service at any point in the first 25 years of life.

- The **experiences** of these young people in 16 to 19 education, including the challenges they face and the strengths they have.
- The **needs** of Armed Forces young people aged 16 to 19, and the extent to which they differ across different types of post-16 education and training providers.
- The extent to which different types of post-16 **providers meet their needs**.
- How and why Armed Forces young people make **post-16 and post-18 choices**.
- Armed Forces young people's **aspirations and attitudes** about higher education, and how their experiences shape this in different post-16 settings (see: McCullough & Hall, 2016; Hall, 2021; Lawrence, 2021; Dobson, 2021).

To address these gaps in the evidence, we draw on existing literature as well as primary research with young people, practitioners and a steering group of experts to explore the following four research questions:

1. What are Armed Forces young people's experiences of 16 to 19 education?
  - a) What needs (intrinsic effects of service life that contribute to disadvantage) do they have during their post-16 education?
  - b) What barriers (extrinsic or structural features of post-16 education and service life that contribute to disadvantage) do they face?
2. What influences Armed Forces young people's decisions about post-16 and post-18 education and training?
3. To what extent are leaders and practitioners in 16 to 19 settings aware of Armed Forces young people and their needs?
4. What are the key principles of good practice in supporting Armed Forces young people in 16 to 19 education?

The research findings presented in this report informed the creation of a best practice framework: 'Thriving Lives In Post-16 Education'. This framework extends the school level 'Thriving Lives Toolkit' and aims to support Armed Forces

young people by enabling post-16 educational settings to implement evidence-based best practice.

In the final section of this report, we summarise how the research findings underpinned the structure and content of the framework. By identifying the most pressing needs and the largest gaps for support, alongside simple tweaks to universal support, the framework targets both the highest leverage points for action and the most straightforward ways post-16 settings can take immediate action. The hope is this will result in tangible and strong progress in ensuring support of Armed Forces young people throughout their post-16 journey.

THE RESEARCH WAS COMMISSIONED BY THE SERVICE CHILDREN'S PROGRESSION ALLIANCE (SCIP ALLIANCE) AND FUNDED BY A COALITION OF UNI CONNECT PARTNERSHIPS AND THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER.



## 3 METHODOLOGY

This research combined a rapid review of the existing evidence, with primary research with young people and practitioners in settings across England, Scotland and Wales, plus a series of consultation workshops with a steering group of experts.

All methods sought to address each research question. Each main question was complemented with subsidiary questions, as shown in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1

| MAIN QUESTION  | SECONDARY QUESTION   |
|--|--|
| 1. What are Armed Forces young people's experiences of 16 to 19 education?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How do their experiences differ between different education settings, including FE colleges, sixths forms and apprenticeship providers?</li> <li>a. To what extent are Armed Forces young people's needs met in 16 to 19 provision?</li> </ul>   |
| 2. What influences Armed Forces young people's decisions about post-16 and post-18 education and training?               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How do their experiences in 16 to 19 settings influence their aspirations, attitudes and plans regarding post-18 pathways?</li> </ul>  |
| 3. To what extent are leaders and practitioners in 16 to 19 settings aware of Armed Forces young people and their needs? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What are leaders' and practitioners' understanding of Armed Forces young people's needs?</li> <li>b. How do they currently respond to these needs?</li> <li>c. How can leaders and practitioners support Armed Forces young people aged 16 to 19 with decisions about post-18 education and careers pathways?</li> </ul>                                       |
| 4. What are the key principles of good practice in supporting Armed Forces young people in 16 to 19 education?           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. To what extent does best practice look different in different 16 to 19 settings?</li> <li>b. How can leaders and practitioners support Armed Forces young people aged 16 to 19 so they reach their potential?</li> <li>c. How can leaders and practitioners support AFYP aged 16 to 19 with decisions about post-18 education and careers pathways?</li> </ul> |

The research findings explored in this report develop the evidence base on the experiences and needs of Armed Forces young people in post-16 education and any systemic barriers they might face. The findings have also informed the development of an organisational improvement framework, 'Thriving Lives In Post-16 Education', which builds on the school level 'Thriving Lives Toolkit' and sets out how post-16 settings can implement good practice for supporting Armed Forces young people (SCiP Alliance Thriving Lives Toolkit, n.d.). The framework is supported by a series of case studies that exemplify elements of best practice in post-16 settings across England, Wales and Scotland.



### 3.1 EVIDENCE REVIEW

This study began with a rapid review of the evidence on Armed Forces children and young people, and their experiences in education. The review brings together findings from 16 pieces of key literature, primarily published in the last 15 years.

An initial search of an academic database and web searches for public reports, including policy reports, were supplemented by additional items of literature when they were revealed by members of the expert steering group, or by references to other relevant literature that was cited.

The evidence reviewed fits into 3 categories:

1. The first is data on Armed Forces children, Armed Forces young people and Armed Forces distribution. Some of the key resources were Gribble and Fear, 2019; Hall, 2019a; MoD, 2021 and National Audit Office, 2013.
2. The second category relates specifically to Armed Forces young people's post-16 experiences of education, with McCullough and Hall, 2016; Dobson, 2021; Hall, 2021 and Lawrence, 2021 as central to guiding our research questions and the design of our fieldwork tools.
3. The third and final category relates to overall children and young people's experiences growing up in an Armed Forces family, where McCullough, Hall & Ellis, 2018; Hathaway, Rusotti, Metzger et al., 2018; Naval Families Federation, 2019; Walker, Selous, Misca & MoD 2020; and Piers, 2021 were referred to as key resources.

Further literature was reviewed, including sources on current best practice, FE/HE provision, the similarities and differences between the English, Welsh and Scottish education systems, and post-16 education offer. A full references list can be consulted at the end of the document.

By conducting the literature review prior to the other strands of the research, we were able to focus the primary research with practitioners and young people, and the consultation with the expert steering group, on filling 'gaps' in the existing research base and interrogating the extent to which findings relating to younger children apply to young people aged 16 to 19.

### 3.2 PRIMARY RESEARCH YOUNG PEOPLE FOCUS GROUPS

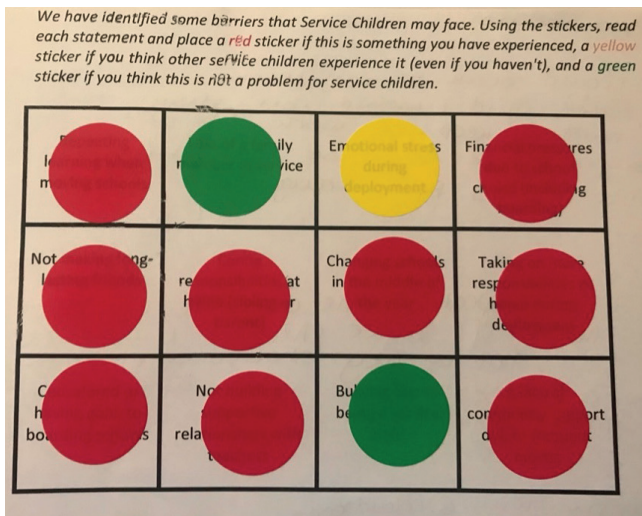
#### PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE

In order to ensure that we centred the voices of Armed Forces young people, we conducted 10 focus groups with three to six young people in each, with a total of 36 young people.

The focus group was structured in three sections:

1. A semi-structured focus group discussion covering questions about participants'
  - Experiences of education in primary and secondary school.
  - Experiences in post-16 education, including any challenges, drawing out in particular any differences between their experiences and those of other students.
  - Views on whether their experiences have led them to develop strengths.
  - Attitudes towards learning, managing workload and other responsibilities.
  - Decision-making process regarding their post-16 choices.
  - Post-18 plans and pathways.
  - Views on the support they currently receive from their setting.
  - Views on what other support they might need.
2. An activity designed to elicit a discussion about the barriers they had experienced during their education and barriers that they feel other Armed Forces young people or families are likely to experience (see Figure 1).
3. A recommendations activity in which young people were asked to complete the sentences (see Figure 2)
  - 'If I could speak to my teachers or college lecturers/tutors about being an Armed Forces child, I would tell them...'
  - 'If I could speak to the government about the needs of Armed Forces young people, I would tell them...'

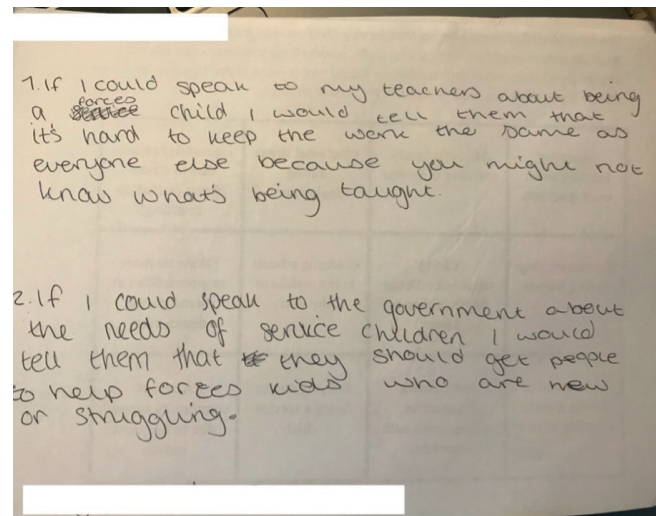
Figure 1. Barriers activity



To avoid problematising coming from an Armed Forces background, we combined a needs-based and asset-based approach, incorporating discussions about strengths young people have and how the Armed Forces lifestyle has impacted their life positively, as well as focusing discussions about challenges on the support they would like to receive.

All young people gave informed written consent to take part in the research.

Figure 2. If I could... activity



**SAMPLING**

The sample of post-16 settings included FE colleges, school sixth forms and standalone sixth form colleges across England, Wales and Scotland. We conducted one focus group in each setting we visited, with groups of three to six young people in each.

Table 2 details the number of focus groups conducted in each country, the setting types and the number of young people involved:

TABLE 2

| MAIN QUESTION   | ENGLAND   | WALES  | SCOTLAND |
|---|-----------|--|----------|
| <b>Total number of focus groups</b>   | <b>6</b>  | <b>2</b>   | <b>2</b> |
| <b>Number of young people involved across all focus groups</b>                          | <b>19</b> | <b>10</b>  | <b>7</b> |
| Number of focus groups (and number of young people) in sixth forms attached to schools. | 3 (11)    | 1 (4)  | 2 (7)    |
| Number of focus groups (and young people) in standalone sixth forms.                    | 1 (3)     | -  | -        |
| Number of focus groups (and young people) in FE colleges.                               | 2 (5)     | -  | -        |
| Number of focus groups in other settings.   | -         | 1 focus group was conducted at a residential summer school in a Welsh HEI. 6 young people took part: 2 attended colleges, 4 attended school sixth forms. | -        |

Target post-16 settings were identified using a sampling framework designed to include colleges, sixth forms and private training providers, each in a different county.

In order to ensure that settings were likely to be able to identify the requisite number of participants, counties with a high proportion of Armed Forces families and young people were targeted. Initially, counties in England that were most likely to have a higher population of Armed Forces young people were identified using SCiP Alliance data on the number of Armed Forces children in pre-16 education identified through Service Pupil Premium registration (The SCiP Alliance, 2020). This created a short list of counties in the 8th, 9th and 10th deciles for the number of Armed Forces children in schools.

Target post-16 settings were then identified using information about the location of military bases and barracks. We sought to ensure our target settings would result in representation of young people with parents in each of the four branches of the Armed Forces. While we did not rule settings in or out of the sample on the basis of which branch of the forces students' parents serve in, we asked young people about this and were able to include young people with parents serving in each of the four branches of the military within our sample.

In Scotland, post-16 settings were identified solely on the basis of the location of military bases, while in Wales, stakeholder networks and SSCE Cymru supported the recruitment of settings with known populations of Armed Forces young people. Several settings in England were also identified through key stakeholders' networks.

In total, 34 settings were approached and asked to take part in the research: 16 in England, 6 in Wales and 12 in Scotland. When it came to recruiting and confirming participating settings, we encountered several difficulties.

The most common was settings not being prepared to track and identify Armed Forces young people enrolled or not having the time or resources to organise their participation. Recruitment was particularly challenging in Wales and for FE colleges in England.

We sought to recruit private training providers to the sample through local networks, such as The Devon and Cornwall Training Provider network and the Coders Guild, but none were able to take part. We conducted consultations with four network leads and directors, who suggested that this was because training providers were unlikely to hold data on Armed Forces status and would likely find it more difficult to ensure that a specific group of students was able to gather for a focus group due to work placements and variations in timetables. Therefore, our final sample did not include young people studying with private training providers or doing an apprenticeship.

## PRACTITIONER INTERVIEWS

Practitioner interviews were conducted at the same settings as the focus groups with young people. This allowed us to gather insights into:

1. How practitioners perceived the needs and strengths of Armed Forces young people and the extent to which this view aligned with students' perspectives.
2. The support, if any, the setting provides for Armed Forces young people and any barriers to providing this support.

We recruited the member of staff who was best placed to answer questions regarding support available to Armed Forces young people, or in relation to their lives at school. In most cases, this was someone involved in student life, pastoral support, diversity and inclusion or learning support, and in five cases was a staff member with a named responsibility for supporting Armed Forces young people.



## PRACTITIONER SURVEY

We conducted an online survey of practitioners working in UK-based or UK-governed post-16 settings, including; high schools in Scotland, school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, FE colleges and training provider settings UK-wide.

The survey included demographics questions, multiple choice questions and three open-ended questions relating to the current practice at the settings.

The respondents needed to be working in settings where the presence of Armed Forces young people was at least known, if not tracked or analysed. We collected responses both from UK settings and MOD schools in Cyprus (n = 66). For the purpose of this report, we will focus our findings only on UK-based respondents (n = 46).

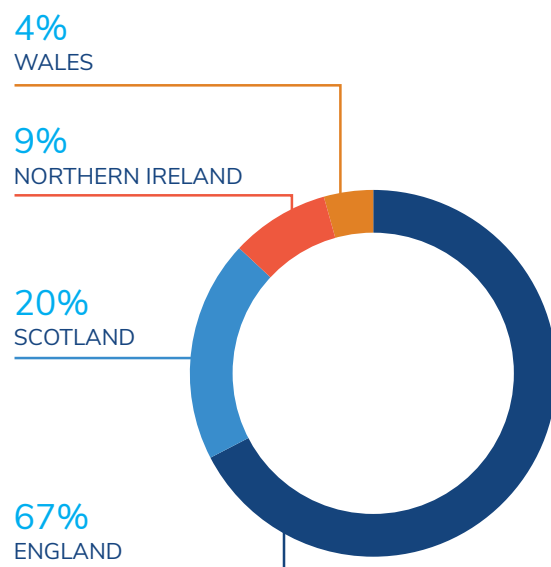
The survey included questions on:

- Practitioners' knowledge of common barriers or difficulties experienced by Armed Forces young people.
- Their attitudes regarding Armed Forces young people's needs and strengths.
- Current practice or support offered to these young people.
- Barriers experienced by settings in embedding any or further support.

Of 46 responses; 67% came from settings in England, 20% from Scotland, 9% from Northern Ireland and 4% from Wales (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3**

LOCATION OF UK RESPONDENTS' SETTINGS (n = 46)

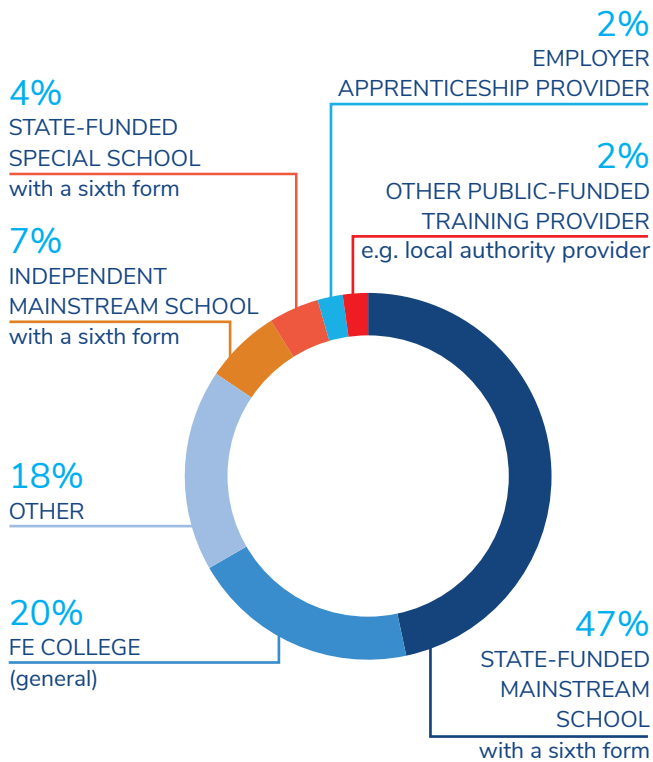


Practitioners most commonly worked in state-funded mainstream schools with a sixth form (47%), followed by FE colleges (20%) and 'other' setting types (18%) (Figure 4).

The spread of roles of respondents are shown in Figure 5, with senior leaders (23%), middle leaders (18%) and teachers (15%) as the most common roles.

