

**‘Grown Up’ Children from Armed Forces Families:  
reflections on experiences of childhood and education**

**Research Team**  
Dr Anne Chappell  
Dr Ellen McHugh  
Dr Christopher Ince  
Mr Mamoon Bhuyan



Cover image: the dandelion is understood as a symbol for children from armed forces families (photograph by Anne Chappell)

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# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1 Background

This research set out to investigate the experiences of ‘grown up’ children from armed forces families, to gather their reflections on childhood and education, and to seek their advice to inform the current armed forces community, policy-makers and practitioners.

The Service Children’s Progression Alliance (SCiP) defines a child from an armed forces family as “a person whose parent or carer serves in the Regular Armed Forces, or as a Reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that person’s life” (SCiP, 2017: para 2) and the Office for Students refers to this definition in their documentation relating to student characteristics (OfS n.d. para 8, see also OfS, 2020: para 11). In this research we use the term ‘grown up’ to indicate individuals over the age of 18 recognised to have reached the legal age of adulthood in the UK.

This group of individuals are currently overlooked in research, policy and practice as the focus continues to be on serving members of the armed forces, veterans, and families, including school-aged children.

## 1.2 Research aims

The aims of the project were as follows:

- investigate how childhood and education were experienced and understood by ‘grown up’ children from the diverse community of armed forces families, and their perceptions of the impact of their experiences;
- seek the advice of the ‘grown up’ children to understand what they think is important for the current children and those who work with them;
- use the knowledge generated by research with the ‘grown up’ children to inform policies and practices for families, schools, armed forces charities, and government to better support current children from armed forces families.

The data collection was undertaken between March 2021 and August 2022 in two stages with individuals who self-identified as being from an armed forces family. The first stage of data collection involved an online questionnaire and was targeted at individuals who have or had one or two serving parents/guardians in the British Armed Forces. Participation was invited via social media and received a very positive response, with 119 participants completing the online questionnaire. Participants were aged between 18-80, from a range of geographical locations (UK and overseas), and across all three branches of the British armed forces. The second stage of data collection involved in-depth interviews with a sample of 10 participants who had all taken part in the online questionnaire.

This report details the context for the study, the research methods used, the key findings and recommendations. The key findings and recommendations are summarised below.

### 1.3 Key findings

The key findings from the analysis of the data are: the challenges and opportunities that arise from hyper-mobility; identification and sense of pride; friendships; talking with parents about the experience of growing up in their family; stability/instability and (re)integration to 'civilian' life; the uniqueness of growing up in an armed forces family; the nature of their childhoods in relation to others and the perceived impact of their experiences. In addition, there is advice suggested by the participants for the Ministry of Defence and armed forces, schools and teachers, parents/guardians, and to current children.

The outcomes of the analysis of the data were discussed with key stakeholders during the project as questions emerged about the relevance of the data collected from the 'grown ups' to the current population of children given how things have changed over time. The stakeholders' reflections were that the experiences shared by participants in this research resonate with and have direct relevance to the children experiencing life with the armed forces now.

This research has highlighted a number of important considerations which can be used as evidence to inform interventions and support for the current children, and those who work with them. The findings illustrate the uniqueness of this non-homogenous group based on the diversity of their experiences. The findings also indicate that consideration should be given to appropriate support over time given that participants noted the long-term, and in some case, life-long impact of their experiences.

### 1.4 Recommendations

#### 1.4.1 Recommendations for policy and practice

Arising from the above findings, this report makes the following recommendations for four key stakeholders: Ministry of Defence and armed forces; Government; schools and teachers; and parents/guardians.

- Recommendation 1: There should be greater acknowledgment of what can be gained from talking to 'grown up children' from armed forces families to inform policy and practice to better support current children from armed forces families. The diversity and complexity of the experiences needs to be understood as they are influenced by a range of factors, including the nature of the work that their serving parent/guardian does, the people they meet, and the places they live.
- Recommendation 2: Schools should continue to be supported in developing the awareness of all staff in identifying and recognising the challenges for children who are part of an armed forces family, including the issues that come with high levels of mobility, and how this presents both unique opportunities and challenges. This is particularly important for schools that have a small number of children from the armed forces families' community. The identification of the children would be improved if the Ministry of Defence kept and shared records with and between schools and this would also enable the 'Service Pupil Premium' to be made available to all schools for all children.

- Recommendation 3: Wider policy development should be informed by the broadest range of knowledge and evidence to ensure that decision-making is fit for purpose and sufficiently nuanced to take account of the nature and impact of the experiences.
- Recommendation 4: The Ministry of Defence and armed forces should ensure that they work in ways that support the children in armed forces families both during the time the parent/guardian is serving, and through their multiple transition points including those out of the armed forces community. In fulfilling these responsibilities, the experience of the family would be improved which would, in turn, improve the experience of the serving parent/guardian as part of that family. An improved life experience for the family could impact positively on the well-being of those serving and increase retention in the armed forces. We recommend that a transition programme should be extended to the children.
- Recommendation 5: That support, including allocated finance, should be consistent for all armed forces children and those who support them across the four home nations, regardless of where they are located.
- Recommendation 6: Organisations consider implementing mentoring programmes that make use of the experiences and wisdom of the 'grown up children' as mentors to support others who have had similar experiences.
- Recommendation 7: The definition and terminology used in relation to the children from the armed forces community(ies) should take account of the diverse experiences outlined within this research and the life-long nature of the impact. We propose two things:
  - that the use of the term 'service child' is reviewed as it is the parent/guardian that serves rather than the child or family. Given that some are not positive about their association with this term, we suggest that it would be appropriate for its use to be reconsidered. One suggestion is 'child from an armed forces family'.
  - that the definition of a child from an armed forces family is broadened, adopted at government level across the four nations, and used consistently in the UK to include:

*'any individual with a parent(s)/guardian(s) who has been a member of the armed forces at any point during their life'.*

#### **1.4.2 Recommendations for research**

Research with this group is in its earliest stages and there are a number of potential areas for future research:

- explore the lives and experiences of a broader group to develop more detailed and nuanced understandings, including any specific impact on the children of the different roles fulfilled by the serving personnel, the nature of their battalion/squadron/regiment/corps, and the different postings and deployment. This could also be extended to those children who have parents working for the military as civil servants or employed by organisations such as NAAFI and SAAFA;

- a longitudinal study that takes account of changes in the social and political climate and the associated generational groups;
- research the types of available support and the effectiveness and impact of support by looking at the child's concerns and wishes for support in relation to perceived needs identified by adult family members and those who work with the children;
- research the use of 'service pupil premium' in schools, the extent to which armed forces families access it, how it is used to structure and offer programmes of support, and the perceived impact beyond simple measures of qualifications gained.

## 2. Introduction

There are several definitions used to identify children who have a connection to the armed forces through their family, sometimes also referred to as ‘military-connected’ children.

The Service Children’s Progression Alliance (SCiP) defines a child from an armed forces family as “a person whose parent or carer serves in the Regular Armed Forces, or as a Reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that person’s life” (SCiP, 2017: para 2) and the Office for Students (OfS) refers to this definition in their documentation relating to student characteristics (OfS n.d. para 8, see also OfS, 2020: para 11).