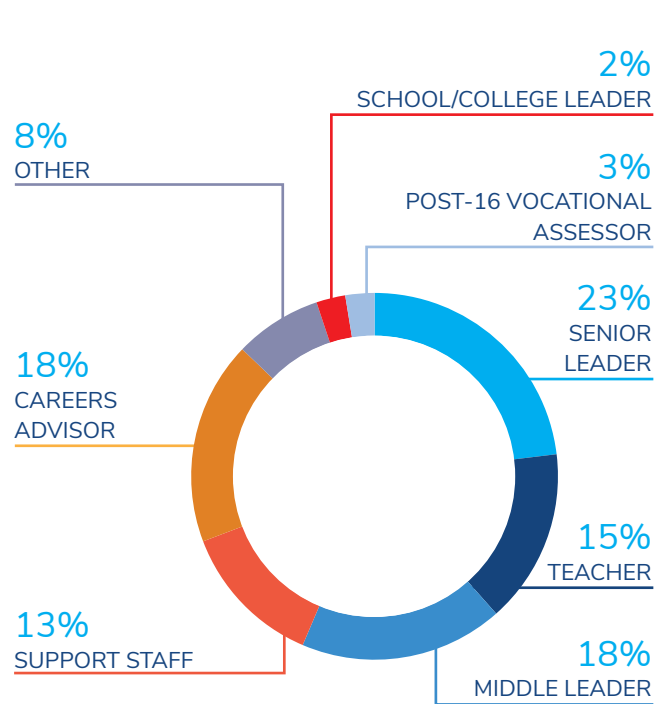
**FIGURE 4.**

UK SETTING TYPE (n = 46)



**FIGURE 5.**

UK RESPONDENTS' ROLES (n = 46)



### 3.3 EXPERT STEERING GROUP

We convened a steering group of experts to support with the formulation of the best practice framework. The steering group took part in two 2-hour online consultation workshops.

In the first workshop, experts were presented with the emerging findings from the literature review and primary fieldwork and were asked to generate a long list of possible themes for best practice. Participants also discussed how a best practice framework would be received by the post-16 sector, and the key contextual considerations that would influence how able leaders and practitioners would be to put the recommended practice in place.

These considerations were further researched and are presented as overarching principles at the start of the framework.

In the second consultation, participants were presented with a refined list of themes that would form the principles of best practice. Participants discussed what good practice would look like within each principle.

The expert steering group included:

- Phil Bannister, Pupil Premium team at Department for Education.
- Russell Collier, Head of Global Education at Ministry of Defence UK.
- Philip Dent, Director of The SCiP Alliance.
- Laura Falconer, CEO of Forces Children Scotland.
- Teresa Frith, Senior Skills Policy Manager at Association of Colleges.
- Nicola Fear, Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research at King's College London.
- Alistair Ferrier, Head of Policy & Professional Practice at Skills Development Scotland.
- Edward Harris, Military Assistant to Chief of Joint Operations at HM Forces.
- Gemma Kay, Director of Aspire to HE Uni Connect Programme.
- Rachel Lad, Projects Manager at The SCiP Alliance.
- Katherine Lawrence, Head of Operations at The SCiP Alliance.
- Andrew Malcolm, Senior Education Officer at Ministry of Defence.
- Professor Siobhan Neary, Professor of Career Development Practice at University of Derby.
- Claire O'Neill, Head of Southern Universities Network.
- Elizabeth Rodulson, Armed Forces Young Person.
- Lily Russell, Southern Universities Network Progression Mentor at Weymouth College.
- Matthew Thorne, Assistant Head of Sixth Form at Nene Park Academy.
- Dr Peter Tormey, Senior Widening Participation Officer at Edinburgh Napier University.
- Nicola Turner, Senior Fair Access Adviser at UCAS.
- Joanna Wolfe, Participation Lead Officer at SSCE Cymru.

## 4 BACKGROUND

### 4.1 DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Within the UK Armed Forces context, a 'Service' or 'Armed Forces child' is the child of a parent or carer who is serving in the regular Armed Forces, or as a reservist, or who has done so at any point in the first 25 years of that child's life. The 2021 MOD's report, based on the Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FamCas), states that 80% of Armed Forces families have children, meaning children represent a significant share of the Armed Forces population (MoD, 2021b).

There is, to an extent, a lack of alignment across the different UK nations and different education institutions regarding the terminology used to refer to young people aged 16 to 19 whose parents serve or have served in the Armed Forces. The existing literature on school-aged pupils commonly uses the terms 'Service children' and 'Armed Forces children'. As this research focuses on young people aged 16 to 19, the term 'children' is not only inappropriate, but could have a distancing or patronising effect.

Across the post-16 sector there is also variation in whether this age group are referred to as 'students' or 'learners', as is commonly the case in FE colleges and other training provider institutions, or as 'pupils', as is often the case in school sixth forms. Therefore, throughout the report we primarily use the term 'young people' and are referring, unless otherwise stated, to 16 to 19 year olds. We feel that this is a more appropriate term fitting the focus on the post-16 context and representing the stage of life that individuals in this age group are in.

Further, whereas the term 'Service' is commonly used in England and in Wales, in Scotland the term 'Armed Forces child' is used exclusively. This is to distinguish the military

community from families who work in service and hospitality. This research project included extensive consultation with an expert steering group in which we reached a consensus that 'Armed Forces' is the preferable term, as it supports the applicability of the research in Scotland and is also clear in England and Wales.

Therefore, throughout the report we refer to 'Armed Forces young people' (Armed Forces young people), 'young people from Armed Forces families' and 'Armed Forces families'. We occasionally use the term 'Service life' to refer to the experiences of these families and young people, as the term 'Armed Forces life' too far implies that we are referring to the experiences of those serving in the military.

Note also that we use the terms 'post-16' and '16-19 education' interchangeably throughout the report. We consulted with experts across the three nations involved in this work regarding the appropriate terminology for this phase of education and found a lack of consensus regarding which phrase was more appropriate or most commonly used. Particular questions were raised in reference to whether 19-year-olds are included as some will have progressed to higher education at this age. Throughout the report we are referring to the phase of education that young people engage in when they are aged between 16 and 19 years old that is not higher education and the sector that provides education during this phase. We appreciate that practitioners working in different locations or different settings might feel more affinity with a particular term but seek to include all settings and practitioners in this phase of education.

## 4.2 IDENTIFICATION OF ARMED FORCES CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In England, the main marker for the presence of children from Armed Forces or Service backgrounds in schools is the Service Pupil Premium (SPP). This is additional funding offered to schools in “recognition of the specific challenges children from service families face” that aims to support schools in the provision of pastoral support for these children (Ministry of Defence, n.d.). This funding stops at the end of year 11 and, as a result, identifying and tracking Armed Forces young people in post-16 education is more difficult. In Wales and Scotland, additional funding mechanisms are not organised on a pupil-by-pupil basis (see section 4.3) and so do not link to the identification of Armed Forces pupils. Thus the data on the presence of Armed Forces young people in post-16 settings is also patchy and inconsistent in these nations.

In 2019, around 76,318 pupils were eligible for the SPP (Hall, 2019a). Currently, there are Armed Forces children in 52% of state schools in England but, in around 50% of those schools, there are only one or two Armed Forces children on roll (Hall, 2019a).

This means that though there is a high distribution of Armed Forces children across the UK, most schools have a very small cohort and may therefore be less likely to focus on targeting support at these pupils specifically.





At the end of year 11, in England, the SPP funding stops and there are no other system-level, statistical markers of the Armed Forces youth population transitioning into post-16 education. This has negative implications both for the provision of tailored support and for the likelihood that these young people will be monitored in terms of their post-16 pathways, their well-being, their attainment and their post-18 progression.

Hall (2021) highlights that tracking Armed Forces young people over the age of 16 is made more difficult by the diversity of settings in the post-16 sector (see further discussion in section 6.1). A streamlined system of data transition between schools and post-16 providers is needed, but the impetus to create this, without attached funding, is low.

Although there are complex implications in defining Armed Forces children and young people as a disadvantaged group, as Service life is not an inherently negative experience, the case for providing post-16 settings with additional funding is strong. The research presented in this report highlights that there are some common experiences among Armed Forces families that mean young people aged 16 to 19 require extra support from their education institutions.

There is also significant variation in the socio-economic status of Armed Forces families (Gribble & Fear, 2019). Despite employment stability, family conditions are often dictated by the serving parent's rank, and may change drastically upon retirement, with some families experiencing less or no material disadvantage, while others live in or close to relative poverty (Gribble & Fear, 2019; SSAFA, 2020).

Additional funding would bring with it the benefit of more readily available data on Armed Forces cohorts. While some of the colleges we spoke to are either already collecting their own data on Armed Forces students on enrolment, or plan to start doing so soon, others remain unaware of this cohort. Some believe they have no Armed Forces students, even when they are located near to military bases in areas with a high proportion of Armed Forces children in local schools.

Colleges reported challenges with collecting this data. Collecting this data requires students or families to disclose their service status voluntarily or for schools to reliably share data, which does not always happen automatically.

Furthermore, there is some existing evidence that young people are less likely to self-report as a member of an Armed Forces family in post-16 settings. This may be due to not wanting to be singled out, not understanding why the information is necessary, or not wanting to be identified by their parents' profession (Hall, 2021).

During our fieldwork, we found that post-16 settings that did not collect this data were less likely to provide tailored support. Of course, where settings are not aware of these young people's status, this puts them at a disadvantage in terms of their visibility, and the education institutions' ability to fully support them.

The case for better identification and tracking of this group of students is clear; having accurate data improves individual education settings' ability to support these young people and offers tangible evidence necessary to create an impetus for policy level change.

## 4.3 WALES AND SCOTLAND

The Welsh and Scottish governments do not provide the SPP. In Wales, SSCE Cymru (Supporting Service Children in Education) is funded by the Welsh government to provide support for Service pupils. Currently, their remit does not include 16- to 19-year-olds. In Scotland, settings can apply for additional funding from a wide range of grants and schemes aimed at supporting Armed Forces pupils' education but none, at the time of writing, explicitly target 16- to 19-year-olds.

Given that, in these countries, funding is not allocated by pupil, education institutions cannot rely on funding information to identify Armed Forces children and young people. Gaps in data have been cited as a fundamental barrier to providing sufficient support to Armed Forces pupils (Walker et al., 2020, p. 56).

In the academic year 2022-23, Wales will begin to collect data on the Armed Forces population at a system-level with the assistance of Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru.

In Scotland, at least since 2016, it is more commonplace for schools to ask about Armed Forces status on enrolment. This is due to data reporting that Armed Forces young people are present in all Local Authorities in Scotland (Forces Children's Education, 2017; Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, 2022a). With the appointment of the ADES National Transitions Officer (NTO), Local Authorities receive support and guidance in tracking Armed Forces pupil mobility and data, which means schools are generally more aware of their presence at the setting and have more data available (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, 2022b).

The differences between the English, Welsh and Scottish school systems are also of particular relevance to Armed Forces young people, who are more likely move between these systems, sometimes multiple times, sometimes at less-than-ideal points in their education. School start times and transition requirements differ between Scotland, England and Wales. In the Scottish system, children start school at age 5, rather than age 4, and primary school consists of 7 years (P1-P7, equivalent to years 1-7 in England). Scottish secondary school is six years long, as opposed to England and Wales's five secondary years plus two post-16 years. In Scotland, secondary school years S1-S6 are equivalent to years 8-13 in England (The School Run, n.d.).

Additionally, in the Welsh system, the requirement to study Welsh presents a barrier to young people who join Welsh schools at a late stage in their education and can be a particularly challenging for students for whom English is already a second language (Walker et al., 2020).

Thus, as Armed Forces young people move between England, Wales and Scotland, some experience difficult transitions in terms of subject and curriculum continuation, examination requirements and consistency with their qualifications. Further, variation in tuition fees and requirements across England and Scotland to access student support, affect families' opportunities to access higher education (Walker et al., 2020).

This research includes post-16 settings in England, Wales and Scotland. This enables us to compare the experiences of young people in each system and to examine, where relevant, the impact of cross border moves. We also consulted with practitioners and other experts in all three countries to ensure that the findings and resultant framework are applicable to all nations.

## 5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section draws together findings from the rapid review of the existing evidence, the primary qualitative fieldwork with Armed Forces young people and practitioners, as well as the results of the practitioner survey. Through the triangulation and synthesis of this data, we contribute to the evidence base on the needs of Armed Forces young people aged 16 to 19 and the barriers they may face in the post-16 education sector.

We differentiate between the needs and experiences of Armed Forces young people in post-16 education (section 5.1) and the barriers that young people and leaders face to accessing or providing support (section 5.2). Both may lead to disadvantage and poorer outcomes for Armed Forces young people, if unaddressed.

We define 'needs' as the 'intrinsic effects of Service life that "contribute to differential experiences and outcomes"' and 'barriers' as 'the structural features that "contribute to differential experiences and outcomes"', as highlighted by our steering group.



## 5.1 NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES

This section explores Armed Forces young people's needs in education and beyond. Here we refer to 'needs' as 'the results of elements of life in an Armed Forces family that contribute to Armed Forces young people in post-16 education having different experiences or outcomes to other young people'. Needs that arise as a result of being in an Armed Forces family may lead to a young person being disadvantaged, requiring additional support from their post-16 setting and, if not addressed, might lead to poorer outcomes.

We discuss the following needs and experiences:

- Mobility.
- Parental deployment.
- Increased responsibilities and resultant stress.
- How Armed Forces young people make decisions about their post-16 and post-18 pathways.

Throughout, we recognise the extensive variation in the experiences of Armed Forces young people (see also section 6.1). Not all Armed Forces young people experience the elements of Service life that we discuss (e.g., parental deployment), and among those that do experience these things, not all young people are disadvantaged by them.

### 5.1.1 MOBILITY

**By the time Armed Forces young people reach post-16 education, they may have been uprooted from schools and communities “as many as eight or more times”, in addition to having experienced periods of family separation, high stress, parental deployment or bereavement (Lawrence, 2021, p.7). Data shows that 21% of Service families have moved in the last year, with variation in the rate of moves by type of service.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, 42% of Service families have moved at least twice in the last five years (Lawrence, 2021). Out of all Armed Forces families that moved in 2021, 71% reported having their children change schools for service reasons (MoD, 2021b).**

The DfE and NCSL note mobility as a “pivotal factor” in Armed Forces children and young people's educational success, having an inverse impact academically and pastorally (McCullouch, Hall & Ellis, 2018). In addition, mobility may lead Armed Forces children and young people to feel a lack of agency, which can result in a general disengagement from the education system and feelings of otherness (McCullouch, Hall & Ellis, 2018). Nearly half (42%) of parents report that mobility has an adverse effect on their child's education, with the other half (47%) reporting that there were mixed effects (National Audit Office, 2013).

Cross-border mobility presents particular challenges. When families move between different nations in the UK, the differences in the structure of the system, the curriculum and the qualifications can cause considerable confusion for families and challenges for young people (Walker et al., 2020). One young person in a Scottish sixth form explained:

<sup>3</sup> 24% Army, 22% RAF, 11% Royal Navy/Royal Marines.

●● *I've had a slightly more negative experience transitioning to the Scottish system, because when I moved from England, I was already doing my GCSEs and going into the final year, where it was proper, full steam ahead. I was pretty close to doing those final exams... because I transitioned the summer before final year, it was quite hard to adjust.*

When young people move in or out of Wales, they may not be able to catch up on, or continue to access, Welsh language lessons, leading to them missing out on a qualification.

While the findings above relate primarily to school-aged Armed Forces children, our research found that the impact of earlier mobility has a knock-on effect on young people's post-16 experiences. Practitioners highlighted that disrupted learning in earlier years appeared to have impacted earlier attainment and subject confidence, with implications for young people's post-16 and post-18 pathways.

Among the Armed Forces young people that took part in our fieldwork, almost all had attended only one post-16 setting and many had been settled in the same area for at least a couple of years. However, most had experienced considerable mobility during their primary and early secondary schooling. Practitioners noted that this was often intentional, with families trying to reduce mobility during students' GCSE, college and sixth form years, to provide stability during these qualifications:

●● *I think the families, if their children are staying to do A-Levels, they want to try to provide stability for them... I think the parents are very much aware of that.*

Thus, in post-16 education, where there are needs arising from mobility, this most often pertains to earlier mobility having a far-reaching impact - generally speaking - on three aspects of their educational experiences: academic learning, social relationships and having unmet needs.

## I. LEARNING

**Mobility is associated with young people experiencing the following issues with their academic experience and progression: curriculum gaps, changes and repetitions, discontinued specialist academic or pastoral provision, delays in transfers, poor communication between schools, poor well-being, disrupted friendships and increased potential for bullying, among others (Walker et al., 2020, p. 9).**

Our findings reflect this. For example, young people mentioned that missed learning resulted in either poor attainment or boredom, leading to disengagement:

●● *Because we were moving about, I missed a lot of maths lessons. And maths is really not my strong point. Because of that domino effect of it.*

●● *I remember doing year six twice. Because I did it at one school and then I went to another one and [they] were like, nah, you've joined us at a weird time, so you've got to do year six again. So I think that affects your education because you're like, I've done all these subjects, I'm not interested, I don't want to be here.*



## II. RELATIONSHIPS

Armed Forces children and young people may develop a transitory mindset as a result of repeated mobility (Rose & Rose, 2018; Lawrence, 2021). In turn, this transitory mindset affects their ability to build long-lasting relationships or long-term plans. This can look like short-lived friendships and temporary goals. We found evidence of this transitory mindset regarding friendships and relationships with school staff among 16 to 19 year olds:

●● *I think I see things more as temporary. Like I never sort of see everyone as fixed. I'm more used to thinking, like, it's okay because I will be leaving these people behind.*

Young people also spoke of short-lived friendships and the effect of earlier mobility on how they relate to others. Some recalled that during their childhoods, they were unable to maintain long-term friendships due to frequent moves. This had a considerable emotional impact on young people and some reported impacts on their sense of belonging:

●● *There's a lot of isolation that comes with it because you're moving around. And I think after a certain point it's harder to make friends and it's harder to feel like you fit in.*

In another case, parents had protected their children from the impact of mobility by arranging grandparents to care for them, but this had other implications regarding young people's relationship with parents:

●● *I haven't been affected because my grandparents looked after me whilst my parents were posted around the country... even though it hasn't affected me in terms of moving, it means that my parents have been quite absent, [I'm not] getting help... [they're not] there.*

Previous research suggests that feelings of isolation and social difficulties among Armed Forces young people can be mediated by feeling a sense of belonging in the military community. Post-16 settings can harness this effect by creating social networks for Armed Forces young people within the setting, for example, by running cadet programmes or other extracurricular groups for Armed Forces young people.