The Welsh Government definition of a ‘service child’ is that they have:

“parent(s) or person(s) exercising parental responsibility who is/are Service personnel serving:

- in HM Regular or Reserve Armed Forces – Royal Navy and Royal Marines; British Army and Royal Air Force, or;
- is an Armed Forces Veteran who has been in Service within the past two years, or;
- one of their parents died whilst serving in the Armed Forces and the learner has received a pension under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme or the War Pensions Scheme.”  
(SSCE Cymru, n.d.).

In 2009, it was noted that there was a growing need to ‘understand the pressures’ on children from armed forces families (RNRMCF, 2009: 4), and in 2011 the Service Pupil Premium funding for schools was introduced in “recognition of the specific challenges children from service families face” (MoD, 2023: para 1). In these terms, they are recognised as a disadvantaged group.

In recent years, the educational experiences of children from armed forces families have become increasingly important for the UK government and other policy-makers, with the Office for Students (OfS) noting the ‘very specific and complex barriers’ and equality gaps faced by this group (OfS, 2020, para. 9). In research undertaken by Rose and Rose they found that the experiences of this group had an impact on their education in ways that were “significantly different from the challenges and opportunities experienced by other groups” (2018: 4). Moreover, it has been suggested that the significance of having been a child from an armed forces family does not end when the serving parents/guardians leave active service (McCullouch and Hall, 2016). An example of this being acknowledged is in the English government documentation on eligibility for “Service Pupil Premium” which permits the funding to any school child aged 16 or below who has been registered as a ‘service child’ any time in the preceding 6 years, referred to as “Ever 6” (MoD/DfE, 2024: para 3).

Although research has been undertaken in recent years with the armed forces, veterans, partners and school-aged children (Walker, Selous and Misca, 2020), we know very little about childhood and education from those now grown up. This research sought to address this important gap in knowledge.

## 2.1 Research aims

Against the background outlined above and in response to calls for further research, including from the OfS, this study aimed to explore the childhood and educational experiences of 'grown up' children from armed forces families. Building on previous research looking at university students from armed forces families (Ince, Chappell and McHugh, 2021), this research was undertaken with 'grown up' children at different stages of the life-course to explore their childhood experiences, with the intention to inform policy and practice for supporting current children in similar circumstances.

The specific aims were:

- investigate how childhood and education were experienced and understood by 'grown up' children from the diverse community of armed forces families, and their perceptions of the impact of their experiences;
- seek the advice of the 'grown up' children to understand what they think is important for the current children and those who work with them;
- use the knowledge generated by research with the 'grown up' children to inform policies and practices for families, schools, armed forces charities, and government to better support current children from armed forces families.

## 3. The Research

This research is underpinned by several key ideas and specific terminology is used, as detailed below.

### 3.1 Terminology

In this research we use the terminology detailed below.

#### 3.1.1 Children from armed forces families

We use the phrase 'children from armed forces families' rather than 'service children' or 'military children' for two key reasons:

- to make the important distinction between them and the parent(s)/guardian(s) who is/are enlisted and serving in the armed forces;
- to highlight that these are not children engaging in formal service or military activity.

#### 3.1.2 'Grown up'

'Grown up' is used to identify individuals over the age of 18, thus recognised to have reached the legal age of majority in the UK.

#### 3.1.3 Children

We use the term 'children' and 'child' to encompass children and young people under the age of 18 years.

#### 3.1.4 Hyper-Mobility

We use the term 'hyper-mobility' to refer to the very high levels of geographic mobility often experienced directly or indirectly by children from armed forces families over short, medium and longer periods.

### 3.2 Data collection

This report is based on data collected between March 2021 and August 2022. This study used a multiple methods approach based on questionnaires and interviews. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, Brunel University of London (Appendix 3 and 4). Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and informed consent was sought prior to participation. All participants who took part in the research were assured that their comments would be treated in confidence and any quotes used would be anonymised.

Data were collected in two stages:

- stage 1 comprised of a 20-minute online questionnaire with 119 participants who self-identified as being from an armed forces family. The online questionnaire was prepared using JISC Online Surveys with a mixture of open qualitative and quantitative questions (Appendix 1). The invitation to participate was shared via social media with a link to the online questionnaire;

- stage 2 consisted of in-depth interviews conducted with 10 participants who volunteered to be interviewed at the end of the online questionnaire (Appendix 2). The interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes and were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed.

### **3.3 Analysis of data**

The data from the questionnaires and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis through coding, identifying, grouping and describing the arising themes from both sets of data. The findings in this report are drawn from qualitative and quantitative data, and quotations are taken from both the open-ended responses to the questionnaire and the interviews.

### **3.4 Participants**

There were 119 questionnaire participants who self-identified as being from an armed forces family. The 10 interview participants volunteered through the online questionnaire to participate in an interview therefore form part of the 119 questionnaire participants. There were 5 male and 5 female interviewees aged between 21-80 who came from across Army, Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy (Navy) backgrounds.

## 4. Findings

The findings are presented in three sections which are the participants' background data, the participants' experiences and the advice they provided. On the basis of sample size, this report does not claim generalisability but illuminates the lives of this under-researched group.

### 4.1 Participant backgrounds

The armed forces community is not homogenous and it was important in this research to understand the diversity of the participants. The questionnaire contained a number of prompts to collect information about their backgrounds.

The information about the participants is presented in this section in tables as follows:

- tables 1-6: demographics;
- tables 7-11: information about the serving parent(s)/guardian(s);
- tables 12-16: schools attended, qualifications and university attendance;
- tables 17-18: continents lived before and after the age of 18.

#### 4.1.1 Demographics

Demographic data for the 119 questionnaire participants on gender, age, ethnicity, disability, care-leaver status and whether they had siblings are presented in tables 1-6 below.

**Table 1: Gender**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Grown-Up Children (n=119)</b>
Female	78%
Male	22%
Non-Binary	0%
Prefer not to say	0%
Other (please specify)	0%

**Table 2: Age**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Grown-Up Children (n=119)</b>
18-20	0.8%
21-25	2.5%
26-30	2.5%
31-40	15.3%
41-50	26.3%
51-60	30.5%
61-70	16.9%
71-80	3.4%
80+	0%
Prefer not to say	0%

**Table 3: Ethnicity**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Grown-Up Children (n=119)</b>
White-British	29.7%
White-English	53.4%
White-Irish	0.8%
White-Northern Irish	0%
White-Scottish	5.9%
White-Welsh	2.5%
Irish Traveller	0%
Gypsy or Traveller	0%
Any other White background	1.7%
White and Black Caribbean	0%
White and Black African	0%
White and Asian	2.5%

Any other Mixed background	0.8%
Asian-British	0%
Asian-Indian	0%
Asian-Pakistani	0%
Asian-Chinese	0%
Any other Asian background	0%
Black-British	0%
Black-African	0%
Black Caribbean	0%
Any other Black/ African / Caribbean background	0%
Arab	0%
Other (please specify)	2.5%

**Table 4: Registered disability**

<b>Yes (n=119)</b>	<b>No (n=119)</b>
5%	95%

**Table 5: 'Looked after child'**

<b>Yes (n=119)</b>	<b>No (n=119)</b>	<b>Did not say (n=119)</b>
10%	89%	1%

**Table 6: Siblings**

<b>Yes (n=119)</b>	<b>No (n=119)</b>
90%	10%

#### 4.1.2 Information about the serving parent(s)/guardian(s)

Participants were asked to provide information about their serving parent(s)/guardian(s).