## III. UNMET NEEDS

**For some Armed Forces young people, frequent moves resulted in their needs going unmet until late in their secondary years or until they joined their post-16 setting.**

In the case of one sixth form student, earlier mobility resulted in an undiagnosed literacy special educational need (SEN), identified only when she started at the sixth form:

●● *In my old schools, think I'd always make comments that I'm really struggling, that I can't read this text. They'd give me big text and I'll be like, I cannot read it... And they just never picked up on anything like that. They just go... get on with it.*

In another example, an AFYP had struggled academically throughout secondary school, because of their responsibilities at home. When they moved to a new school for their GCSEs, the school was not aware of their home situation and they did not receive any support:

*I had no one [at home] to help me revise or whatever. So, I didn't really revise that much. And I think that if I had maybe a bit more time in school to revise, then that would have helped.*

### 5.1.2 DEPLOYMENT

Research suggests Armed Forces children and young people view deployment separation as “a far greater challenge than mobility” (McCullough, Hall & Ellis, 2018, p.13). The experience of deployment (having one or both parents away, for diverse reasons and to – sometimes - undisclosed locations, with an unknown level or risk), leads to emotional stress and, in some cases, young people having to take on extra responsibilities in the home. Both factors can impact young people's education. We found that, while the impact of the former may reduce as young people become 'used to' parents being away, the impact of the latter as young people get older, with young people finding it challenging to balance home responsibilities and their studies.

#### EMOTIONAL STRESS DUE TO DEPLOYMENT

**Young people in our focus groups identified deployment as the greatest cause of emotional stress, as well as the main barrier to their educational performance.**

Previous studies have found that Armed Forces children and young people experience considerable emotional stress, anxiety and a lack of support, on top of long and repeated periods of separation and deployment (McCullough, Hall & Ellis, 2018).

The impact is worsened in the case of long deployments or during exam periods (Engel et al., 2010, cited in Piers, 2021). In teenagers from Armed Forces families, the effects of separation may result in a range of behavioural challenges, depression and anxiety, as well as parentification from the family (Hathaway, Russotti, Metzger, Cerulli & Center, 2018).

McCullough, Hall & Ellis (2018) note that often the emotional toll on their educational performance may not be realised until later. This may mean that some Armed Forces young people who attain well at secondary level, despite experiencing emotional stress, will struggle and require additional support during their post-16 education.

In addition, there is an association between young people experiencing a greater number of unaccompanied deployments (with single parents or both parents being away from the family) and a reduced likelihood of progressing to university (McCullough et al., 2018, p. 14). This points to an urgent need for support in the context of post-16 education.

Most of the young people we interviewed spoke about parental deployment as an extremely challenging period of time. The emotional toll of having a parent away from home, in potentially dangerous situations, on top of having to meet responsibilities at home and school, was often overwhelming. Young people felt strongly about the negative impact of parents' deployment on their education:

●● *It does take a hold of you, especially when they're gone... you've got everything bearing down on you, school, work, general household things. And you do feel about to explode from it all.*

Young people reported feeling intense fear and anxiety during parents' deployment:

●● *Luckily... my dad was not injured while he was away, but it was traumatizing. The fear of it is absolutely traumatizing.*

A few also reported having experienced difficulties with their mental health as a result of stress related to parents' deployment. One student felt they had not been supported with this at secondary school:

●● *But the secondary school I went to, they didn't really understand that, so I really didn't cope well with anxiety and stress and everything, they didn't offer support.*

In addition, young people acknowledged the impact of deployment on the non-deployed parent, which in turn, placed further strain on the young people themselves:

●● *[My Mum] had a full time job...she was just so stressed and busy, she'd wake up in the morning, have to get us all sorted for school. Then she'd do a full day of work... make sure the house is running... deal with her poor health, especially when he is away. I think she struggled mentally...when you see your parent like that, it's awful to see.*

While many of these accounts referred to young people's experiences of deployment during their school years, the impact of the emotional stress was long lasting, with one young person discussing the long-term impact of anxiety and separation. The disrupted relationship she had with her father meant that the focus of their interactions were academic performance, which led to her burning out after GCSEs:

●● *We [Dad and her] mostly spoke about school and my education, so it really impacted how I looked upon my education. I find academics are really important to me. And I've pushed myself when I actually needed support.*

When speaking about the challenges in education from emotional stress associated with parental deployment, some young people highlighted that non-military staff often did not understand this as a challenge:

●● *The teachers were mostly civilian, so they didn't really understand that you have a lot to cope with. Your parent's gone for months... sometimes you don't even get to say goodbye, and there's your dad gone for six-odd months in an unknown country. Perhaps you can't nothing. It's soul-destroying for a period time.*

The extent to which young people felt supported with these challenges differed by their post-16 setting's awareness of their family situation. Some Armed Forces young people in college felt that this stress was not acknowledged or understood by staff, whereas most in school sixth forms felt that enough pastoral support was on offer if they asked.

The availability of this support appeared to be driven by the settings' awareness of their Armed Forces young people's cohort, as the SPP in year 11 allowed them to identify these pupils. Most colleges, however, had no way of identifying Armed Forces young people on roll and were therefore less likely to reach out with specialised support.

Reflecting this, some college students emphasised that the main change they would like to see in their education settings is a greater awareness among staff of the emotional stress that deployment causes:

●● *Just what it's like, because obviously your dad, even if your dad's not out of the country like mine, they can be away for a couple of weeks and then that can affect your college experience.*

Often, Armed Forces young people find the burden of explaining, re-explaining, or justifying their difficulties by reminding staff and practitioners of the situation at home exhausting, which at times dissuades them from requesting support or advocating for reasonable adjustments (e.g., deadline extensions).

#### INCREASED RESPONSIBILITIES DUE TO DEPLOYMENT

**Young people were taking on additional responsibilities at home during deployment, and struggled to balance these with their educational responsibilities.**

During deployments, Armed Forces young people are more likely than other young people to have caring responsibilities; caring for parents with ill health, or for siblings when the non-service parent is unable to (McCullough et al., 2018). In addition, as parents leave and return periodically from deployment, this can result in young people's identity and role in the family shifting, creating a sense of instability within the home (Walker et al., 2020; Naval Families Federation, 2019).

A report on the experiences of Naval families found that older children feel more negatively than younger children towards their parent's career due to the responsibilities they face or their changing role in the family (Gribble & Fear, 2019), suggesting that the negative impact of deployment may be felt more strongly in post-16 education than at secondary level.

In line with previous findings about the impact of deployment on older children, we found that deployment led to an increase in young people's home responsibilities, which in turn impacted their education, in particular their ability to meet deadlines. This ranges from managing chores or preparing food, to taking on work to help with income:

●● *I've got to feed the dogs, do the dishwasher, clean the kitchen. So I've got take on those responsibilities when I get home... and then I've also got work to do and then it all balances out. So I'm doing multiple jobs at once.*

Some young people self-identified as young carers and in some cases this situation had arisen as parents were not present:

●● *I have a younger brother with autism, he hasn't been able to get the support at home that he needs because, even though my grandparents did their best, they didn't have the education on that.*

Students suggested that where staff do not recognise the challenges and responsibilities they face at home, this made it challenging for them and they did not feel supported.

●● You've got so much on your plate... I think there's a sense of, because you're young, they think you do just get home and doss off. But it's different for a service child.

Practitioners themselves felt that they generally recognised that Armed Forces young people might feel stressed by these responsibilities, however they also highlighted that many other students have considerable family responsibilities and, in many cases, more challenging home environments. This indicates, to an extent, that some practitioners may not view Armed Forces young people as having unique needs or needs that are severe enough to require additional support. This could form a barrier to Armed Forces young people receiving sufficient support in post-16 settings.

Indeed, in the practitioner survey, over 3 in 5 practitioners (68%) agreed that Armed Forces young people have needs in education different to other pupils (Figure 9). However, 1 in 5 practitioners (22%, see Figure 10) reported that prioritising other groups of students in need of support was a barrier to their setting supporting Armed Forces young people.

### 5.1.3 INDEPENDENCE AND STRESS

**Experiences related to Service life, namely mobility and parental deployment, combined with the culture of the military, appear to lead to some Armed Forces young people having a heightened sense of duty, independence and responsibility, and having to take on additional caring or home responsibilities.**

Some previous research suggests that Armed Forces children are more likely to be independent, adaptable and able to take on responsibilities (McCulloch and Hall, 2016).

McCulloch and Hall (2016) suggest that this independence occurs as a result of Armed Forces children being less likely to have consistent supportive adults in their lives due to school moves and parental absence (see section 5.1.2), and that this independence is then further reinforced as the military community holds these attributes in high esteem.

There is some debate regarding whether this is a positive or negative effect on Armed Forces young people's educational outcomes and well-being. While independence and responsibility might be seen as positive strengths (Longfield, 2018), these skills may be borne out of bearing emotional strain at an early age, whilst prized traits, such as resilience, may be acquired coping mechanisms that obscure young people's needs (McCulloch et al., 2018). Resilience, in particular, has been subject to debate with regard to Service children (see Hall, 2019b for a full review).

McCulloch et al. (2018) suggest that the development of these strengths is positively associated with HE progression, as a "strongly-held sense of identity with reflected moral performance, courage and independence" may result in young people being more likely to attend university (p. 19).



On the other hand, the emotional strain of bearing greater responsibilities may have a negative impact on young people's well-being and, potentially, their educational attainment. The authors explain that these positive traits may mask the effects of experiencing challenges:

●● *It might be argued that if a child is told often enough that they are brave for example, then it becomes rooted [...]. The Service child's recital of values indicating pride, determination and so on may be masking the impact of the loss of agency imposed by the Service child's life. (p.18)*

There is also likely to be considerable individual variation, both in the development of these strengths and whether the expectation of independence and resilience has an adverse effect on young people's well-being.

We found mixed trends that support both a positive and a negative view of Armed Forces young people developing greater independence. Armed Forces young people in post-16 education spoke about how they had become independent as a result of their circumstances. Whilst most felt that their non-Service parent supported them, they also felt that the absence of their Service parent meant they had less adult support and had to become more independent.

Some practitioners agreed that Armed Forces young people are more likely to have particular strengths in comparison to other students, including being more adaptable to change and being more mature:

●● *I think they tend to be a bit less flappable... they tend to be more stoic they accept things... they have that bit more experience, might be more mature.*



Not all practitioners agreed with this, however, and most also suggested that, despite general trends, there is considerable variation between young people.

While young people generally spoke positively about being more independent or resilient to difficult circumstances, viewing these perceived strengths as a benefit of service life, in some cases, these traits appeared to reduce help-seeking behaviour. This is a negative effect of greater independence and it reduces the likelihood that Armed Forces young people will access the support they need:

●● *Because I've gotten so used to doing it all myself. Now when I'm struggling... [teachers say] 'if you're struggling tell us'. But I just, I don't know. I don't think of it... I don't think, oh, I'll go ask for help.*

In addition, young people felt that their status as an Armed Forces child was not often recognised as something that required additional support. This further reduced help-seeking behaviour, particularly in regard to specific issues relating to Service life:

●● *You get conditioned into believing that it's not much of a problem...you get used to doing it by yourself, just dealing with a parent not being there, missing them. The teachers don't really think about it either. It's normalised... a child who has parents in the Army, it's part of their life. It's inevitable. So it's just, swept under the carpet.*

## 5.1.4 ASPIRATIONS AND DECISION-MAKING

This section examines the key drivers underlying Armed Forces young people's aspirations and decision-making process with regard to their post-16 education or training and post-18 education, training or employment.

### ASPIRATIONS

**Most young people involved in the focus groups had clear, set aspirations for their post-18 pathways and, in some cases, their careers.**

Given that research suggests that the predictive accuracy of young people's intentions to pursue post-16 and post-18 education is high from Y7 onwards, and over 80% from Y10 (Croll, 2009), asking young people about their plans is a relatively good measure of their likely future pathways.

Young people were pursuing a range of courses and careers including IT, childcare, linguistics, fashion, astrophysics and engineering. Most of the young people in FE colleges were planning to go on to training contracts or apprenticeships.

Contrastingly, young people at sixth forms or high schools were working towards A-level qualifications or equivalent and had plans that included university degrees:

●● *I'm hoping to go to university and do civil engineering. For me, it was a choice of university because I wanted to get the more academic side of it, rather than the hands-on side of it. I don't really think I looked into it [apprenticeships] that much.*

Practitioners highlighted that this difference likely results from the typical intake of colleges and the focus on technical qualifications:

●● *Because if they come to FE, they go on a specific course, that narrows their goals down. So I don't see service students who generally want to go to university, because those students are probably on A-level courses. I wouldn't generalise, but most of the students that I've seen on my courses would be the less academic type.*

In the case of the sixth form college, most of the young people we spoke to were considering university. However, the practitioner (who is also a designated member of staff for Armed Forces pupils) highlighted that, in recent years, there's been a strong push towards FE and apprenticeships in the Armed Forces young people population:

●● *When I speak to students, they might have [university] as a backup, but they just want to get out to the world of work. Well, I mean the financial side might be a concern, but it's generally more of a positive choice rather a negative choice against university, from the impression I get, as in; 'That's what I want to do. That's the path that I want to follow. I've never wanted to go to university. I want to get out there'.*

## PARENTAL ASPIRATIONS AND INFLUENCE

**The practitioners we interviewed suggested that Armed Forces parents were generally highly aspirational regarding their children's career options and the possibility of them progressing to further or higher education.**

One practitioner highlighted that parental aspirations for their children could sometimes be influenced by parents' rank and qualifications:

●● *It depends what role in the services their parents have, their ranks. Often the parents want better than they have had... so for parents who joined the services, perhaps, because they didn't really know what else to do or felt they didn't have necessarily the options 20 years ago before they had kids, now actually want their children to take those opportunities [go to university].*

A few practitioners also believed that parents serving in the military were equally likely to be interested in vocational routes, as well as in academic routes:

●● *[From] the conversations I've had with parents over the years, the vocational course and apprenticeship route is something that they don't shy away from. I think if they think it's the most appropriate for their child, then they will be advocates for those routes.*



## MILITARY ASPIRATIONS

Although some of the young people we spoke to had considered pursuing a career in the military when they were younger, now, when making decisions about post-18 pathways, none were currently doing so (in some cases this was due to medical reasons e.g. asthma or allergies that prevented them from joining).

Some young people across the different settings spoke about having considered joining the military. Some highlighted that this could be seen as 'an expectation' passed down through generations:

●● Regarding pathways, I've noticed the military family or job is generational. My Dad was in the Army, his Dad, his Dad. It's all the way through. It feels like you're expected to join.

●● My brother's joining the Navy, and I don't know whether that is because he felt we had to or because he really wanted to... it's his dream job. But I don't know if that's because he wanted to or if it was inspired by family pressure to.

Others explicitly stated that their parents did not pressure them to join the military:

●● My Dad's side of the family, all the dads have been in Navy, but he actually went and said; 'You don't have to join'. He said; 'Just do what you enjoy. No one's forcing you to join'. He's set against it, which is actually really good of him.

Some college practitioners in England reported that many of the Armed Forces young people they worked with looked to pursue a career in the military, but that their parents encouraged them to complete post-16 education first:



●● *The ones who have chosen a B-tech route, and mainly would be looking at a career in the military, but Mum and Dad have normally said, give it two years at college before you do what they did, which was join at 16.*

## DECISION-MAKING

### POST-16

**Our findings show that geographical variation in post-16 provision is a key factor influencing whether a young person stays at their secondary schools' sixth form or moves to an FE college or other training providers.**

Where they are able to progress to a sixth form attached to their school, Armed Forces young people are likely to do so, which appears to result in better recognition of their Armed Forces status and continuity of support.

In large FE colleges, which do not collect data on Armed Forces young people, their background is less considered (Lawrence, 2021).

In England, Armed Forces young people are equally as likely to progress to post-16 education as other non-FSM, non-Armed Forces young people. In 2018/19 the majority (87%) of Armed Forces young people progressed to an education institution, in line with the national average for non-FSM and non-AF pupils. Only a small proportion of Armed Forces young people (4%) progressed onto an apprenticeship or other employment, in line with national averages (MohhhD, 2021a).

When making their post-16 choices, the young people we spoke to had considered factors including location, costs, travel expenses, subject preferences and career destination, factors which would likely be typically considered by all students. Armed Forces young people appeared to give particular consideration to potential mobility but, in most cases, their families had made efforts to stay in one place during their 16 to 19 education.

Students in sixth forms had often attended their final compulsory school year at the attached school and decided to stay on if their family was planning to stay in the same location. These students emphasised the importance of knowing the teachers and being familiar with the school as a key factor in deciding to stay at sixth form, rather than going to a local college:

●● *I knew the school, the teachers knew how I worked and stuff. So, it was just knowing that I've been right here.*

A couple of students had experienced mobility during their post-16 education, even moving from England to Scotland. Moving between these differing school systems, negotiating changes to examination systems and curriculums and sometimes having to repeat school years was a clear barrier for these individuals and impacted their attainment.

●● *I transitioned the summer before final year, it was quite hard to adjust. Because, obviously, the Scottish system's so much different and I feel like nationals are... less packed than GCSE, because there's the Highers... it was quite difficult coming into a place where the courses were so much different to what I was doing in England, because they didn't have some of the courses that I took over there.*

Most college students had made their choices primarily based on subject preferences and a lack of other post-16 options in their area. Some reported their Armed Forces parent being heavily involved in their decision-making about subject choices and supportive in their application to college:

●● *When I got this course, [Dad] helped me get into building computers by showing me how to build them. And then he helped me get into the college as a result because a lot of the IT teachers are ex-forces as well.*



## POST-18

All the young people we spoke to either had a plan for their post-18 pathway or, among younger students, were exploring a range of options and felt well-informed. Young people reported that their parents were highly influential in their decision-making and supportive of their plans. This is likely similar to most other students, as existing evidence shows that parents are key influencers for young people's decision-making.

Previous research on post-18 decision-making identified 4 key influencing factors (McCullouch et al., 2018):

- **Family Considerations:** young people consider financial and relational strains on the family if pursuing HE. This may include caring responsibilities at home, financial factors or wanting to remain close to family.
- **Parental Attainment:** parents' education and rank is positively associated with an intention to progress to university (p. 14).
- **Mobility:** the removal of choice and agency through mobility (p. 20) may result in disengagement from formal or academic education, leading Armed Forces young people to seek vocational or technical routes.
- **School And College Support:** many Armed Forces families feel that their children receive insufficient support with their post-year 11 choices.

We also asked young people about their post-18 plans, to establish whether their status as an Armed Forces child had any impact on their aspirations or the way they made their plans.

In a few cases, parents' mobility due to Service life appeared to open up a wider range of post-18 options to young people, as there was no requirement for them to stay close to home:

●● *I've got a couple options at the minute because my dad's moving, my mom and my sister go in next year when I finish. So, I can either go to uni abroad, or I can stay here and move up north with my family and go to uni there, or get an apprenticeship.*

Interviews with practitioners echoed this. One practitioner highlighted that some Armed Forces families were less likely to want young people to 'stay local' post-18, compared to other families, as they had less attachment to the area:

●● *I think actually they're probably less concerned [with staying local]. A lot of our students are very local, whereas I don't think our service families do. So I don't think they're as restricted on if they're choosing to go to university, they don't just look at local universities, they look more widely at what matches what they want.*

Some young people in the Welsh focus groups stated that the independence they developed as a result of extended separation due to deployment, meant that their post-18 plans included options away from their families. They viewed this as a positive, contrasting their experience with what they saw from non-Armed Forces peers:

●● *I've spoken to a few [non-Armed Forces] people, and quite a lot of families are like; 'no, don't go far away,' but I've said I wanna go far away and my parents are like; 'yeah, go do it then'.*

Where young people's families were struggling financially, this led to them being less likely to consider university.

In the case of a few students, their Armed Forces parent's wage was insufficient to support the family but their mobility and/or deployment prevented the other parent from working. One student explained that, as a result of being unable to afford travel to college, they would be unlikely to progress to university:

●● *I don't get EMA, but we have such a big family. We're a family of eight. My bus pass is 150 quid a term to get down to town to be able to attend my college. I can't pay that... so for a lot of my education, especially in [college] I have got 0% attendance because I can't get there. By September I'll probably have to drop out completely... so I won't be able to finish sixth form. I won't be able to go to university... and I wanted to go to uni.*

In the case of another student, the disruption of their parents leaving the army during their post-16 education was causing financial strain, leading to concerns that they could not support themselves at university:

●● *My parents are leaving the army, they've had to get a new mortgage. Most of our furniture's all army furniture...otherwise we don't own any. A lot of money's now got to go towards a house for us to live in... I won't have a lot of support financially from them, to be able to keep myself in the university. I want to go for what's best for me, but I'm going to have to also try figure something out that's going to be cheapest.*

Among the Armed Forces young people we spoke to, many did not report any financial issues and these young people tended to be planning to progress to HE. Socio-economic status is one of the key determinants of HE progression for all young people, so these trends observed among Armed Forces young people are not exclusive to them.

However, these findings do highlight that Armed Forces young people may experience this barrier to their progression, specifically as a result of their parents' wages, veteran status and the impact of mobility or deployment on the family. The impact of financial pressures and socio-economic status on Armed Forces young people is further explored in section 5.2.2.



## 5.2 BARRIERS

This section explores the barriers that may affect the support Armed Forces young people receive and, consequently, their success in education and beyond. Here, we refer to 'barriers' as 'the systemic or structural constraints that lead to Armed Forces young people having different experiences and outcomes compared to other young people'. We explore how failures to identify Armed Forces young people, understand their needs, or to fully resource and fund support leads to Armed Forces young people's needs going unmet.

We discuss the following barriers:

- Data and identification.
- Financial pressures.
- Support provision in post-16.
- Practitioner understanding and attitudes of Armed Forces young people's experiences and needs.
- Funding and resources.

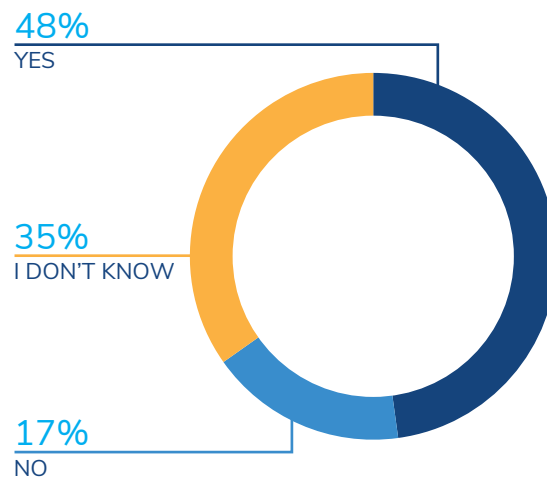
As in section 5.1, throughout, we recognise the extensive variation in the experiences of Armed Forces young people, both in terms of whether they face the challenges we discuss and their setting's preparedness to support them.

Osborne (2018) and Hall (2021) suggest that the most accurate way to currently estimate the distribution of Armed Forces young people in the post-16 sector is by aggregating school level SPP data, combined with the location of service personnel across the UK. Nevertheless, many settings we approached in these 'high population' areas were not aware of Armed Forces young people in their cohorts (see discussion in section 3.2).

In our practitioner survey and through our practitioner interviews, we explored whether post-16 settings (from our sample) asked about Armed Forces status on enrolment, whether staff were aware of this, and whether tailored support is provided. While 48% of our survey participants stated that their setting records Armed Forces status on enrolment, the rest (52%), reported that either their place of work did not record this, or they weren't aware of it (see Figure 6):

FIGURE 6.

DOES YOUR PLACE OF WORK ASK ABOUT ARMED FORCES STATUS ON ENROLMENT? (n = 46)



### 5.2.1 DATA AND IDENTIFICATION

The identification and tracking of Armed Forces young people and their performance, progression and well-being is necessary to ensure that appropriate support is on offer. In section 4.2, we outline how the curtailment of Service pupil premium after year 11 results in post-16 settings being less likely to identify and track their cohort of Armed Forces young people. We found that this is particularly the case in standalone FE colleges and training providers, as sixth forms attached to schools often use their existing data to identify Armed Forces young people in years 12 and 13.

Based on our practitioner interviews, identifying and managing data about Armed Forces pupils coincided with the setting providing some form of support for them. Most of the settings we visited either asked about Armed Forces status at enrolment or had systems to acquire that data through 1:1 support. The settings that did not collect data on Armed Forces status were the two FE colleges in England, as one college practitioner explained:

**●● We don't capture at enrolment whether a student is from a Service background at all. And to be honest, it doesn't feature as part of any of our programs for ascertaining that information. It would only come up through one-to-ones with students.**

In the case of the two colleges in England that did not collect this data, there did not appear to be any tailored support: the young participants at this college expressed that they were not aware of any support on offer specific for Armed Forces learners.

It is necessary to highlight that our fieldwork sample is biased towards settings that held data on students' Armed Forces status, for two reasons. Firstly, because of the difficulties we experienced when sampling our participant settings (discussed in section 3.2), where those that had no way of identifying and contacting Armed Forces pupils were not able to participate. Secondly and relatedly, because of the type of settings that were included in the sample. Most settings in the sample were either sixth forms attached to a school or high schools (in the case of Scotland) because colleges were less likely to agree to be involved, often due to being unable to identify students. Settings attached to schools usually hold Armed Forces data on pupils younger than 16 and, therefore, continued to use this historical data to track their students in post-16 phases.

The lack of data on Armed Forces children in post-16 education also makes it difficult to track progression to Higher Education (HE) and assess their career outcomes. Existing research suggests that young people from Armed

Forces families progress to HE at a lower rate than the general population: for the 2013/2014 entry year, only 0.34% of young first degree 1st year undergraduate students were from Armed Forces families (McCullough & Hall, 2016, p. 18). Although not a reliable figure given the overall opacity of the data available, this highlights the urgent needs to accurately identify, track and support this cohort.<sup>4</sup>

## 5.2.2 SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND FINANCIAL PRESSURES

**Although this report explores the additional needs and barriers experienced by Armed Forces young people, being from an Armed Forces family is not universally synonymous with disadvantage or differential outcomes (see also sections 3.2 and 5). We found that one key determinant of whether Armed Forces young people in post-16 settings experience, or feel that they experience, disadvantage is socio-economic status and the experience of poverty or financial strain.**

Where Armed Forces young people's families struggled financially, young people found this extremely stressful and experienced negative impacts on their education. While this is likely the case for non-AF young people who experience poverty, we found that financial strain worsened the impact of other Armed Forces related barriers, such as deployment and mobility.

Further, these characteristics of Service life appeared to trap some families in poverty, as the non-serving parent was unable to work and manage the household single-handedly during the serving parent's deployment. In some cases, young people spoke about experiencing financial hardship, including being unable to pay bills and having to use food banks:

<sup>4</sup> In England, the 16 to 19 bursary fund is available to support young people of this age if their household income falls below a threshold. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland a different system, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is used. Eligibility for EMA is also determined by household income.

●● You know, we're actually fine, but we're not, we're eating from food banks and we're relying on extended family to pay for our bills.

Young people whose families were struggling financially highlighted that they were often unable to travel to college or sixth form because public transport was not affordable. In some cases, when their serving parent was at home, they were able to drive them to their setting but when they were deployed, they were unable to do so, resulting in young people having low attendance.

Two young people told us that, because of their parent's wage, they did not qualify for additional financial support, but their parent's wage was nevertheless insufficient to support the family and pay for the young person's travel to their education. In Wales, one young person explained that their parent's wage meant they could not access Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA):

●● We're a family of eight, and five of us are on the spectrum, but because my father makes more than the amount required, we're not entitled to EMA. But my bus pass, gosh, 150 quid a term to get down to town to be able to attend my school. I can't pay that. So for a lot of my education, I have got 0% attendance because I can't get there... there are other kids [younger siblings] that need to go to school more than I do.

For this young person, the financial strain on their family meant they believed they would be forced to stop their education:

●● By September I'll probably have to drop out of school completely, so I won't be able to finish sixth form. I won't be able to come to university because my younger siblings have to go to school and my Daddy's not here

Several young people reported having to work during some periods of time to help their family:

●● Sometimes, if needed, I work as well. So sometimes she'll need a bit of money... because she was studying for college for a HR position, so I was helping her pay for that.

In one case, a young person's parents had served in the Armed Forces and had now left their posts. This change in circumstances had greatly impacted their finances and resulted in a considerable strain on the young person:

●● I'm already financially supporting myself quite a lot now, because both of my parents have left. So we went from having both parents on above minimum wage, in four years, to having both parents on literally minimum wage... you're living a lifestyle where you can afford all of these things and then... all of a sudden [you] just have this massive random transformation.

These challenges stood in contrast to the challenges highlighted by young people whose parents held high ranking positions in the military and therefore were materially better off.

When asked about barriers or challenges relating to Armed Forces life, these young people were more likely to highlight issues such as having to travel long distances in school holidays, rather than issues that had a negative impact on their education.

While these challenges are also important and had an impact on the young people concerned, it is apparent that financial advantage or disadvantage mediates the impact of Armed Forces life on young people's post-16 education.

Some settings we visited provide some form of financial relief. For example, discounted bus passes, study materials, a bursary or UCAS application fees. In these circumstances, Armed Forces young people greatly appreciated the acknowledgement of the challenges they face and felt that some burden was being eased.



### 5.2.3 SETTING SUPPORT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

We found mixed results regarding whether the extent of pastoral support and parental engagement was meeting Armed Forces young people's needs. In most cases, the educational support provided at different settings was meeting Armed Forces young people's needs. However, some young people felt that the visibility of the Armed Forces community in school was low and staff lacked an understanding of their needs.

Previous research on Armed Forces young people's needs suggests the changing nature of the relationship between families and educational institutions at the post-16 level, and the expectation that all students become more independent, may result in young people with specific needs (such as those in Armed Forces families) receiving less support (McCullough & Hall, 2016).

Although most post-16 settings provide pastoral services and continue to support their students' needs, the extent of school-family engagement is likely to decline. We were interested to explore this potential barrier and its intersection with the tendency for young people from Armed Forces families to be relatively independent. Given that Armed Forces young people may already feel pressured to be independent and resilient (see section 5.1.3), an increase in this expectation from their education setting may either allow them to thrive or leave them feeling unsupported.

In addition, because the Armed Forces young people's needs are driven by features of their parents' employment, parental engagement is likely to be a key component of supporting them effectively. Previous research and the practitioners we spoke to, specified that the differences in the nature of post-16 provision means that 'best practice' guidance for engaging Armed Forces parents in schools does not translate entirely into post-16 settings.

Most students reported feeling satisfied with their school or college, enjoyed the increased independence and having more control over what they study. However, students did feel that they would benefit from having a designated staff member, who they could talk to about their experiences and challenges as an Armed Forces young person.

Young people also highlighted that the time they would require the most pastoral support would be during parents' deployment:

*I think that it depends on if your parent is deployed or stationed somewhere else. Because if they're at home, it's no different to anyone else. But if they were deployed... then I think you'd need a bit of everything really.*

In settings that appeared to provide effective support tailored to Armed Forces young people's needs, practitioners emphasised the importance of understanding family circumstances and communicating with parents:

*It's making sure that the communication with home is done the right way at the right time... sometimes it can be quite difficult to get a hold of parents, so it's how do you manage that communication with home.*

## 5.2.4 PRACTITIONER UNDERSTANDING AND ATTITUDES

Practitioners' understanding of pupils' needs is a key determinant of attainment for all pupils (Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, 2007). In addition, practitioners' and leaders' attitudes regarding whether Armed Forces young people should be prioritised for additional support is likely to influence how well these young people are supported. As such, our survey sought to gather insights into whether practitioners felt Armed Forces young people should be given additional support and the extent to which practitioners understand their needs and how to support them.

This section examines the following three aspects of practitioners' attitudes and knowledge regarding supporting Armed Forces young people:

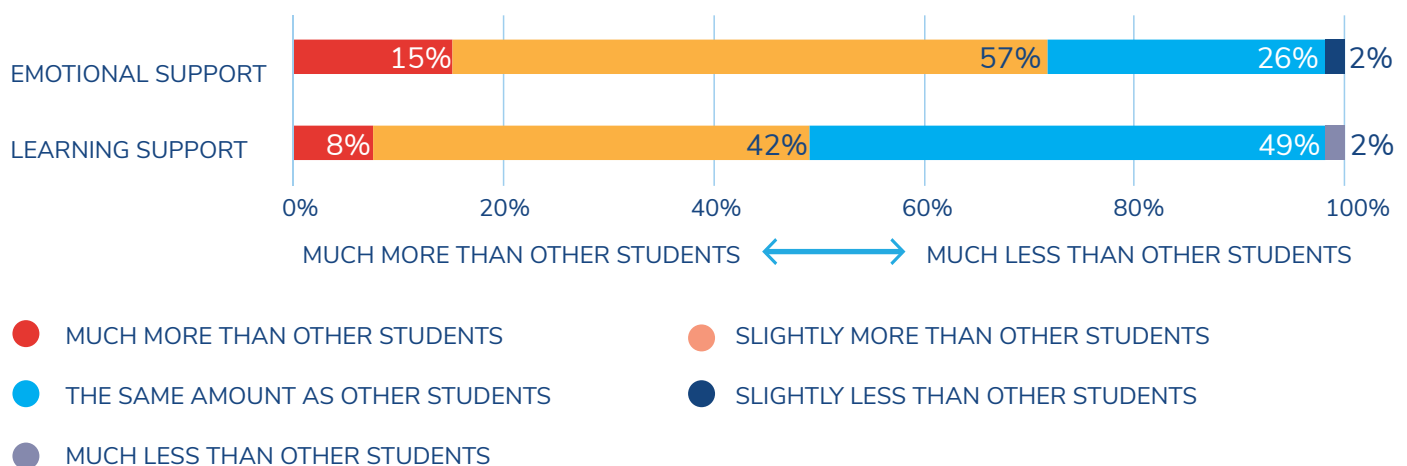
- i. Practitioners' willingness to support Armed Forces young people in terms of the extent to which they believe these young people require additional support.
- ii. Practitioners' understanding of the needs that Armed Forces young people have.
- iii. Practitioners' ability to identify Armed Forces young people and put in place the right kind of support for them.

### PRACTITIONERS' WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Over half of practitioners surveyed felt Armed Forces young people require more support than other pupils. Practitioners were more likely to report that Armed Forces young people need additional emotional support (72%) than learning support (50%) (see Figure 7). In line with this, most practitioners felt Armed Forces pupils required additional support, especially pastoral support, in post-16 education (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 7.

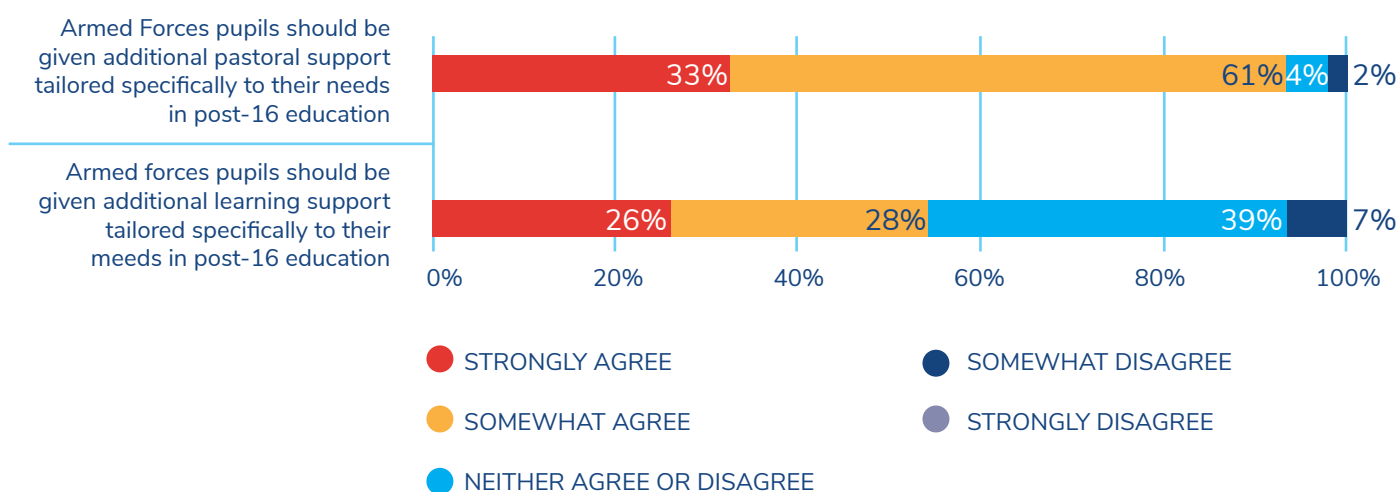
PERCEIVED NEED FOR SUPPORT OF ARMED FORCES STUDENTS IN COMPARISON TO OTHER PUPILS  
 'I THINK THAT THE ARMED FORCES STUDENTS AT MY SETTING NEED...' (n = 46)



Most practitioners also believed that Armed Forces young people should receive additional support in post-16 settings, with almost all (94%) suggesting they should receive additional pastoral support (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8.