**Table 7: Number of serving parents/guardians**

One serving parent/guardian (n=119)	Two serving parents/guardians (n=119)
92.4%	7.6%

**Table 8: Who was the serving parent(s)/guardian(s)**

Serving parents	Grown-Up Children (n=119)
Male parent/guardian	100%
Female parent/guardian	5.1%

**Table 9: Which of the armed forces (Army, Navy, Royal Air Force)?**

Branch of the armed forces	Parent/Guardian 1 (n=119)	Parent/Guardian 2 (n=11)
Army	56%	36.3%
Navy	4.2%	18.2%
Royal Air Force	40.3%	45.5%

**Table 10: Highest rank held by the serving parent(s)/guardian(s)**

Rank	Parent/Guardian 1 (n=119)	Parent/Guardian 2 (n=22)
Junior Ranks	16.8%	50%
Non-Commissioned Officer	44.5%	36.4%
Senior Commissioned Officer	31.1%	13.6%
No response	7.6%	0%

**Table 11: Unaccompanied posting locations for serving parent(s)/guardian(s)**

<b>Continents</b>	<b>Grown-Up Children (n=119)</b>
Africa	6%
Asia	36%
Australia	3%
Mainland Europe	32%
The Americas	13%
Within the UK	10%

#### 4.1.3 Schools, qualifications and university

Participants were asked about the schools they attended, the qualifications they secured and whether they attended university or not.

**Table 12: Number of primary schools attended**

<b>Number of schools attended</b>	<b>Grown-Up Children (n=119)</b>
1	4
2	18
3	29
4	26
5	16
6	11
7	6
8	1
9	0
Unknown	4
No answer	4

**Table 13: Number of secondary schools attended**

<b>Number of schools attended</b>	<b>Grown-Up Children (n=119)</b>
1	33
2	28
3	28
4	16
5	4
6	1
7	2
No answer	7

**Table 14: What qualifications do you have (select all that apply)?**

<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Number of participants (n=119)</b>
GCSE	89
BTEC	22
HND	7
HNC	5
Access Course	8
A-Levels	51
International Baccalaureate (IB)	1
Undergraduate degree	53
Master's degree	20
Doctorate	3
Other	36
No response	4

**Table 15: Did you go to university?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Grown-Up Children (n=119)</b>
Yes	48%
No	50%
No response	2%

**Table 16: Why did you not go to university?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number of mentions</b>
Cost was prohibitive	11
Did not have the qualifications to go	9
Joined the armed forces	6
Not an option at the time	6
Full time employment after leaving school	6
Was not clever enough	5
Did not get support to apply	5
Did not need to go	4
Not the right time	4
Got married	3
Moved to a different country	2
Parent(s) died	2
Parental divorce	2
Did teacher education	2
Did not get the opportunity to go	2
Did not consider it at the time	2

#### 4.1.4 Continents lived before and after the age of 18

The participants were asked to indicate the places that they had lived before and after the age of 18. This is captured in the tables below which provide a summary of the continents where the participants had lived.

**Table 17: Continents lived (before 18 years of age)**

Continents	Grown-Up Children (n=119)
Mainland Europe	36%
Asia	27%
Within the UK	23%
Africa	9%
The Americas	5%

**Table 18: Continents lived (after 18 years of age)**

Continents	Grown-Up Children (n=119)
Mainland Europe	35%
Asia	26%
Within the UK	17%
The Americas	13%
Africa	9%

#### 4.2 Participant Experiences

This section is organised under the following headings: the challenges and opportunities presented by high levels of mobility; identification and sense of pride; friendships; talking with parents/guardians about the experience of growing up in their armed forces family; stability/instability and (re)integration to 'civilian' life; the uniqueness of growing up in an armed forces family; and, the nature of their childhoods in relation to others as the "same but different" (Ince *et al.*, 2021). In addition, there is advice for the Ministry of Defence and armed forces, schools and teachers, parents/guardians and children from the participants based on their 'grown up' reflections of being from an armed forces family.

The sections below illustrate the themes arising from the data with a number of direct illustrative quotes from the participants to foreground their accounts. This was important in this research because the voices of 'grown up' children are currently missing from the conversations about the lives of the armed forces community. As Yasmin notes in response to seeing the invitation to participate in the research:

*it just kind of popped up and I just thought, oh that ... you know that sounds like really interesting, because actually no one's ever asked me anything... I've actually got quite a lot to say (Yasmin - Interview).*

The themes, and quotes to support think description, provide an illumination of the participants' reflections and interpretations of key experiences.

#### 4.2.1 Challenges and opportunities

It is often the challenges faced by this group that are focused on in literature, policy and practice, and the participants provided a range of information about the challenges they felt they had faced, alongside the opportunities that they benefited from. Based on the findings of previous research (Ince *et al.*, 2021), which indicated that there were positives as well as challenges experienced by these 'grown up' children, this research encouraged participants to reflect on both in this study.

#### 4.2.2 Challenges

There was a specific question about the 'greatest challenges' the participants experienced, and the outcomes of the thematic analysis of their responses are presented below in Table 19, listed from the most commonly mentioned to the least.

**Table 19: Challenges**

Challenges	Number of Mentions
Transitory nature of life	41
Making new friends	37
Maintaining and retaining friendships	34
Moving from place to place	28
Adjusting to a new school	18
Fitting in	16
Separation from deployed parent/guardian	15
Issues with schooling and education (adjusting, curriculum, teacher attitudes)	14
Separation from extended family members	13
Transition to 'civilian' Life	11

Saying goodbye to friends	10
Civilians (children and adults)	8
Bullying at school	7
Anxiety and confidence	6
Lack of belonging to a 'place'	6
Difficulties at Boarding School (bullying, loneliness)	6
Isolation and loneliness	6
Difficulties with parents and/or home life	6
Moving to a new home	5
Naivety due to a protective community	4
Strict/regimented family	3
Always ready for change	3
Missing the unaccompanied/deployed parent/guardian	2
Shyness	2
Lack of emotional support	2
Lack of knowledge about the UK	2
Classism/hierarchies	2
Material loss	1
Feeling negatively different	1
No challenges	1
Being fostered	1
Perceived risk of danger	1

Participants described very high levels of geographic mobility, referred to here as hyper-mobility, throughout their early and late childhood as challenging:

*You come from nowhere but you belong everywhere (Questionnaire 41).*

There were many references to the participants moving house, leaving places and people, as well as those around them doing the same, and childhood being characterised by:

*saying goodbye to others (Questionnaire 45).*

Annie's account illustrates the nature of the mobility in relation to the different postings her family experienced:

*... the moving around definitely affected me, we were moving from Scottish into English systems and that disrupted us. I know that we left ... well when we came back from Germany we went to Wales and we were only in Wales for a very short period of time...we would have moved there in maybe ... maybe July, June, July [year], we were moving by the November, December time, we moved up to Scotland (Annie – Interview).*

Yasmin notes the mobility in relation to attending school:

*I think some of the other things that I probably reflect back on are the amount of moving we did. I went to seven primary schools. I was really fortunate, even though my dad was posted three times when I was in secondary school, that I was able to stay at the same school, really fortunate, because that was a one-off ...I remember saying to my dad, the second time, you know they come home don't they and just say "oh by the way, I've been posted, we're moving" and you just think, but I'm fifteen years old, I'm not going. You know, I remember saying "No" to him, "I'm not going anywhere". If I have to sort of pitch up a tent somewhere here, then that's what I'll do. (Yasmin - Interview).*

This hyper-mobility presented a number of challenges in the form of curriculum gaps; disruption to their primary and secondary education; difficulties creating and maintaining relationships with family and friends; periods of separation from immediate family members and their extended families; fitting in and feeling a sense of belonging to a community; and feeling frustrated at having to adjust and move from place to place sometimes at short notice. These are explored later.