ARMED FORCES CHILDREN'S SUPPORT NEEDS IN POST-16 EDUCATION  
 'TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS' (n = 46)



Although these results suggest a strong motivation to provide support for Armed Forces young people, interviews revealed that this motivation was not always borne out, sometimes due to the prioritisation of other groups of young people with additional needs.

Interviewees suggested that other vulnerable pupils, including young carers, young people in care and young people with SEND, were more likely to need - and receive - support in comparison to Armed Forces young people. While practitioners may interpret this tension as competition for support, it is worth noting that some Armed Forces young people fall into other categories of high need. Therefore, the prioritisation of groups, such as young carers and SEND pupils, means that Armed Forces young people with the highest level of need are more likely to receive support.

On the other hand, if Armed Forces young people are not viewed as a subgroup of pupils needing additional support, the support is unlikely to cater to the particular challenges facing these young people.



### PRACTITIONERS' UNDERSTANDING OF ARMED FORCES YOUNG PEOPLE'S NEEDS

The majority of practitioners felt that Armed Forces young people face additional barriers (68%) in comparison to other pupils (see Figure 9).

However, a lack of understanding of Armed Forces young people's needs was highlighted by two thirds (63%) of practitioners as a key barrier to providing effective support (see Figure 9).

Taken together, this suggests that practitioners may view Armed Forces young people as a group in need of support, but may require better evidence and training to understand how best to implement this support:

FIGURE 9.

DO ARMED FORCES YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 16-19 HAVE NEEDS IN EDUCATION DIFFERENT TO OTHER PUPILS?  
(n = 46)

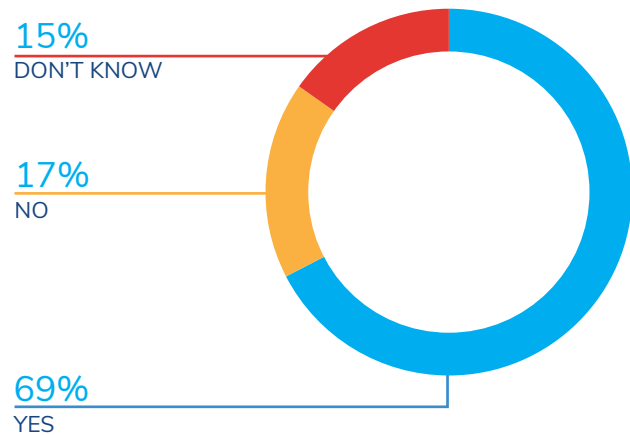
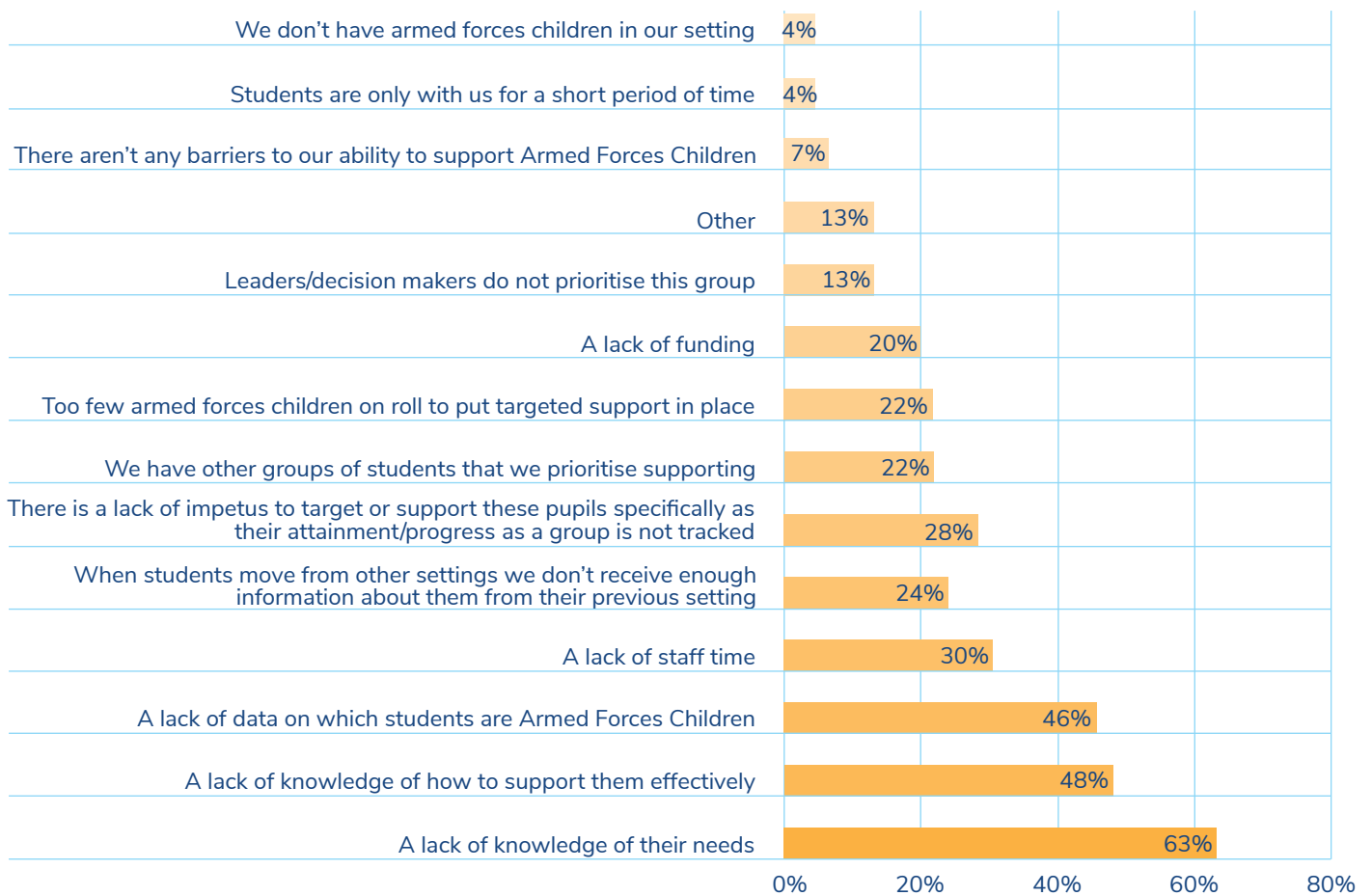


FIGURE 10.

WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING BARRIERS IMPACT YOUR OR THE SETTING'S ABILITY TO SUPPORT ARMED FORCES CHILDREN AGED 16-19? (n = 46)







The importance of practitioners' recognising and understanding Armed Forces young people's needs was underlined by the young people themselves. Most young people in the focus groups reported that, if they did not feel well understood by staff in their education setting, this had a negative impact on their engagement with education and, ultimately, their performance.

Survey results indicate that whilst most practitioners (among those surveyed) are aware of some barriers experienced by Armed Forces pupils, they were less likely to identify other key barriers.

Practitioners were most likely to select the following four factors as barriers faced by Armed Forces young people, shown in Figure 11:

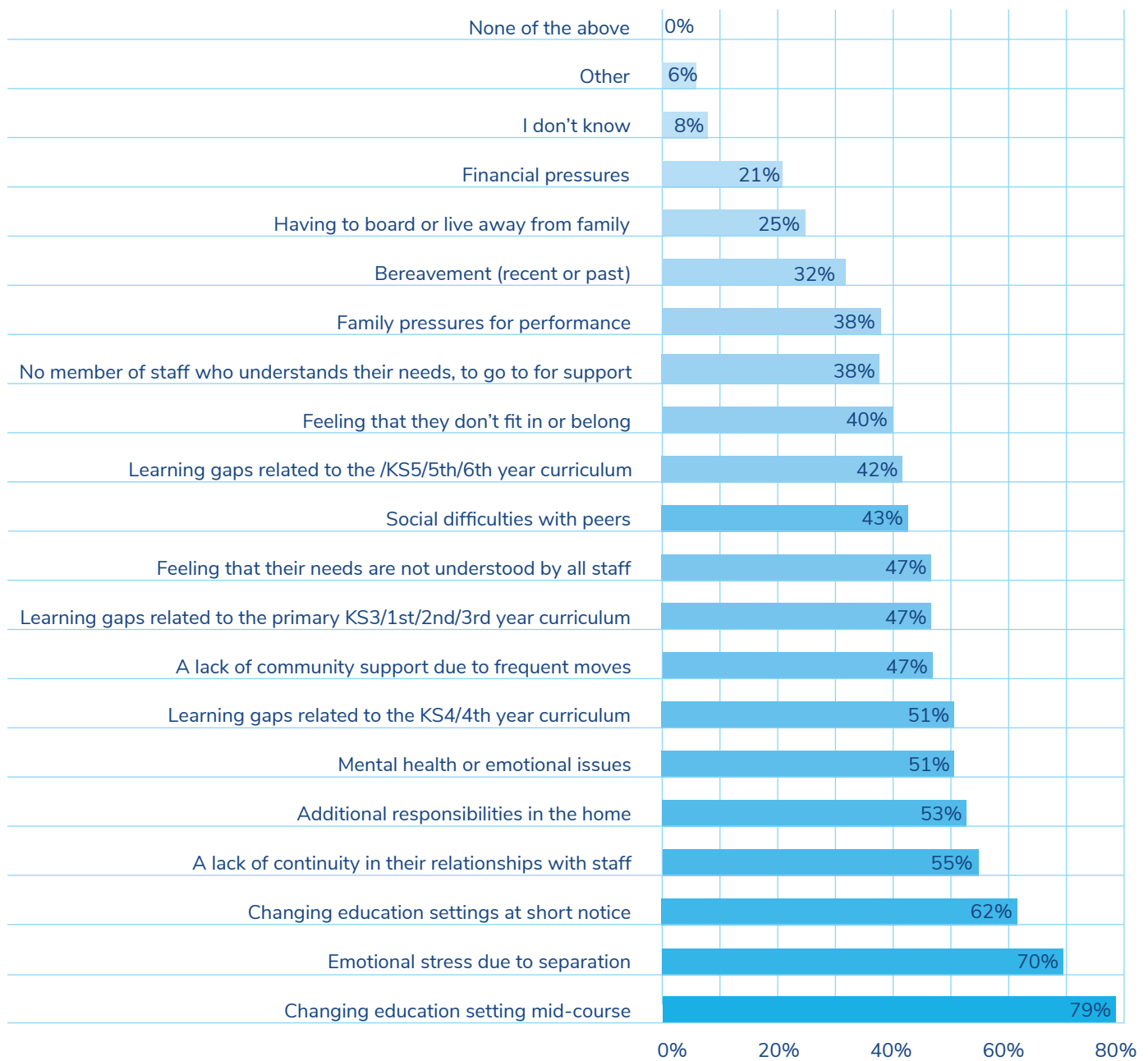
- Changing education settings mid-course (79%).
- Emotional stress due to separation (70%).
- Changing education settings at short notice (62%).
- A lack of continuity in their relationships with staff (55%).

However, only 53% and 51% of respondents selected additional responsibilities at home and mental or emotional health issues as barriers, respectively, and only 1 in 5 (21%) selected financial pressures.

Given that pressure due to home responsibilities was frequently mentioned by young people in our focus groups, and financial issues were highly significant for some young people, these results suggest some misalignment in some practitioners' understanding of Armed Forces young people's needs.

FIGURE 11.

IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHICH BARRIERS ARE THE ARMED FORCES CHILDREN AGED 16-19 IN YOUR SETTING LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE? (PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY) (n = 44)



Most practitioners also agreed that Armed Forces young people were likely to develop strengths as a result of being in an Armed Forces family, which other pupils are less likely to have (Figure 12):

Around half of practitioners felt Armed Forces young people in their setting were more able to cope with setbacks and challenges (43%) and were more independent (53%, see Figure 13).

Additionally, in our interviews, some practitioners suggested that Armed Forces young people's strengths can relate to ambition, their ability to "get on with it", and being more family orientated, among others.

FIGURE 12.

ARMED FORCES CHILDREN AGED 16-19 TEND TO HAVE STRENGTHS THAT OTHER PUPILS/STUDENTS ARE LESS LIKELY TO HAVE (n = 46)

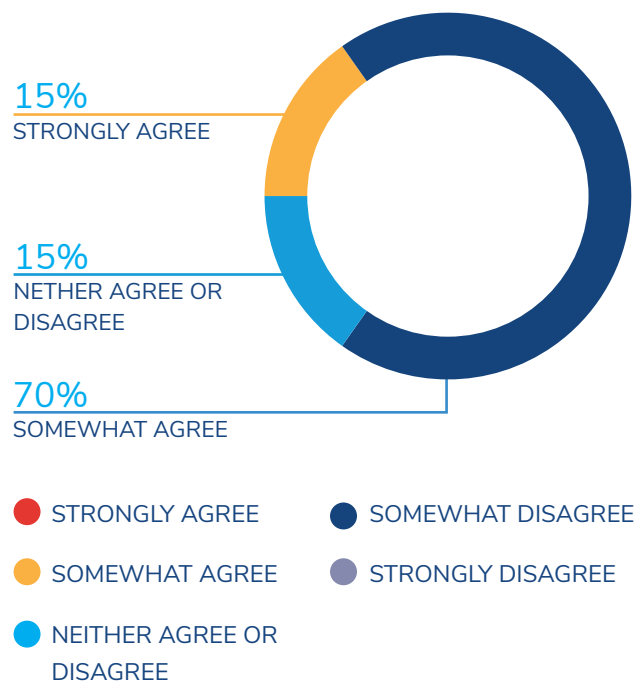
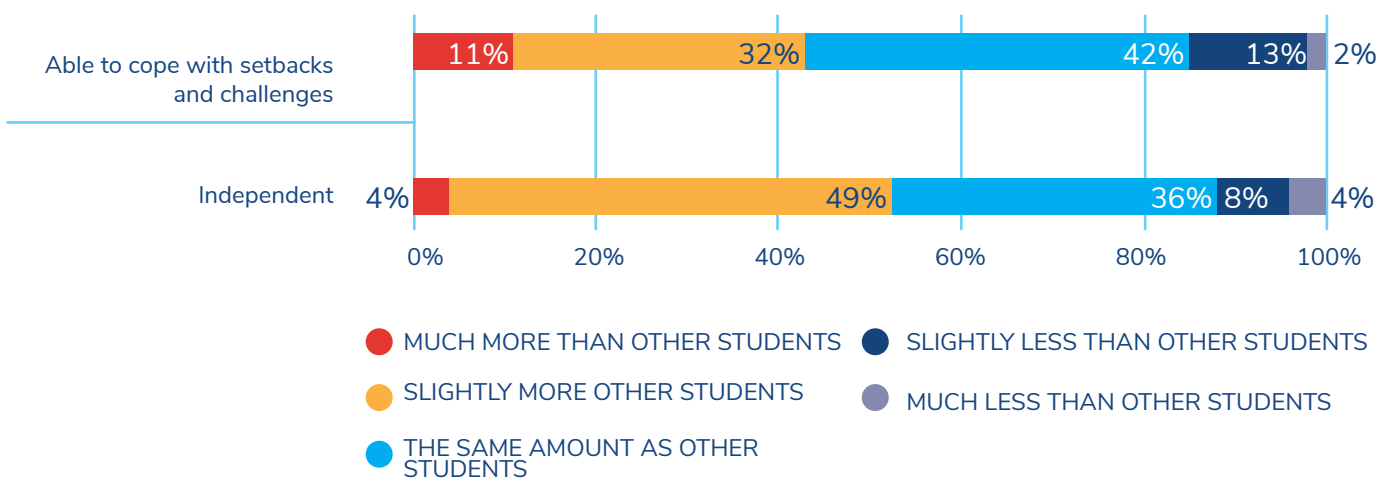


FIGURE 13.

ARMED FORCES STUDENTS STRENGTHS IN COMPARISON TO OTHER PUPILS  
'I THINK THAT THE ARMED FORCES STUDENTS AT MY SETTING ARE...' (n = 46)



While this indicates that practitioners are keen to avoid a deficit rhetoric when considering these young people, it may also be problematic for practitioners to assume that facing challenges allows young people to develop strengths, as some young people report that having to become more independent is stressful and affects their education negatively (see section 5.1.3).

Thus, practitioners must strike a balance between appreciating young people's strengths and being cautious not to reinforce the expectation that Armed Forces young people should be more independent as a result of their experience.

## PRACTITIONERS' ABILITY TO PROVIDE SUPPORT

**Beyond a willingness to provide additional support and an understanding of needs, there are other factors that need to be in place to facilitate effective support, primarily, being able to identify and target Armed Forces young people and understanding how to support Armed Forces young people.**

When asked about barriers to supporting Armed Forces young people in their setting, practitioners were mostly likely to cite a lack of knowledge of their needs (see section 5.2.4 for further discussion), as well as a lack of data on which students are Armed Forces young people and a lack of knowledge on how to support them effectively, highlighted by 46% and 48% of survey respondents, respectively.

Reflecting this, we found a lack of evidence within the literature on best practice in supporting Armed Forces young people in post-16 settings. Practitioners also expressed frustration with the lack of information directed at post-16 settings, with most information and guidance being tailored towards supporting children in primary and secondary school.

Some had used the 'Thriving Lives Toolkit' or explored information on the SCiP, Forces Children Scotland, or Armed Forces Covenant sites, but had had to adapt this guidance to their settings and student body, despite there being no information on how to do so.

While this research and the resultant toolkit seeks to address this issue, it is nonetheless worth noting that practitioners have experienced this frustration.

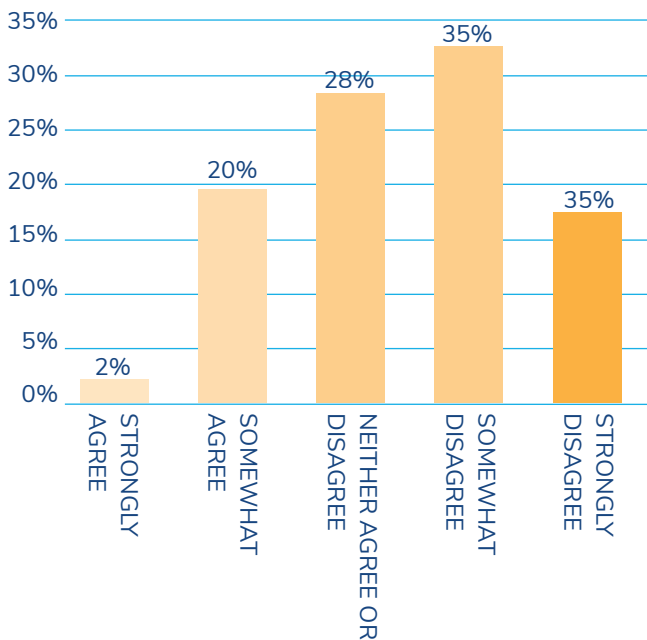
The majority of survey participants also reported that they did not receive sufficient training on how to support Armed Forces young people, with only 1 in 5 (22%) practitioners agreeing that their setting provided this (Figure 14).

In interviews, practitioners explained that sometimes training on Armed Forces young people was not provided due to the need to provide training on a wide range of other topics:

**●● We have done training in the past, we haven't done any recently. There is the short bites on the SCiP website, that we could access. The danger is that you overload staff with too many bits of staff training.**

FIGURE 14.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT 'MY PLACE OF WORK OFFERS SUFFICIENT TRAINING ON HOW I CAN SUPPORT ARMED FORCES CHILDREN AGED 16-19'? (n=46)



Among survey respondents, 1 in 5 said a lack of funding was a barrier to providing support while 1 in 3 mentioned a lack of staff time (see Figure 10).

Practitioners we spoke to suggested that FE colleges and training providers are less likely, than sixth forms, to be able to resource sufficient support for Armed Forces young people. Sixth forms attached to schools (in England) can more efficiently extend the support funded by SPP for their sixth form students where they already have systems and trained staff in place. As one practitioner in a sixth form setting explained regarding the pastoral support on offer, funded by the SPP:

●● Because the funding went to [under] sixteens, that's where they focused it on. But obviously when we worked with students there, in the previous years, we didn't just say; 'I'm not going to talk [to you] anymore' once they joined year 12.

In some cases, we found that staff turnover created a barrier to support. Where there had previously been a designated/ informed member of staff for Armed Forces young people support and that person left the setting, they had not always been replaced.

## 5.2.5 FUNDING AND RESOURCES

The findings presented throughout this report strengthen the claim that Armed Forces young people continue to need additional support during their post-16 education. However, as previous research has highlighted, the end of the Service pupil premium after year 11 (in England) leads to a reduced likelihood of post-16 settings being able to dedicate resources towards supporting Armed Forces young people specifically.

In Wales and Scotland, the issue is the same, though it is worth noting that no system-level funding similar to the SPP is provided at school level so there is less of a funding 'cliff edge' at post-16.

## 5.3 GOOD PRACTICE

### 5.3.1 THE SUPPORT THAT YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL THEY NEED

We asked young people in our focus groups what they would tell their teachers about being an Armed Forces young person and their needs. Their answers fit into three categories: offering greater flexibility in recognition of their circumstances; encouragement to ask for help and staff noticing when they need support; and more visibility and understanding within the setting community (see Table 3):



TABLE 3

| FLEXIBILITY, SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING REGARDING DEADLINES AND ACADEMIC WORK   | SUPPORT ON OFFER, WITHOUT REQUEST   | WANTING GREATER VISIBILITY AND UNDERSTANDING, AND ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS   |
|--|---|---|
| <p>●● Sometimes handing in work on time can be difficult due to having a lot on my plate and getting to college itself is something I have to plan out.</p> <p>●● I can work independently but <b>might struggle with deadlines</b> if my dad is deployed.</p> <p>●● There needs to be more flexible deadlines for children with mother or fathers away from home. Normally not just my case [but] <b>children have to adapt to new responsibilities due to an adult figure not being in that role.</b></p> <p>●● It can be hard and stressful when my dad is deployed, so <b>I may need extra support or time to complete classwork and homework.</b></p> | <p>●● That I may find it harder to ask for help due to the independence that I have expected of myself due to my parents' absence.</p> <p>●● I would tell them that we don't need to be treated differently to other students, yet <b>we may need some support or just someone to notice we might be struggling</b>, but most of us don't feel different to the rest of the students.</p> <p>●● More emotional and educational support would be very <b>appreciated. I would tell them to support people in the services even if they don't ask for it. They probably won't ask for it.</b></p> | <p>●● To look into the lifestyle of a service child and <b>educate yourself/thank them for doing their best.</b></p> <p>●● That they <b>should be more aware of the stresses/mental health issues that come with being a service child.</b> This is important to being supportive.</p> <p>●● Probably just like assumptions and stereotypes people make about army kids. Like <b>some teachers and even friends have said really negative things.</b> Like that my parents are abusive or bad because they're making me move around a lot, or that army kids never succeed in life because they move around...<b>There's a lot of the negative stereotypes around what your parents do.</b></p> |

In focus group discussions, young people expressed that the following support would be the most helpful:

- Having a designated member of staff to go to for support.
- Greater staff awareness of the difficulties associated with the Armed Forces lifestyle.
- Flexibility in special cases, especially during parents' deployment.

During parents' deployment, young people felt they had lost a key source of support and they would therefore benefit from having an adult in their education institution to substitute that support:

●● You need that adult figure, that adult figure's gone. So, you need to work with... you need to be able to express your emotions to someone.

Young people also found that explaining these circumstances at school or college at the time is difficult, and it would be helpful to count on staff who already have some knowledge of how their lives could be affected. Further, young people also wanted their setting to make more effort to recognise Armed Forces families and raise awareness of the challenges they might face:

●● I don't think forces families are talked about enough at college. You don't really see... you know the positives and the negatives, the struggles. I may just get on with life, but then I do also have things to deal with.

Other Armed Forces young people also reported that having the option of flexibility for deadlines would be helpful. For most focus group participants, this was due to experiencing stress or dealing with other life/administrative responsibilities, which led to less time for school work.

Although our findings come from a small, non-representative sample, we are able to draw some comparisons between young people's feelings about the support they have experienced.

In some cases, students felt they were currently receiving this support, whereas others felt they needed more support. In particular, in England, the college students felt that most staff were not aware of their status or their needs, which could be improved, and most young people in Welsh settings felt unsupported, even in sixth forms.

In Scotland, the young people recognised that having schools near military bases or barracks meant that awareness and understanding was high and they were at least aware of some support on offer for them, should they need it.

## 6 FRAMEWORK PRINCIPLES

This section sets out the rationale for the structure of the 'Thriving Lives In Post-16' framework of best practice and explores how the findings from this research underpin the principles and best practice recommendations included in the framework.

This framework builds on the school level 'Thriving Lives' framework but is tailored to the post-16 sector. We draw together findings from the evidence review, focus groups with Armed Forces young people, interviews, the survey of practitioners and consultation with our expert steering group, to build the case for the inclusion of each principle and element of good practice.

### 6.1 CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The existing evidence base and primary research findings highlight two important contextual considerations regarding the post-16 sector and the needs of Armed Forces young people. These considerations underpin the principles set out in the framework and will influence how settings approach their practice in this area.

By recognising these contextual considerations, we acknowledge that each post-16 setting may approach supporting Armed Forces young people slightly differently, varying the provision based on the setting context and the cohort of Armed Forces young people in their student population as a whole and as individuals.

We urge leaders and practitioners to use their professional judgement and their knowledge of their context, in combination with the evidence and recommendations on best practice, to decide the best way forward.

The two contextual considerations are:

1. **The post-16 sector is complex** and there is considerable diversity across different types of post 16 settings in terms of the way they operate, their scale, their funding and the student experience. On top of this, there is huge variation between settings in terms of the number of Armed Forces young people in their student cohort and, therefore, the extent to which they can dedicate significant resources to targeting support at these young people.



2. **There is variation in the needs and experiences of individual young people from Armed Forces families.** Although it is possible to identify trends regarding the experiences of these groups, not all young people from Armed Forces families experience the challenges set out in our research findings. In addition, the needs of some Armed Forces young people may be similar to other groups of young people who require additional support, e.g., young carers. We cannot expect that Armed Forces young people will always require the same support as other groups of young people, nor that they will require the same support as one another.

The interaction of these two factors means that a framework of best practice that is specific to this group of young people, and specific to this part of the education system, is necessary, but challenging to design as a 'one size fits all' model of best practice.

A post-16 sector specific framework is necessary because, while the school-level framework provides some useful information for practitioners in post-16, it does not take account of the unique and complex nature of the post-16 sector and therefore a specialised framework was required. However, the complexity and diversity of both the post-16 sector and the lives of Armed Forces young people means that a 'one size fits all' approach is neither possible nor appropriate.

As a result, the approach each post-16 setting chooses to take as they shape their support provision for Armed Forces young people may differ slightly, focusing on different elements of recommended best practice. In particular, settings must establish the correct balance of universal and tailored provision based on the context of their setting and the needs and experiences of the Armed Forces young people in their student cohort:

- Universal support (that which is available to, or could benefit, all students) is accessible to Armed Forces young people, and Armed Forces young people are encouraged to access this support.
- All support that is accessed by Armed Forces young people is appropriately tailored to their needs and experiences, and that Armed Forces young people receive targeted, tailored support, where universal support is inefficient to meet their specific needs.

When considering their universal support offer to all students, settings must consider how features of Armed Forces life may act as barriers to young people and families

accessing this support and seek to remove these barriers. In addition, they must consider where there are gaps in their universal support offer with regard to addressing the needs of Armed Forces young people and must provide tailored support to fill these gaps.

In addition, the support offer that each individual setting designs must be informed by Armed Forces young people themselves. Engaging with students will allow settings to take account of the aforementioned contextual considerations that underpin all practice in this framework, and to ensure an effective balance of universal and tailored support.

Through student engagement, settings can build an understanding of:

1. Individual young people's needs and variation in experiences across the cohort of Armed Forces young people.
2. What support Armed Forces young people want and the extent to which they wish to receive targeted support.
3. Any barriers Armed Forces young people experience with regard to accessing universal support.

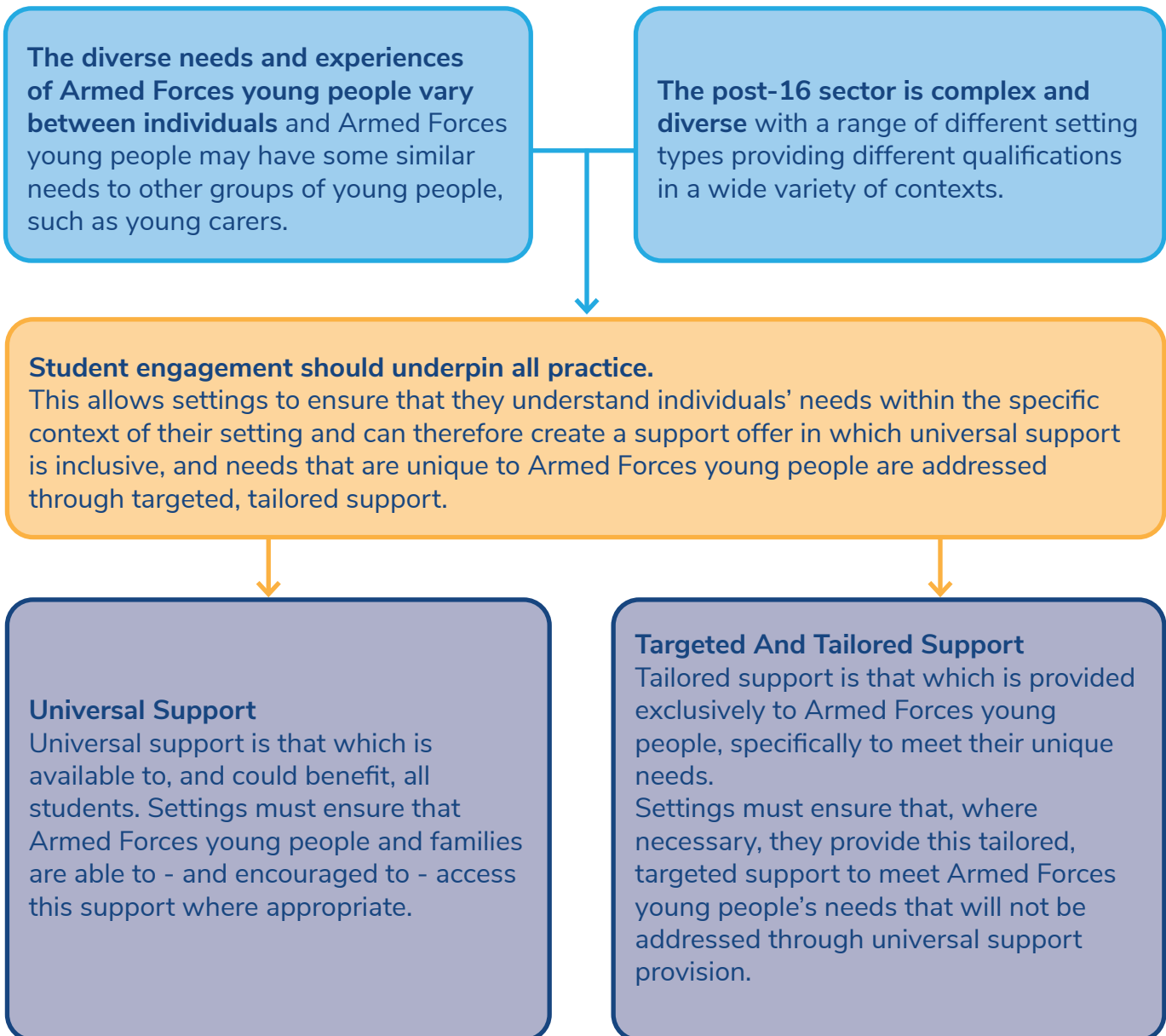
Therefore, student engagement sits at the heart of this framework, forming a link between the two overarching contextual considerations and the unique support offer each setting provides.

Rather than including a best practice principle in the framework focused explicitly on student engagement or student voice, student engagement is woven throughout all framework principles, to ensure this aspect is not side-lined should settings choose to focus on developing only a single aspect of their practice.

The assessment questions within each best practice principle highlight questions that are explicitly focused on listening to student voice. The aim here is to support settings to ensure that, whichever approach they take to supporting Armed Forces young people, their practice is informed by the students themselves.

The sub-sections below explore the contextual considerations in further detail.

FIGURE 15 OVERARCHING CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

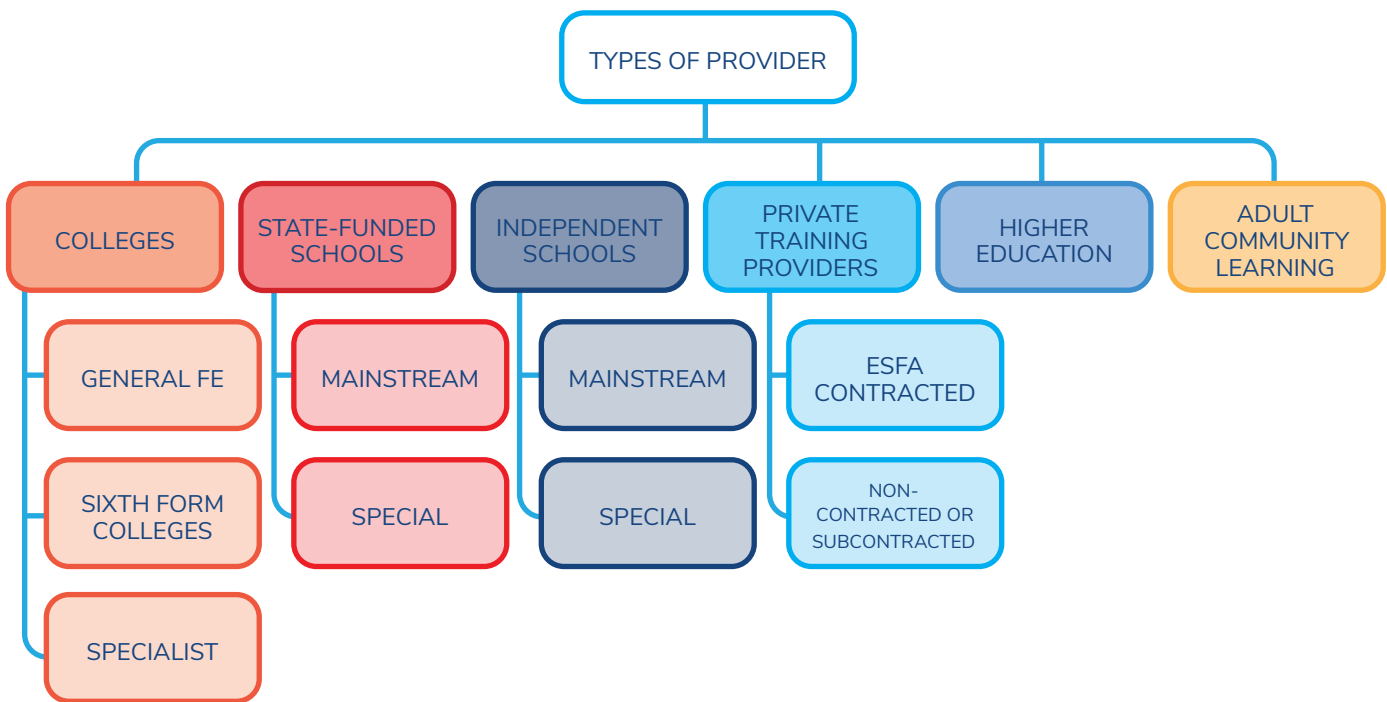


### 6.1.1 THE COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE POST-16 SECTOR

Previous research on post-16 education and training for Armed Forces young people highlights how the complexity of the post-16 sector makes it challenging to provide transferable best practice guidance for all settings.