### **4.2.3 Opportunities**

There is often far less emphasis on the opportunities and positive aspects of the experiences of these children evident in literature, policy and practice, and in the discussions about them. There was a specific question to ask about the 'best bits' of their experiences. The outcomes of the thematic analysis of their responses are presented as 'opportunities' below in Table 19, listed from those mentioned most to least.

**Table 20: Opportunities**

<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Number of Mentions</b>
Living in different places and countries	48
Experiencing different places, cultures and languages	48
Travel	32
Sense of belonging to a community	31
Meeting new people	19
Travel to different countries	18
Social activities available	16
Friendships	15
Moving from place to place	14
Security: personal safety	14
Sport and other activities available	12
Making new friends	9
Security: housing and employment	7
Feeling positive about being different to other children	7
Facilitating independence	7
Good school and education	7
Positive relationship within the immediate family unit	6
Pride in the serving parent and being part of the family	5
Everything	5
Development of social skills	3
Connecting and reconnecting with other children from the armed forces community	3
Stability	2
Good healthcare	2
Positive relationship within extended family	2
Visiting other armed forces communities	1

As identified in the table above, participants noted that their experiences of hyper-mobility presented a number of exciting opportunities. Five of the participants responded to the prompt by noting that the best bits were 'everything'. As indicated in the table, there was an emphasis on meeting others and belonging to a community; travel, including specific mention of international travel; living in other countries; and experiencing different cultures during their childhood and early adulthood:

*You know we lived in Germany, Northern Ireland, Hong Kong, you know we had some lovely, lovely postings, and even when my dad was away and it went over the summer holidays, we were able to go and visit him in certain places. So, you know one summer holidays I went to Australia for six weeks...it was just phenomenal (Yasmin - Interview).*

A number of participants noted that the regular moving, and living in different countries, made them resilient, independent, adaptable and more open to new experiences:

*...you become more resilient. You get amazing experiences. I feel like...I feel like it's a gift that not many people are given, because I feel like if I had grown up in once place, I might not feel like I want to go and explore and I might not have the confidence to do that (Annie - Interview).*

There are also reflections on the ways in which the range of opportunities and the meeting of people create a positive history that can lead to nostalgia:

*I love the fact that I had the opportunity to do everything, to go all these places and travel and meet lots of people, and I'm in touch with so many people from different times in my life that I can jump in and out of...I get very...what's the word...nostalgic about it all...the older I get, the worse I seem to be (Damian - Interview).*

There was also reference made to the opportunity to reinvent the self as a result of moving:

*You can reinvent yourself at your next place, which is kind of fun (Questionnaire 42).*

This is an interesting idea in the context of the comments made later about friendships and community.

#### **4.2.4 Education**

A number of participants identified very specific challenges the hyper-mobility had on their education and learning due to attending a number of different schools at primary and secondary level across the UK and overseas. Participants spoke about identifying gaps in their learning and knowledge at different stages of their schooling as a result of this constant movement:

*...education wise, I definitely think it [moving] did have an impact because I couldn't study what I was studying before, I had to change some of my subjects, and as I say, the curriculum wasn't the same*

*either, it was different books that we were studying, so I'd lost sort of about six weeks of term already prior to moving there. So yeah, it definitely had an impact (Donna - Interview).*

*...the schooling was very different, the syllabus was different, if we're looking at it from an educational point of view...just everything...everything was different, and it's so weird, but by this point how many schools had I been to? So, I just kind of got on with it and you just learn to go with the flow. I knew that an entire year pretty much of my GCSE work had been erased and I had to start again (Annie - Interview).*

The positive comments about schools came where the participants felt that the school understood the specific challenges that they faced:

*Most of my education was British Forces... I feel that it was a superior education system and lots of different opportunities which I wouldn't have experienced in a civilian school... schools and teachers were well versed in supporting us through our nomadic lifestyle (Questionnaire 18).*

#### **4.2.5 Friendships**

As well as the implications for education, participants also highlighted the social impact of the movement from school to school, with friendships as the most noted challenge:

*I found it very difficult, you know, moving to a new school and making new relationships and fitting in, I did find that really hard. Not that I didn't have friends when I was at school but you know they weren't friendships that have carried on in the same way that you know other relationships in my life have (Hannah - Interview).*

As Damian noted above, the hyper-mobile lifestyle led to encounters with many different people which has implications for making and retaining friendships as noted here:

*There's good and bad. I mean from a negative point of view, the big regret I've got is I don't have anybody in my life that I started off school with. I don't know who I went to nursery or primary school with because they're not in the same place, we moved around so much. I kind of look at people when they say they've got friends from when they were three or four, and I do feel a bit jealous because I don't have that. My friends are ones that I've made as I've got older (Donna - Interview).*

*I didn't feel any pressure to keep in contact with friends from school because I knew they were going to move on, alright? So, all the way through primary school, I just accepted you go in, you make friends, you move on to another friend, or whatever...I admire the way my children stay in touch with their friends from their school times (Nathan - Interview).*

*I suppose it raised a few issues...issues around family and around friendships, it made me maybe more aware of the relationships that my own children have with their school friends, and that you know my youngest son has just left sixth form this year, he's just started at university and he's keeping in contact with his friends from school. And my middle son was the same, kept in contact with his friends from school. I don't have that. I see a few people on [social media] but I would never meet up with my friends I went to school with. In my adult life I have come across one other person that I went to secondary school with. She ended up in an adult literacy class I was teaching, and it was a bit of a bizarre experience. But that's the only person I have ever come across. I went to so many different schools, yeah, I think my own kids went to one primary school and one secondary school and that was it (Hannah - Interview).*

There were also cases of when making friends was difficult and bullying was experienced:

*When we moved to [named place] that was when things were ... really, really hard. There was a particular person who was really horrendous...she ... she started bullying me, and because everyone was afraid of her, they started bullying me as well. And there were a couple of people who I knew but they were so afraid of her that they started to bully me too. She at one point stabbed me in the back with a fountain pen a number of times, straight through my shirt, straight into my back ... and the teacher told me off because I stormed out... and bear in mind that there were quite a number of service children in this school, there were quite a number of people from the married patch [armed forces housing] and for some reason, I don't know why, maybe I made myself look vulnerable, maybe I was the ... maybe I was fresh meat, maybe the rest of them had experienced this bullying, but then I arrived and they you know just started picking on me, I don't know, it was... I felt like I had no friends, I was coming home crying every night... because I was being bullied (Annie – Interview).*

Some participants explicitly mentioned making friends and forgetting them:

*I think it's a service thing that I can make friends wherever I go. And I think that come from changing school, particularly primary schools, and always finding a friend. And so, you sort of have that little bit of confidence that that will happen. And indeed, it always did, always did (Nathan - Interview).*

*So, all the travelling that you do as a brat [slang term for a child from the armed forces] and in many brats' cases as a serving afterwards, that does alter your views for the rest of your life, it's still very easy to make friends and very easy to forget them. ...despite the fact the school is full of strangers, you make friends quickly, and yet now I couldn't tell you the name of any friend from that school, or any school I've ever been to... [friendships] don't last long enough. I didn't retain any of them at all, and again it's possibly because we [family unit]*