The post-16 sector incorporates a range of different provider types, offering a wide variety of qualifications and learner experiences (see Figure 14). The way in which different settings can implement the practice set out in the framework will vary, and practitioners are encouraged to use their professional judgement to tailor their approach, whilst still ensuring they are informed by the evidence.

FIGURE 16 POST-16 LANDSCAPE TAKEN FROM HALL, 2021



This framework applies to colleges, school sixth forms (both state-funded and independent) and training providers, but is not targeted at higher education institutions or other adult learning providers.

We found that young people's experiences of completing their post-16 education in a school sixth form differed from those studying at FE or standalone sixth form colleges. College students feel more independent and, whilst this is viewed positively in terms of preparation for post-18 education, young people experience more stress and find the transition from school to college to be more of a step-change:

●● I think, compared to secondary school, it's definitely a big change in workload. It's gone from relying on your teachers to give you work to being quite individual, which I enjoy personally. It's definitely being responsible for your work and your vision...it's down to you to make sure that you do all of your work and get it in on time.



Institution type also affected the experiences of Armed Forces young people and the support they receive specifically. School sixth forms tended to be more aware of their cohort of Armed Forces young people, in comparison to FE colleges, as they could rely on year 11 SPP data in England to identify them. In some cases, this results in school sixth form settings supporting these students more effectively.

Survey results reflect this, with half of FE college practitioners, compared to less than a third of sixth form practitioners, citing a lack of data on who these students are as a barrier to supporting them.

This finding was further reinforced by the challenges experienced during sampling and recruitment. The majority of colleges approached for our research, which included those in areas with high populations of Armed Forces families, were not aware of their cohort of students from Armed Forces families.

While arranging fieldwork, we approached an additional 13 FE colleges across England, Wales and Scotland, in areas with high numbers of Armed Forces families, which were unable to take part in the research due to being unable to find these young people.

It was also challenging to involve private training providers in the primary fieldwork aspect of the research as, similarly to FE colleges, practitioners were not aware of Armed Forces young people in their cohorts. We consulted with a number of practitioners and Training Provider Network Directors, who reported that it would be extremely challenging to identify Armed Forces young people, as providers do not collect this data and there is unlikely to be a member of staff with responsibility for supporting particular groups of young people.

Overall, this suggests that some FE colleges and training providers are more likely to need to begin shaping their practice supporting Armed Forces young people by focusing on the first principle; 'understanding your students from Armed Forces backgrounds'. This will allow them to identify and get to know their cohort of Armed Forces young people, so they can make key decisions about how to ensure they have access to universal support, and how to ensure support is tailored to their needs.

## 6.1.2 VARIATION IN ARMED FORCES YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS

The experiences of individual young people from Armed Forces families varies hugely.

Although it is possible to identify trends regarding the experiences of these groups, not all young people from Armed Forces families experience the challenges set out in our research findings, nor are their needs exclusive to Armed Forces young people, as many challenges may overlap with those experienced by other vulnerable groups.

Across the focus groups with young people, we observed considerable variation in the extent to which young people felt that being in an Armed Forces family had impacted them negatively, or at all.

Some young people felt that experiences, such as parental deployment and mobility, had significantly affected their wellbeing and academic attainment. Others felt that it had minimal impact or, while it impacted their earlier education, they were now 'used to' Service life or did not 'know any different':

●● *I moved a bit when I was younger... I wouldn't see him Monday to Friday or I'd see him every two weeks normally. But I think just cos I'm older now and I've got like another life. It's hard to see him [parent] a lot and he does move around a lot [but] I'm used to the distance.*

Often, the main determinant of whether young people felt severely negatively impacted by being in an Armed Forces family was whether their family was struggling financially (see section 5.2.2). Where families faced material deprivation, young people found parental deployment more challenging, had more strained relationships with parents and wanted more support from their setting. While there is also likely to be variation in this trend itself, it is nonetheless important to consider the intersection between Service life and poverty when considering the needs of individual Armed Forces young people.

In interviews, most practitioners were also reluctant to generalise about either the needs or the strengths of Armed Forces young people. When asked whether staff members understood the needs of these students, practitioners highlighted the importance of understanding individual students as well as understanding key aspects of Service life.

Sometimes, practitioners suggested that their settings did not do enough to understand this individual variation and provide tailored support:

●● *I think we're okay in terms of knowing who is a service child. I think [understanding their needs] is more of an individual thing. It's about understanding how [being an Armed Forces young person] might impact on that particular student, particularly for 6th formers. And I think maybe we need to develop the role in tutors more, in having conversations with our service students about whether there's anything that's impacting negatively on their learning, and any additional support they require because of that.*

Therefore, the framework acknowledges the need to consider Armed Forces young people as individuals, whilst still recognising they may have common needs that can be addressed with group support.

For example, the wellbeing principle suggests that Armed Forces young people are encouraged to access universal pastoral support, which is available to and beneficial for all students, whereas some provision should be tailored to Armed Forces young people's needs, such as allowing extenuating circumstances or additional pastoral support during parental deployment.

However, the framework guidance also highlights that staff should not assume that these young people will have poor wellbeing simply due to their Armed Forces status and they may not need to access either universal or tailored support. Practitioners' will need to exercise their professional judgment to ensure each young person from an Armed

Forces background receives the support they need.

In addition, practitioners highlighted that Armed Forces young people's needs overlap with the needs of other vulnerable groups and individual young people might fall into more than one 'vulnerable group'. In some cases, the needs of other groups, such as young carers, were seen as more severe and were prioritised. This de-prioritisation creates a barrier to Armed Forces young people receiving the support they need.

Our expert steering group discussed how this variation in the needs of individuals and the tension of limited resources driving prioritisation of one group over another may make it challenging for some post-16 settings to adequately support Armed Forces young people.

They suggested that settings should consider the following questions to support them in assessing the needs of all young people:

1. Which groups of students, as well as Armed Forces young people, might require additional support?
2. What are the overlaps between the needs of Armed Forces young people and other vulnerable groups? E.g., Armed Forces young people and young carers are likely to have additional responsibilities in the home, which may make it more difficult for them to dedicate time to independent study.
3. In our cohort of Armed Forces young people, which students also fall into other vulnerable groups and what are the implications of this in terms of the support they need?

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### 6.1.3 CONSIDERING THESE CONTEXTUAL FACTORS: UNIVERSAL OR TAILORED PROVISION?

Our expert steering group discussed these three contextual considerations and highlighted that, as a result, each post-16 setting may need to take a different approach to the

support they provide. However, throughout the process of planning their support offer, they must consider how both their universal offer of support and some tailored provision can complementarily address Armed Forces young people's needs.

Practice that is universal should be available to and benefit all students, but specifically address the needs of Armed Forces young people. This could include conducting academic assessments that identify gaps in students' learning and providing 'catch up' support.

Arguably, this type of provision will be present in all good settings, but the framework also emphasises the need to ensure that Armed Forces young people access this support. Settings that have small cohorts of Armed Forces young people and/or large cohorts of students in other disadvantaged groups, creating a shortage of resources for tailored provision, might focus on developing aspects of universal support.

Practice that is tailored should be specific to the needs of Armed Forces young people and may potentially not be appropriate or necessary for other young people, including those in other vulnerable groups. This could include systems for recording and communicating parental deployment, and tailored pastoral support to help young people cope during deployment.

Settings that have larger cohorts of Armed Forces young people, and/or individual students from Armed Forces backgrounds who have very high needs, are more likely to be able to focus on developing this type of tailored provision.

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## 6.2 BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

This 'Thriving Lives in Post-16' framework sets out seven best practice principles. The rationale behind each principle is supported by the existing evidence base and our primary research findings. The expert steering group formulated these principles following a presentation of this evidence.

In addition, the case studies provide examples of the application of these principles. The seven principles are:

1. **Data and Identification:** we know our Armed Forces young people and their families.
2. **Culture:** our culture recognises and celebrates the experiences of Armed Forces families.
3. **Transition:** we provide specialist support for young people from Armed Forces families as they join and leave our setting.
4. **Staff Awareness:** our staff are well informed about the experiences and needs of Armed Forces young people.
5. **Wellbeing:** the wellbeing of Armed Forces young people is prioritised and supported.
6. **Achievement/Attainment:** the achievement of Armed Forces young people is maximised.
7. **Parental Engagement:** we work with and involve parents from our Armed Forces community.

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### 6.2.1 DATA AND IDENTIFICATION

**The first principle in the post-16 framework is 'we know our Armed Forces young people'. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that settings know who their Armed Forces young people and families are and what needs they have, as well as ensuring they collect and monitor data on them.**

This principle is the first principle because it is foundational for all other best practice principles. It recognises that, in order to implement best practice in supporting Armed Forces young people, settings must know who these students are so they can:

- Build an understanding of their experiences and their needs, taking into account the diversity in their needs.
- Explicitly welcome their families into the setting community.
- Target support effectively.
- Track data on these students' wellbeing, progress and attainment.

In short, it will not be possible for settings to effectively implement best practice under other principles if they do not

identify and understand their community of Armed Forces children and families.

Currently, it appears that not all post-16 settings are fulfilling the key aspects of this principle: 42% of respondents to the survey said that 'a lack of data on which students are Armed Forces children' was a key barrier in providing support.

As discussed in section 4.2, the process of conducting fieldwork in this research underscored the challenges that post-16 settings currently face in identifying their Armed Forces young people. While school sixth forms are more likely to be able to rely on school level SPP data as the majority of their cohort transfers from year 11, standalone post-16 settings will not automatically have access to this data.

We found that settings that had systems in place to identify and track their Armed Forces young people were consistently more likely to provide tailored support for their Armed Forces young people. For example, one setting provided several

opportunities to capture data regarding students' Armed Forces status, including through application forms and interviews, an enrolment questionnaire to be completed with the group tutor, and through cross referencing data on other needs (like caring responsibilities).

In contrast, settings that did not hold this data - and had to identify Armed Forces young people for the purposes of taking part in the research - did not tend to have support systems in place. Students were conscious of whether their setting recognised their status, valued this awareness and, where there was a lack of awareness, saw this as a reason why they were not supported.

Only half (51%) of UK settings in our survey collected data on whether a student is an Armed Forces child on enrolment. Given that the survey sample is likely skewed towards those with a greater awareness of Armed Forces young people, nationally, the proportion of settings that collect this data is likely to be lower.

TABLE 4

|   |              | INSTITUTION TYPE    |   |
|---|--------------|---------------------|---|
|   |              | FE colleges (n = 9) | State funded mainstream school (n = 21) |
| DOES THE SETTING YOU WORK IN ASK WHETHER A STUDENT IS AN ARMED FORCES CHILD ON ENROLMENT? | Yes          | 2 (22%)             | 14 (67%)                                |
|   | No           | 4 (44%)             | 4 (19%)                                 |
|   | I don't know | 3(33%)              | 3 (14%)                                 |

Proportionally, in our sample, FE colleges were less likely than state funded mainstream schools to collect this data (see Table 4).

While the small sample size means it's not possible to reliably generalise beyond the survey, this trend, combined with the difficulties of finding FE colleges to take part in the research, suggests FE colleges may be less likely to collect this data. Our steering group highlighted that, in order to best support Armed Forces young people, settings should collect data that goes beyond simply identifying whether or not young people are from an Armed Forces family.

Firstly, when settings collect service status data, they should also collect information on:

- The branch of service the parent serves in.
- The likelihood that they will be regularly deployed.
- The level of school mobility the young person has experienced.

This information would be highly valuable in decisions about how to best target support for these young people. In addition, all staff should be able to access this data so they can understand the needs of the cohort. Among survey respondents that indicated their setting collected data on Service status, nearly a quarter (23%) said that this data was not available to all staff.

As well as data collection, building an understanding of Armed Forces young people's needs and experiences is a central tenet of this principle. Given that the evidence suggests that:

1. Armed Forces young people are more likely than their peers to have particular needs or challenges, such as being a young carer, and that
2. Armed Forces young people's experiences vary significantly,

settings must make a particular effort to 'get to know' Armed Forces young people and their individual circumstances, in order to effectively target support.

Among survey respondents, 'a lack of knowledge' on Armed Forces young people's needs was the most commonly reported barrier to supporting them, cited by 58% of practitioners. This barrier was considered far more influential than a lack of funding, low or transitory pupil populations or a lack of prioritisation. In sum, this suggests that adopting the practice set out in this key framework principle will address a considerable systemic barrier to supporting these young people.

## 6.2.2 CULTURE

**The second framework principle is 'our culture recognises and celebrates the experiences of Armed Forces young people and their families'. Strongly underpinned by the first principles of knowing the Armed Forces students in a setting, this principle ensures that young people feel their background is understood. It is also a key element of practice in striving to ensure that Armed Forces young people are not viewed through a deficit lens as, despite facing some systemic barriers and having some extra support needs, many Armed Forces young people also hold strengths as a result of their experiences.**

Firstly, research suggests that feeling a sense of belonging in an institution is positively associated with academic

motivation and success (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007; Korpershoek, Canrinus, Fokkens-Bruinsma & de Boer, 2020). Therefore, the first element of this principle is that settings must consider how they make sure Armed Forces young people and families feel welcomed into the setting community.

In addition, although young people from Armed Forces families recognise that they face some barriers, they generally did not view being part of a military family in a negative light. While they wanted some support from their post-16 settings, they did not want the setting to problematise their families' circumstances.

This principle therefore sets out how settings should celebrate and welcome their Armed Forces community by:

- Celebrating key Armed Forces events.
- Holding events and/or support groups for Armed Forces parents.
- Creating opportunities for Armed Forces young people to build a community within the setting through extra-curricular activities.
- Where possible, ensuring there is some representation of the military community in the staff body.

Secondly, in order to create a positive culture that celebrates the setting's Armed Forces community, settings must recognise and capitalise on the strengths that individual young people hold. Most young people in our fieldwork agreed that growing up in an Armed Forces family had given them strengths, with greater independence and greater resilience to change or adaptability being the most commonly discussed attributes.

Surveyed practitioners echoed this, with 81% agreeing that Armed Forces young people have strengths that other students may not have. Around half of practitioners surveyed felt that, in comparison to other pupils, Armed Forces young people are more able to cope with setbacks (43%) and more independent (53%).

However, settings must tread carefully when considering their practice in relation to celebrating these strengths. There is debate within the literature regarding the dangers of viewing strengths positively when they are developed as a result of adverse experiences. Furthermore, the existing evidence and our fieldwork suggest that increased resilience

and/or independence in this context may reduce help-seeking behaviour.

It is crucial that, while enacting this principle, settings avoid reinforcing the view that Armed Forces young people don't need help, because they are independent or resilient.

This principle sets out that the best way to approach celebrating young people's strengths is to speak with them about their experiences, and to ensure they are explicitly told that seeking help and support when needed is, in itself, a strength.

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### 6.2.3 TRANSITION

**The third framework principle is 'transition', specifying that settings 'provide specialist support for young people from Armed Forces families when they join or leave the setting.' Whether young people from Armed Forces families join and leave the setting at the start and end of their post-16 phase, or midway through, settings must ensure that they support their transitions.**

**In addition, settings must understand how young people from Armed Forces families might have different considerations in their post-18 decision-making and transitions compared to other students and ensure that the IAG provided meets their needs.**

As highlighted by the school level 'Thriving Lives' framework research, 'transition is one of the defining characteristics of being a Service child' (p.32). Even where, as we found among the young people involved in our fieldwork, families have made efforts to avoid mobility during the post-16 phase, the impact of earlier mobility may persist and young people may require specialist support as they join and leave the setting, regardless of whether this is at the start and end, or midway through, their post-16 education.

In addition, while multiple transitions at school level may have resulted in greater adaptability or resilience to change, it may also have led to disengagement or transitory attitudes.

Therefore, effective transition support is a central principle for good practice with these young people at post-16, as it is at school level.

In this principle there are three transition types that settings must consider when examining their practice in this area:

- Young people joining the setting, either at the start of their post-16 phase or midway through.
- Young people leaving the setting midway through their post-16 education to transition to another setting.
- Young people moving on to their post-18 pathways.

Our research found the following elements of good practice supporting transitions, which are reflected in this framework principle:

- **Sharing Information with other settings:** this practice is underpinned by the first principle on collecting, sharing and utilising data on Armed Forces young people, however, with particular regard to transition, settings should ensure that their transition protocols include a process for gathering data from previous settings or transferring data to new settings.
- **Assessing needs:** while sharing information with other settings may allow settings to understand young people's needs, it may also be necessary to conduct needs assessments when young people transition into the post-16 settings. This allows practitioners to identify and then respond to any academic or pastoral needs (see principles 5 and 6).
- **Parental engagement:** effective communication with parents is essential for facilitating smooth transitions. Young people involved in our research valued the involvement of their parents in their transitions as parents are key influencers in their decision-making, for instance on subject choice.
- **Creating a community:** ensuring that young people and families feel welcome in the setting community and, where possible, feel that there is an Armed Forces community within the setting, supports smooth transitions. Running events, groups or activities for Armed Forces families can support this.
- **Supporting next steps:** the transition to post-18 pathways should also be considered under this principle. While Armed Forces young people may have the same needs as other students in terms of their post-18 decision-making, high quality IAG and individualised support is needed to ensure that Armed Forces young people can fulfil their potential.



Our steering group also highlighted the particular importance of FE colleges considering how they support student transitions into their settings, given the higher rates of dropout in these settings.

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## 6.2.4 STAFF AWARENESS

**The fourth framework principle is 'staff are well informed about the experiences and needs of Armed Forces young people'. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that all staff are able to provide appropriate, tailored support to these young people and that there is a member of staff responsible for organising, reviewing and improving the support on offer.**

Young people involved in this research highlighted that the main change they wanted to see in their settings was a greater staff awareness, and acknowledgment of their experiences and the challenges they may face as a result of being in an Armed Forces family.

A setting is unlikely to be able to deploy support effectively if staff do not have a good awareness and understanding of their Armed Forces student community.

There are two key tenets of good practice in this principle:

1. Whole staff awareness, understanding and training.
2. A designated staff member to lead and drive support initiatives and systems.

Whole staff awareness of Armed Forces young people's needs and experiences is crucial, as young people are likely to turn to staff members that they work with frequently and have a trusted relationship with. Whilst this might be a staff member with a designated responsibility for supporting Armed Forces students, it also may not be.

This is especially true in FE colleges or other training providers that provide a larger range of courses, sometimes across many different buildings, meaning that each student has a unique pathway through the setting and a different set of staff relationships.

Furthermore, awareness across the whole staff body, including leaders, will support the implementation of other aspects of good practice. For example, any staff with pastoral roles will need to understand the needs of Armed Forces young people in order to effectively deliver the wellbeing support set out in principle 5. Training is essential, as many staff members may not understand the nuances of Service life and therefore how to support students.

Our practitioner survey revealed that the second most commonly cited setting-based barrier to providing support was a lack of knowledge of how to support Armed Forces young people effectively, selected by 45% of respondents. When asked what barriers Armed Forces young people face, 38% said that Armed Forces young people feeling that staff members do not understand their needs is a key barrier. One practitioner specified:

●● *I would suggest that all service and veteran forces children be given the same support nationally in 16-19 education. A training package should be made mandatory in all FE colleges who have service children to make all staff aware of their needs. Similar to the Keep Children Safe In Education but focussed on Support Armed Forces Children in 16-19 Education.*

In our fieldwork, we found that settings that were supporting Armed Forces young people effectively also had a designated staff member responsible for monitoring the Armed Forces student population, organising support initiatives and resources, and disseminating information to other staff members:

●● *All of the service children are looked after by a particular mentor, and that mentor would then share information about those with the staff who taught. So [we] provide a bit of training, support for staff in managing service families.*

This is particularly helpful in facilitating good home-setting communication, as Armed Forces parents can notify this staff member about upcoming deployments or other challenges, triggering a series of support mechanisms for the student, overseen by the designated staff member. In addition, naming this responsibility allows the staff member more licence to make decisions about support initiatives, such as running trips or events for Armed Forces students and families.

## 6.2.5 WELLBEING

**The fifth framework principle is 'the wellbeing of young people from Armed Forces families is supported'. It sets out that pastoral staff and support systems take account of these young people's needs and provide tailored support. The purpose of this principle is to address the fact that Armed Forces young people are more likely to suffer emotional distress, which could affect their post-16 education due to features of Service life, such as having a deployed parent.**

Previous research has consistently found that mobility and deployment can cause emotional distress to Service children. Our research with 16 to 18 year olds revealed mixed trends in this area.

Nearly three quarters (72%) of post-16 practitioners surveyed felt that Armed Forces young people required more emotional support in comparison to other pupils.

Practitioners were more likely to view Armed Forces young people as having emotional support needs, rather than academic support needs. Practitioners explained that a variety of issues associated with Service life, and mobility in particular, could lead to poor wellbeing:

●● *They need more wellbeing support because disrupted education means lower achievement, or they missed out key support, or they may not be able to take their first choice post-16 options.*

Social difficulties were mentioned frequently by survey respondents as a key challenge faced by Armed Forces young people, which pastoral support should address:

●● *They may have attended a number of schools and therefore need help establishing friends and networks in new communities.*

Reflecting findings with younger age groups, some young people explained that they sometimes experience stress and negative impacts on their wellbeing as a result of Service family life. Often these stresses were in relation to having to balance additional responsibility in the home with their studies, and feeling overwhelmed. For a few young people, one parent's deployment or weekending had a negative impact on relationships in the home.

However, as discussed in section 6.1, others felt that due to their age and experiencing deployment and mobility as children, they were now 'used to' these things and no longer as affected by them. In some cases, they felt they were more resilient and independent than their peers, who would be more easily distressed by things like being away from home.

Whilst this may suggest less need for wellbeing support, it is nonetheless a central principle of this framework, as it is in the school level framework. This ensures that young people who do experience negative impacts on their wellbeing can access appropriate support.

In addition, some young people who felt they did not experience poor wellbeing due to service life also suggested that they were unlikely to seek support when they do face challenges. This means that providing and promoting tailored wellbeing support for Armed Forces young people is evermore essential and, indeed, should uphold positive messages about help-seeking behaviour.

## 6.2.6 ACHIEVEMENT

The sixth principle is 'the achievement of young people from Armed Forces families is maximised'. It specifies that academic support in post-16 settings should address any gaps resulting from mobility or other issues, and ensure that young people are able to fulfil their academic potential. This mirrors the school level framework, recognising that, as in other stages of education, Service life should not form an obstacle to achievement in post-16 education.

Previous research, set out in the school level 'Thriving Lives' research report, highlights how transition, mobility, deployment and other facets of Service life, may negatively impact attainment.

This issue is particularly pertinent at post-16 for two reasons:

1. At this stage, young people may experience the culmination of missed learning throughout their school lives. Having just completed their GCSEs, young people may have failed to pass exams due to disruption in their secondary schooling that, in turn, could have affected their post-16 choices.
2. The complexity of the post-16 education sector means that moving between settings - and potentially between England, Wales and/or Scotland - creates issues with course continuation and qualifications.

As most of the young people encountered during our fieldwork had not moved settings during their post-16 education, any effect of mobility on their academic progress had occurred earlier in their education.

Some practitioners suggested that they observed the culmination of this disrupted education in their post-16 attainment, though they caveated that this could not be generalised to all Armed Forces young people:

●● *I do think they struggle academically. The ones I've had... maybe that's just through disruption in the earlier years.*



Half of practitioners surveyed reported that Armed Forces young people needed slightly or much more academic support than other students. Identifying these learning needs at an early stage in a young person's post-16 education is crucial.

In one setting we visited, all Sixth Form students completed a comprehensive learning questionnaire designed to identify learning gaps and needs. It was through this that a participant's SEN was uncovered and then addressed. Although this practice was universally applied to all pupils, it is likely to be particularly effective for young people who have had a disrupted education.

One practitioner highlighted that the Armed Forces young people are most likely to have gaps in their English and Maths knowledge compared to other subjects. They felt this was likely due to these subjects requiring more foundational knowledge than other subjects, meaning that, where young people miss content, it is more challenging to catch up:

●● *There's some of the gaps in their learning... some of them I wouldn't specifically say they've got more additional needs, but I would say... the key thing is it's the gaps in their learning and often it's Maths and English where that gets picked up more than other subjects because some of the other subjects they can maybe just start looking at in fifth year, they might start in third and fourth year, but the gaps in their learning with Maths and English can be quite vast.*

As a result, the framework suggests that Armed Forces young people may need additional support with Maths and English, including both for GCSE retakes and to ensure they can access learning in other subjects. However, this focus does not suggest that academic catch up in other subjects would not be valuable and this should be decided on an individual basis.

Practitioners and young people also reported that the complexity of the post-16 sector, particularly regarding the variety of subjects and qualifications available, can lead to academic challenges, as Armed Forces young people move between institutions. This was particularly pertinent when families moved between England and Scotland, or from other countries.

When asked about the main challenges facing Armed Forces young people in post-16 education, around a quarter of survey respondents mentioned issues with qualifications:

●● *Often pupils have moved from different education qualification systems so are behind or ahead of their year group. They also have gaps in their education.*

●● *Potentially changes to qualifications/awarding bodies from one education system to the next could have a negative impact on achievement through no fault of their own.*

This issue is difficult for individual settings or practitioners to address. Often it will not be possible to change the courses on offer in response to an Armed Forces young person's needs.

Therefore, the best practice set out in this principle focuses on practitioners assessing young people's learning needs and supporting them to catch up and access the qualifications on offer. The framework also suggests that, in institutions that tend to have students transitioning from other countries, at least one member of staff should have a good understanding of the different qualification systems.

## 6.2.7 PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

**This final principle in the framework is parental engagement. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that, despite the increased independence of students in post-16 education, settings recognise the importance of parental engagement, especially for this group of young people who may face challenges directly because of their parents' jobs.**

This framework recognises that post-16 settings work with young people and families in a different way to schools. Although post-16 settings continue to serve both students and families, they have a more distant relationship with parents and carers, in comparison to schools, especially in the case of FE colleges and private training providers.

However, existing evidence suggests that parents remain an important source of support and a key influencer on young people's post-18 pathways (Mulcahy et al., 2019), and our fieldwork with Armed Forces young people substantiates this.

Parental influence and family circumstances are particularly pertinent to considerations about how to support Armed Forces young people, as the primary challenges that young people from Armed Forces families face in their education relate directly to the circumstances of their parents' job. Therefore, the framework includes a principle of best practice focused on parental engagement.

When asked about the difference between schools and post-16 settings, practitioners and young people highlighted the increased expectation for independence, generally speaking, in positive terms. Practitioners believed that developing young people's independence was a key aim for post-16 education:

●● *I think it's just a difference between secondary and post-16, to be honest, I think all the students benefit from that; being treated more like an adult.*

Young people studying in FE colleges or boarding schools were particularly likely to highlight the increased expectation on them to be independent as the main difference between school and post-16.

Overall, young people tended to view this as positive preparation for post-18 education, though some sometimes felt stressed by the pressure and wanted additional support.

There was some disagreement among practitioners we spoke to regarding what level of parental engagement in post-16 education is optimum or expected. Some felt that the relationship between settings and parents became more one-way information sharing, via the student, rather than a parent-setting partnership.

These practitioners suggest that the dynamic between the setting, the parents and the young person shifts, with a decline in setting-parent partnership being replaced by a setting-student partnership, although young people may continue to be influenced by their parents:

●● *There's less contact with parents perhaps in post-16, it's more kind of, information giving rather than a partnership. It's to give the information to the student and the parents and they have their discussion rather than us trying to [mediate that]... at parent's evenings and those sorts of things, [parents] expect information rather than asking; 'what can we do?'. Because at that point, I think a lot of families feel it's more up to the student and they're making their own decisions.*

Other post-16 practitioners acknowledged that parents remain 'essential' and influential in young people's decision-making and are a key source of support. This viewpoint aligns more closely with existing literature on parental involvement (ibid). These practitioners tended to conclude that post-16 settings must balance parental involvement with building young people's independence:



●● *We want to develop independent skills, we want them to feel a little bit more adult like. But, we still have parents evening. We still keep parents in the loop. They are an essential part of the process.*

Therefore, effective support for these young people requires that settings communicate regularly with parents, so they are aware of these circumstances on an individual student level.

Reflecting this, across the settings we visited, we found that, where Armed Forces young people felt well supported, their settings had established systems - either formal or informal - to allow parents to notify the setting about upcoming deployments, moves and other changes to circumstances.

We appreciate that each individual setting may strike a different balance in their focus, between providing in-setting support for students from an Armed Forces family and working directly with families. These decisions will likely be based on available resources and the extent to which settings currently engage with all parents.

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## 7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research gives the first comprehensive set of insights into Armed Forces young people's experiences in post-16 education settings, their needs, and the barriers they may face. It also highlights the willingness within the 16-19 sector to support these young people and explores the challenges currently hindering these efforts. Although further research is needed to include a more significant number of training providers and FE colleges in particular, the findings suggest a need for more support for these young people and a better understanding of their needs among practitioners in the 16-19 sector.

Our findings indicate that Armed Forces young people in 16-19 education are more likely than their peers to have needs requiring additional academic and pastoral support due to the nature of Armed Forces life. Sometimes, these needs are severe but go unnoticed or unmet in systems not set up to capture Armed Forces young people's status and track their progress.

Practitioners often lack clarity on Armed Forces young people's experiences in general, though they may be aware of the needs of individual students. This is often driven by one, or a combination of the following factors:

- low awareness of students' Service status due to not collecting this data systematically,
- disjointed and incomplete information on a young person's schooling due to multiple school moves,
- low numbers of Armed Forces young people in the setting's cohort
- competing priorities and a need to support other groups of students with high needs, e.g. young carers.

Despite this lack of awareness, we found a strong motivation among practitioners to effectively support this group of people.

A lack of data identifying Armed Forces young people in 16-19 education is a significant barrier to enacting support across all three nations. Although SPP data from year 11 cohorts can be used in England, it is a poor substitute for data systems expressly set up for tracking students in 16-

19 settings, as it results in standalone settings being less likely to identify their Armed Forces students. In Scotland, collaboration across local authorities has highlighted the presence of Armed Forces young people across all localities. However, the quality of data collection and tracking varies considerably between settings. Only once this issue is resolved, potentially at a setting level but ideally through a wider-system approach, can settings effectively provide support to their Armed Forces community.

Speaking to our young participants, it became clear that they can identify the areas where they need the most support and are a valuable source of information on how to design support. We recommend school leaders and practitioners in 16-19 settings to place pupil voices at the centre of their support strategy and activities.

Finally, the findings of this and previous research highlight the complexity of the 16-19 sector and the variation and diversity in Armed Forces young people's experiences. The report and framework titles reflect our findings: 'Diversity meets complexity'. Each system, each type of education institution, each particular setting and each student have different strengths and face different challenges. We invite settings to acknowledge their unique context and the needs of their Armed Forces cohort and to shape a support offer guided by the best practice framework but also tailored to each setting and informed by practitioners' professional understanding of the students.

The findings of this research have led to the creation of a best practice framework for 16-19 settings; therefore, most recommendations for practice are contained within it. In addition, we put forward the following key recommendations for practitioners and policymakers regarding the system-level changes necessary to facilitate the best practice set out in the framework.

### FUNDING

#### **Include the 16-19 sector in additional funding for the support of Armed Forces young people across England, Wales and Scotland**

The findings of this research contribute to the strong argument that educational disadvantage does not stop at age 16, and therefore, funding for support should not stop either. As students in post-16 are expected to become more independent, the likelihood that those who face additional

challenges become disengaged or unable to access education may increase if they do not receive the necessary support during this education phase. A lack of funding is a key barrier to settings being able to provide the support that these young people need.

Therefore, there is a strong case for the following:

- The extension of Service pupil premium funding to the post-16 sector in England.
- An increase in the funding given to SSCE Cymru to allow them to extend and improve their support to the full range of post-16 settings.
- Policymakers and practitioners in Scotland to consider post-16 settings and 16–19-year-old Armed Forces young people. Especially when creating or applying for funding to support these students, which is currently available from multiple sources.

In sum, across all nations, the findings of this report make it clear that funding mechanisms or grants aiming to support Armed Forces pupils in their education should not exclude young people aged 16-19. Thus, in future, when researchers or organisations make recommendations to change or increase funding for Armed Forces children and young people anywhere in the UK, such recommendations should consider this age group.

## DATA

**Create better systems for recording the presence of Armed Forces students throughout their education journey, ideally on a national level but, in the meantime, on a setting or system level.**

The lack of consistent data identifying, tracking and monitoring Armed Forces young people in the post-16 sector has been highlighted throughout this report as a barrier to understanding their experiences and outcomes and targeting and providing the appropriate support. While the ideal solution to these issues should be implemented on a UK-wide level, individual settings and each nation can also make strides towards addressing this challenge. We make recommendations at setting-, country- and UK-wide levels.

16-19 settings should include Armed Forces status on any existing student data collection systems. How settings

should collect and use this data is further explored in the first best practice principle of the framework. We emphasise it here as it is likely the crucial first step that allows all settings to understand students' needs and target support. Settings should incorporate multiple opportunities to collect this data into their existing systems to maximise the chances of identifying Armed Forces young people in their cohorts.

The DfE could support some of these setting-level changes by adding Service status to the data required on individual learner records (ILR)<sup>5</sup> (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2022). FE colleges and training providers in England currently complete these records.

Beyond setting-level solutions, we concur with Walker et al.'s recommendation that The Department for Education, Education Scotland and The Department for Education and Skills Wales should each ensure that all Armed Forces children and young people are identified with a marker that allows them to be tracked throughout their education, including as they move between different schools/settings and systems. We highlight in particular that such data systems should be designed with the inclusion of the post-16 sector in mind.

Currently, the main identification marker used in England is eligibility for SPP. We propose that this system should be divorced from the funding system, particularly given that the current funding does not extend beyond 16. This will also allow the inclusion of Service children and young people by the broader definition of any person whose parent has served in the first 25 years of the young person's life.

Finally, again upholding the recommendations made by Walker et al., we recommend that the respective education departments across the English, Scottish and Welsh governments should work together to align these data systems to enable smoother cross-border transitions for Armed Forces children and young people.<sup>2</sup> This would provide an impetus for these parts of the sector to record the presence of Armed Forces young people in their cohorts.

<sup>5</sup> The ILR is an ongoing collection of data completed by Further Education colleges and training providers in England (DfE, 2020).

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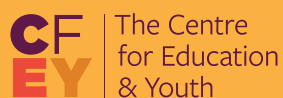
*‘Society should ensure that all children  
and young people make a fulfilling  
transition to adulthood’*







# THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN



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