*moved in ones, we moved individually [rather than as part of a regiment or similar] (Tom - Interview).*

Participants spoke about how they struggled to remember friends and maintain school friendships over the life course as a result of the hyper-mobility which resulted in attendance at several different schools across the UK and overseas, and compared that to friends who had different experiences to them:

*You know I get really envious of friends who I know locally that will say, you know, I could go out shopping with them for the day and they'll bump into people [and say] "Oh I went to school with them" and I'm like "Oh ok". The only friends I get to see from school are through [social media], you know, finding out what people have been doing, or going to a school reunion or a get together. I certainly don't bump into people walking down the high street, out shopping (Yasmin - Interview).*

Participants also spoke about how this hyper-mobility impacted negatively on their ability to maintain close relationships with family members:

*I mean we [siblings]...because of his [dad's] job, we had really no relationship with my paternal grandparents because we didn't come here [the extended family home(s)] (Hannah - Interview).*

Some participants identified that on reflection, they had often felt frustrated at times when told they had to move to a new school, town and, in some cases, country at very short notice. Yasmin's earlier comment illustrates this and the challenge in being required to make constant transitions. Moreover, there was an expectation, sometimes unspoken, that they would accept and be able to adjust to the transition:

*So yeah, you leave one place, right? You arrive at the other place and then within two days you're at a new school. Right. And you're expected to obviously get on in that school, there is no massive period of adjustment, you don't get the luxury of adjustment time because soon enough, a year later or so, you're at a different school anyway. So really, if you were to take the amount of time you needed to adjust to each thing, you wouldn't have stopped adjusting by the time you left. So, it's almost like a survival mechanism that you... you just get on with it. And it's only in reflecting in later years that I've realised this (Annie - Interview).*

The participants noted the lack of understanding by those who had not had the same experiences as them and the impact this had on making friends outside the armed forces community referred to as 'civilians' or 'civvies':

*It is kind of difficult to make friends within the civilian community. I have to remember I'm the civvy now. Within the civilian community they've already got a base of friends, why should they let you in? They know that you're not going to be there forever and you're just going to up sticks and move you know in the blink of an eye...it's difficult (Damian - Interview).*

#### 4.2.6 Sense of pride and identification

Participants' accounts illustrated that feeling a sense of pride about coming from an armed forces family and identification as part of the community was complex:

*I have an interesting relationship with the military I think. Because I'm very proud of my family and stuff and what they've done and I'm very proud to be who I am and to be part of that community, but I don't feel strong enough pride, for example, to want to join the military myself (Ava - Interview).*

For Hannah, she found herself questioning whether it was appropriate to feel a sense of pride just because she came from an armed forces family, and highlights some of the complexities and difficulties involved when choosing not to identify with all aspects of military service:

*Pride in having served? I don't know, I can see both sides. Yes, it's great that somebody served but I don't know that they're any better than anyone else because of it, you know, we all have a job to do and we all have something to offer to society. I do find this sort of, oh our veterans, I find it a bit much. Particularly around veterans from [mentions an active deployment] because there were some terrible things that happened there... sometimes there isn't anything to be proud of (Hannah - Interview).*

It is interesting that in the references made to civilians, as illustrated in Damian's quote earlier, there was no acknowledgement made of their own position as civilians but, as will be illustrated later, there was a recognition of them being distinct from civilians.

#### 4.2.7 Talking with parents/guardians and siblings

A number of participants, particularly when prompted to reflect during the interviews, noted that they did not discuss their experiences of growing up in an armed forces family with their parents or siblings. In some cases, participants expressed a specific reluctance to discuss their experiences with the serving parent/guardian to avoid causing distress or upset:

*No, it isn't discussed. I think my dad is aware that...it was very difficult and that he was, he was absent quite a lot of the time (Hannah - Interview).*

For some participants, there were conversations but for others the topic never came up in conversation with parents/guardians or siblings either when they were a child or once they became an adult:

*I don't think it ever came up. We just accepted it because it was, you know, dad's in the Air Force, and we move around (Tom - Interview).*

*Well do you know what, it's a funny thing, we [his sister] haven't ever really even talked about it (Richard - Interview).*

One of the striking features in the accounts was the way in which the experiences of siblings within the same family could vary and were explicitly reflected upon as being different:

*[Having children] made me reflect on the relationships I have with my siblings. We have different experiences because we were at different schools at different times, and we have different relationships because of the dynamic of my family. (Hannah - Interview).*

#### **4.2.8 Community, belonging and (in)stability**

There was a recognition that being part of the armed forces provided a community of people that were experiencing similar things:

*...you are all kind of in the same boat...lots of people in the same boat doing the same thing (Damian – Interview).*

Although for some the 'same thing' felt like:

*Never really having somewhere where you belonged, everything was always temporary (Questionnaire 24).*

It is worth noting that the participants came from across the three services and had lived in many different places, including on and off bases, both in the UK and overseas. This information, alongside the accounts, indicate that the experiences of being part of the armed forces community were multiple and different, although participants were not asked for any details about the specific role served by the enlisted parent(s)/guardian or the battalion/squadron/regiment/corps etc. that they belonged to.

The community created some stability, alongside all the instability caused by change:

*I think we were in our own little bubble in that environment. We had...everything we had was each other and I think we did, everybody looked after each other, were really supportive. And I think as well there was not any deprivation that you get here, you came from two parent families, your dad was working...you know we didn't know a lot of the deprivation that goes on in other parts of the country where people, you know, they've not got an income coming in and things like that, so I think we were fortunate from that point of view (Donna - Interview).*

Hannah felt it important to maintain links with family and others outside the armed forces community:

*I always felt you know there maybe was a sort of feeling among service communities that...not that you didn't need your extended family but that your service family were there to help and support you and so you didn't maybe need them as much. Whereas, I think people should be encouraged to maybe keep their own links and to keep their links with their communities (Hannah - interview).*

A number of participants reflected on the lack of recognition given to the implications for the high levels of instability in their childhoods:

*We military brats haven't really got any credit for what we had to deal with. In fact, we didn't have stability on the whole...I mean yes, I got to see amazing places...but, I think we did also have to put up with a*

*lot, and then you come out of that situation, it's quite shocking. My experience was quite shocking, I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to handle that (Richard - Interview).*

Belonging also became evident when talking about the significance of home:

*...learning that a home is not the same as a house (Questionnaire 107).*

*...when we were in the families' accommodation, as in this time, the one we've just moved from, it never felt like home because it always felt temporary, it always felt like we could be moved somewhere, because we don't own it, we don't live there, there's no roots, that's not ... you know it's not ours. We've been in here [new own house] for two weeks and it feels like home. And it's because I know that this ... we're paying for this house, this is ours ... do what we want with it, it'll always be here, if we want to stay here for thirty years, we can stay here for thirty years. Yeah, I've never had that and it's amazing. It feels great. It feels wondrous. Every time I like walk into the kitchen and see the hob, I'm like that's my hob! (Annie – Interview).*

*It [home] is [current location], this is the longest place I've ever.... I've lived in this house for twenty-one years...oh, my goodness, amazing. I would say I live ...where my physical house is, that's where I go home and I have all my ... as in I have all my stuff, I go to bed, I brush my teeth, whatever. But if we're talking about where ... where I ... my feelings are, I could say a number of places (Yasmin – Interview).*

#### **4.2.9 Transition from armed forces life**

As captured in Richard's point above, a number of participants highlighted the lack of support they felt was available to them when the serving parent/guardian was making the transition out of the armed forces. Whilst the serving family member received support, this was usually not available for the children, who were expected to navigate this transition without any support and advice from outside their family:

*In civvy street they didn't have an understanding or there was no support for me in integrating. That's what I was looking for...support in re-integrating into a civilian life for the kids. The parents had it. Dad had a whole year of reintegration. He went to [named base]. Part of it was re-education so he could have something he could use outside, but that also meant that he was able to build networks and stuff like that and slowly ease in, but we were just dumped in school (Richard - Interview).*

*When my dad came out of the Army, and my husband was telling me when he came out of the army, there's stuff for them to do, there's courses for them to go on, there's help, but yet, we got nothing. And yet you're saying goodbye to your home, all your friends that have become your extended family, your routine, your day to day, and you get nothing. Yeah...which I think looking back is really unfair (Yasmin - Interview).*

The participants noted that regular transitions of different types such as, moving house, moving schools, and changing friendships, as well as the serving parent/guardian leaving the armed forces, seemed to be taken for granted by others as just another part of their everyday lives hence the lack of support they observed.

#### 4.2.10 University attendance

Participants who did or did not attend university highlighted some of the challenges they encountered when making the decision to continue their education beyond secondary level. For Hannah, she felt that career advice at the time was very much demarcated by gender and therefore, it was not an option for her at that point in time:

*There was definitely, you know, in terms of career advice at [school], I felt the emphasis was on if you were a boy you went into the Army and if you were a girl you went to do either secretarial or [nursery nursing]. So, I don't know what it was like for encouraging people to go to university. My sister did go to university straight from [school], so she might have had a different experience of that, but definitely it was very much a...I do remember Army careers, people coming in quite a lot into [school] (Hannah - Interview).*

This was also a similar experience to Yasmin and others who highlighted that they never applied to attend university as this was not a suggested option or discussed with them while studying:

*So, I did my A-Levels and do you know what? I will say this to you, university was never mentioned to me...I just thought, right, I'll go back to the UK and I'll go and get a job. (Yasmin - Interview).*

For some participants, they also felt that there was lack of familial support and therefore they went into full employment at the end of their secondary schooling:

*Not really pushed to do so [apply to university] and unsure what I wanted to do (Questionnaire 25).*

However, for Yasmin and other participants, the opportunity to attend university presented itself at different stage of their life course:

*However, saying that, I then did my degree when I was twenty-six and had two young children. So, I did do it, because I just thought, you know what, well it was the job I was in at the time, there were lots of people saying to me, you know, you ought to go and get a degree, and I did (Yasmin - Interview).*

*Wasn't right for me at the time. Am now studying through [distance study] (Questionnaire 6).*

*Didn't feel supported to go as a teenager so studied in my 40s (Questionnaire 16).*

For some participants, a serving parent/guardian being deployed to and living in a different country, or leaving the armed forces, resulted in a perceived lack of support and non-attendance at university:

*Didn't attend university, although I had a place, as at 18 parents still living Germany and I didn't feel support in the UK (Questionnaire 57).*

*In Germany and my parent had left the forces at this point and no family in the UK to be able to further education (Questionnaire 36).*

For those that did attend University there were some potential gaps in knowledge, like Ava who had only lived in Europe as a result of repeated postings, and received some support that she found helpful:

*...it was good though because when I came to the university, they actually gave me a pack that they give to all the international students... yeah, they kind of flagged it up and they were like, oh OK military child, we'll give them all of this stuff...some of it was good... it did give a lot of information ... I can't quite remember exactly what it was but I looked through it and some of it was like, oh OK, that's good to know (Ava – Interview).*

#### **4.2.11 Uniqueness of growing up in an armed forces family**

Participants in this study described their experiences with direct reference to growing up in an armed forces family, replicating some of the findings in the report by Ince *et al.* (2021) on university students from these families. For many participants the reflections on their experiences resulted in them describing the ways in which their upbringing was different and unique, although the recognition of difference was not necessarily clear at the time:

*I don't think we ever thought we were any different to any other family. (Questionnaire 29).*

As noted earlier, participants described how the uniqueness they recognised often made it difficult for people with no armed forces background to understand some of their experiences:

*...we had such a unique experience and unless you were part of it, you wouldn't understand it and...people that I speak to that are not armed forces related don't understand the kind of upbringing that we had and the way things were, how different this was from everybody else's (Donna - Interview).*

Participants also highlighted how their experiences of growing up were often very different to the experiences of their siblings in terms of schooling, relationships with family, and the challenges they encountered across the life course:

*So, it's just something we're ... I'm tacitly aware that my sister Ella didn't really ... it wasn't ... she wasn't fazed by it at all, but I was. But I mostly became aware of this once I came to the UK and was aware of how... unanchored I felt...given the peers that I had just met, who had... most of whom had been born and brought up in the same place and had never moved, some of them had never even moved house, which to me was extraordinary. So, my sister's experience was a little bit different (Richard - Interview).*

*I've got an older brother, who funny enough isn't as connected to it all as I am. He left home...he's three years older than me, so he left home on our last tour in Germany. And he...because we lived in a few places that were what I call civilian as well, and I think because he was older and at a different stage of his life to me, when we got posted back to Germany for the second time, he really wasn't happy with that at all because he'd built a base of friends, so he didn't...he doesn't connect to it the same as I do, or my sister did (Damian - Interview).*

The significance of this is keenly felt when there is a loss in the family which Donna exemplifies here:

*I think that was probably one of the hardest things with Simon [brother] dying for me. He was the only person close to me that knew what it was like to have grown up in the Army and that's...yeah...I lost that connection when he died (Donna - Interview).*

She noted the significance of this loss of the person she perceived as best understanding her experiences. A loss such as this potentially becomes more significant when considered in relation to the earlier points about having limited or no sustained friendships from childhood.

Expanding on the 'uniqueness' of their upbringing, a number of participants reflected on the impact they felt their experiences had over their life course. Participants were able to recognise that some aspects of their childhood were similar to that of other non-serving individuals, the previously mentioned 'civvies', but they also recognised that their experiences were very 'different':

*I could do it now...I'm daughter of [recited the service number] Sergeant X. It's still...I think a lot of us say that, it's...it's imprinted in your brain forever. You had your ID card wherever you went, you had to show it if you wanted to go in the barracks or anything else like that. I was never Donna, I was always the daughter of Sergeant X. I think from that point of view, you did kind of lose your identity a bit while we were out there (Donna - Interview).*

Some participants acknowledged that discussing their childhood could present challenges and difficulties and often they resorted to only discussing it with other grown up children from armed forces families:

*I kind of probably really only talk about my childhood with other military children that I'm still friends with because they're the only one that really understand what it was like (Donna - Interview).*

There was a recognition of the complexity of the story that would be told in response to the question 'where are you from?' that influenced the decisions made about what to share and how to share it:

*So I guess it's ... do I actually ... is this person interested? Do I actually know this person? Like as in have we met more than once? Have they offered up anything about themselves? Because it's give and take, remember. And do they have the stamina for this? Do they have the stamina to sit and listen? Is their drink full? You know? Do*

*they need the toilet? Quite often I will joke, I'll be like, do you need to go for a refreshment break before we start this because you know it's going to be a while! Then I ... then I start, and then I just explain (Annie - Interview).*

Participants highlighted some experiences in their childhood that would not have been uncommon amongst those who did not grow up in an armed forces family. There were some aspects where an experience, set of experiences, or formative event was due to the participant being part of an armed forces family but could not be considered as unique to that group. This includes examples such as moving school multiple times, a family member in a high-risk career causing worry and stress, and the death of a family member. However, the specific cause(s) of these experiences and potential for these to appear in combination makes them of note, and leads to something that participants attribute to being from an armed forces family, rather than them being experiences that could have happened to a child from a non-armed forces family. Hannah noted this in relation to moving house and school:

*I do appreciate that sometimes you...people move house and they do need to move school and that can be managed properly and sensitively. Whereas I don't think that that was always the case when we were moving, it was part of our life, get on with it, just do it, come on, we all have to do it. It's part of your dad's job. You know, don't let the side down and you...there was a lot of that sort of feeling (Hannah – Interview).*

This highly specific association, particularly when it is not known, recognised or understood by others, highlights the experiences of those who have grown up in an armed forces family as 'the same, but different' (Ince *et al.*, 2021) in comparison to other children.

#### **4.2.12 The impact**

The responses to the question about their perceptions of the impact of their experiences covered issues such as making friends, attachment and willingness to invest in and maintain relationships, interest in settling in one place, feelings about belonging, independence, interest in travel, mental health and openness to others. Whilst some participants felt positively about the impact their lives as children from armed forces families had on each of these areas, an equivalent number felt the opposite:

*Do not feel rooted in life, lack of belonging, outsider - in positive terms this has developed into resilience but inwardly I carry great sadness - no extended family relationships, no long-term friends to visit. In short no home apart from the one I have now with husband and children (Questionnaire 38).*

There was also a recognition amongst the participants, as indicated earlier, that only those who had experience of being in an armed forces family could understand what it was like. The implications of these experiences differ within and between families and are complex and cannot easily be compared. As Richard states:

*...and because this is the only experience I've had, there's no control...might have been the same had I been brought up in the UK,*

*but I don't know. Yes, I think it's definitely had an impact, yeah, whether it's positive or negative is hard to tell because I can't go and live the alternate timeline (Richard - Interview).*

The word resilience is mentioned explicitly as well as implied throughout the accounts. As Annie noted earlier, she felt that she could 'just get on with it', 'it' being the range of her experiences. It is important to consider the implications when people do 'just get on with it' which Annie reflected on further:

*...everyone says, "oh you must be so traumatised by that", "oh it must have been deeply traumatic". But I don't know whether I've just screwed it up into a ball and put it somewhere (Annie – Interview).*

As well as the implications for those who feel able to process their experiences in productive ways, it is critical to consider the implications of pathologising individuals as lacking resilience when they find their experiences difficult. This is a particular challenge within the culture of the armed forces where personnel fulfil the requirements of their service regardless of the circumstances and demands made on them. The children have not chosen to be part of this and, as Donna notes, the impact can be significant over time:

*It's something that we think about all the time, it doesn't really go away from you I think because our upbringing was so different to most people's, it's always there in the back of your mind (Donna - Interview).*

### 4.3 Advice from the 'Grown Up' Children

One key feature of this research, alongside exploring the experiences of the participants, was to ask in the questionnaire for the advice they would give to the Ministry of Defence and armed forces, schools and teachers, parents/guardians, and to current children. In the sections below, there is a summary of the advice they gave resulting from the thematic analysis of questionnaires and interviews.

#### 4.3.1 Advice for the Ministry of Defence and armed forces

Practical support for the children and their families was the overwhelming focus of the advice participants offered to the Ministry of Defence and armed forces in two key areas with emphasis on the identified disruption caused by hyper-mobility and:

*...that growing up in the military can be very insular (Questionnaire 18).*

There were three key areas of advice given:

1. Increase stability:
  - increase the length of postings;
  - extend postings on request;
  - look at the impact of changes to the curriculum/exam boards;
  - take account of those children taking exams.

2. Understand the challenge and insularity:
  - acknowledge the social, emotional, practical and educational impact of hyper-mobility on the children;
  - be aware of the impact of mental health issues with the serving parent/guardian on the families;
  - recognise that each transition for the serving parent/guardian, including leaving the armed forces community, impacts upon children as part of the family.
3. Ensure appropriate support is provided for children and partners:
  - keep families together wherever possible;
  - reduce the regularity, length and number of detachments;
  - offer more orientation on arrival in new places;
  - provide additional support for those in schools where there is little or no armed forces experienced community;
  - provide more opportunities to go home to the family for those at boarding schools, including flights at half term;
  - encourage the Department of Education to review the National Curriculum implementation to ensure a more standardised curriculum;
  - offer support for the transition out of the armed forces community for the children.

The overall suggestion was that the armed forces should

*...be a bit more supportive to children and spouses. They seem to be sometimes overlooked (Questionnaire 14).*

#### **4.3.2 Advice for schools and teachers**

As noted earlier, the hyper-mobility of these children has an impact on their experiences of education and there is a complexity to this:

*...you know about the continuity of education ... course content, stable social situations for those kids, which I think is important, and it's enough for them to have to deal with the ... social side, never mind the education side ... it's not just about education, because this is a double whammy they get. Some kids are very good at it, they don't ... they fit in ... it'll be two, three days and they'll have bessie mates all over the place. And there are some kids who just ... that's very difficult for them. And their parents, it's difficult for their parents to manage because maybe they don't have those skills themselves (Jack – Interview).*

The advice given was as follows:

- be understanding;
- show kindness, patience and inclusion;
- ask the children about their experiences and find out their perspectives;
- be aware of what leads to their experiences, including mobility, separation, bullying, abuse, and trauma;
- be especially understanding in schools with a small or no armed forces community;
- offer emotional support, including counselling;

- check for gaps in knowledge and provide support for the gaps;
- support integration with other children, again particularly where the community is small;
- follow the National Curriculum and choose exam boards carefully;
- communicate detail effectively with previous and subsequent schools;
- don't penalise the 'temporary' status of the children.

#### 4.3.3 Advice for children

One key issue that the analysis highlighted was particularly evident when the participants gave advice to the children. In the summary of the advice below, there are examples where the current children are encouraged to 'just get on with it' and be resilient. As indicated elsewhere in the report, there can be risks associated with the way in which resilience is understood and presented. However, in the advice given it was clear that the challenges for the current children were understood by the participants.

The advice given to the children was as follows:

- you are not alone;
- talk and speak up;
- ask for help;
- enjoy it;
- embrace change;
- see the opportunities;
- persevere;
- recognise the challenges;
- don't tolerate bullying;
- grow a thick skin;
- try not to worry;
- keep your head down;
- join clubs;
- get and maintain contacts as you move around;
- be kind to others;
- know that some schools are harder to be in than others, such as 'civilian' ones;
- don't worry when things seem tough as they will be over eventually;
- be proud: be bold, be confident and be yourself;
- it's a crazy life but not boring;
- don't worry – it may seem tough now - it will be over eventually.

It is interesting to see the extent of the positive encouragement, including the seeking of support when needed, and reassurance:

*It's a crazy life but not boring... (Questionnaire 108).*

*you have been born into a select band of people, in my humble opinion, military children are amazing, we have so much more to offer than children who stay in one town all their life. You will meet other military children as you go through life and there will be an instant bond between you, an understanding that you come from nowhere*

*but belong everywhere, embrace the different, it will define you (Questionnaire 41).*

#### 4.3.4 Advice for parents/guardians

There was a recognition of the challenges experienced by parents/guardians but a reminder to think particularly about the children:

*I would say this though: kids aren't household items that get packed in an MFO [Military Families Overseas] box and shipped whenever the mood takes you. It's not much fun ditching your home and friends virtually biannually (Questionnaire 23).*

The advice given to parents/guardians was:

- remember they are children;
- be honest and open;
- explain everything;
- be positive;
- make it an adventure;
- spend time with your children;
- check in on how friendships are going, particularly in civilian schools;
- don't assume that they have got used to moving/coping;
- don't ignore their concerns;
- stay alert to changes in behaviour and mental health;
- plan as far ahead as possible for moving house;
- plan ahead for saying goodbye, including goodbye to others who are leaving;
- maintain their interests when they move - find clubs and activities to help make friends;
- maintain good and regular communications with your children's school;
- think carefully about boarding school...don't 'stick' them in boarding school;
- do your child's room first when you arrive in your new home;
- help them plan their future: further education/university/training/work;
- don't feel bad,

Parents/guardians were encouraged to:

*Talk to your children and 'listen' to what their concerns and dreams are (Questionnaire 87).*

## 5. Conclusion

This report provides an invaluable insight into this under-researched, non-homogenous, diverse group. The outcomes of this research illustrate that 'grown up children' from armed forces families have experienced unique, particular, complex and extraordinary everyday lives. This insight can be used to raise awareness and provide the foundation for supporting the current children, their families and those who work with them, as well as the now 'grown up' children in their education, work and lives.

### 5.1 Summary of findings

This research has highlighted a number of important findings which are detailed below.

- Participants experienced high levels of geographic mobility throughout their early and late childhood, living in locations across the UK and overseas.
- Participants identified a number of challenges and difficulties associated with this temporary- and 'hyper-mobility' in the form of disruption to their primary and secondary education, curriculum gaps and repetition of curricula; long periods of separation from family; difficulties creating and maintaining relationships with family and friends; challenges with fitting in and feeling a sense of belonging to a community.
- Participants also identified opportunities that came with this temporary- and hyper-mobility in the form of travel, travelling to and living in other countries, meeting a range of different people, a positive sense of belonging amongst others with similar backgrounds, and experiencing different cultures at different stages of their childhood and early adulthood which they identified as being helpful in the development of their social skills. A number of participants also identified an increased perceived resilience associated with their experiences of hyper-mobility.
- Participants illustrated the ways in which the temporary- and hyper-mobility of others, which included friends and family members, also impacted upon them as individuals.
- Participants expressed a general reluctance to talk with their parents about their experiences of growing up in an armed forces family.
- Participants expressed mixed reactions in terms of identifying and feeling a sense of pride in coming from an armed forces family, and their place in the community.
- Participants identified valuable advice for the Ministry of Defence and armed forces, schools and teachers, parents/guardians and current children.
- Participants recognised the uniqueness of their experiences and the similarities and differences between themselves and others ("the same but different"). The diversity of their experiences illustrates that they are not a homogenous group and should not be treated as such.

- Participants explained the ways in which the challenges and opportunities had impacted upon them. This impact was felt by some of them to be life-long.

The outcomes of the analysis of the data were discussed with key stakeholders during the project as questions emerged about the relevance of the data collected from the 'grown ups' to the current population of children given how things have changed over time. We noted particularly the rise of modern technology to maintain contact, and that fewer of the current children live overseas thus not attending schools specifically run for the armed forces community. However, the responses from stakeholders to these questions were that the experiences shared by participants in this research resonate with and have direct relevance to the children experiencing life with the armed forces now.

## 5.2 Recommendations for policy and practice

Arising from the above findings, this report makes the following recommendations for four key stakeholders: Ministry of Defence and armed forces; Government; schools and teachers; and parents/guardians.

- Recommendation 1: There should be greater acknowledgment of what can be gained from talking to 'grown up children' from armed forces families to inform policy and practice to better support current children from armed forces families. The diversity and complexity of the experiences needs to be understood as they are influenced by a range of factors, including the nature of the work that their serving parent/guardian does, the people they meet, and the places they live.
- Recommendation 2: Schools should continue to be supported in developing the awareness of all staff in identifying and recognising the challenges for children who are part of an armed forces family, including the issues that come with high levels of mobility, and how this presents both unique opportunities and challenges. This is particularly important for schools that have a small number of children from the armed forces families' community. The identification of the children would be improved if the Ministry of Defence kept and shared records with and between schools and this would also enable the 'Service Pupil Premium' to be made available to all schools for all children.
- Recommendation 3: Wider policy development should be informed by the broadest range of knowledge and evidence to ensure that decision-making is fit for purpose and sufficiently nuanced to take account of the nature and impact of the experiences.
- Recommendation 4: The Ministry of Defence and armed forces should ensure that they work in ways that support the children in armed forces families both during the time the parent/guardian is serving, and through their multiple transition points including those out of the armed forces community. In fulfilling these responsibilities, the experience of the family would be improved which would, in turn, improve the experience of the serving parent/guardian as part of that family. An improved life experience for the family could impact positively on the well-being

of those serving and increase retention in the armed forces. We recommend that a transition programme should be extended to the children.

- Recommendation 5: That support, including allocated finance, should be consistent for all armed forces children and those who support them across the four home nations, regardless of where they are located.
- Recommendation 6: Organisations consider implementing mentoring programmes that make use of the experiences and wisdom of the 'grown up children' as mentors to support others who have had similar experiences.
- Recommendation 7: The definition and terminology used in relation to the children from the armed forces community(ies) should take account of the diverse experiences outlined within this research and the life-long nature of the impact. We propose two things:
  - that the use of the term 'service child' is reviewed as it is the parent/guardian that serves rather than the child or family. Given that some are not positive about their association with this term, we suggest that it would be appropriate for its use to be reconsidered. One suggestion is 'child from an armed forces family';
  - that the definition of a child from an armed forces family is broadened, adopted at government level across the four nations, and used consistently in the UK to include:

*'any individual with a parent(s)/guardian(s) who has been a member of the armed forces at any point during their life'.*

### 5.3 Recommendations for research

Research with this group is in its earliest stages and there are a number of potential areas for future research:

- explore the lives and experiences of a broader group to develop more detailed and nuanced understandings, including any specific impact on the children of the different roles fulfilled by the serving personnel, the nature of their battalion/squadron/regiment/corps, and the different postings and deployment. this could also be extended to those children who have parents working for the military as civil servants or employed by organisations such as NAAFI and SAAFA;
- a longitudinal study that takes account of changes in the social and political climate and the associated generational groups;
- research the types of available support and the effectiveness and impact of support by looking at the child's concerns and wishes for support in relation to perceived needs identified by adult family members and those who work with the children;
- research the use of 'service pupil premium' in schools, the extent to which armed forces families access it, how it is used to structure and offer programmes of support, and the perceived impact beyond simple measures of qualifications gained.

## 6. Sharing the Research Findings

### 6.1 Presentations

The research has been presented to academic and practitioner audiences as detailed below.

- Chappell, A., McHugh, E. and Ince, C. (2024) *'Grown-Up' Children from Armed Forces Families: Ever-Changing Friendships*, presentation at the British Sociological Auto/Biography Study Group Conference, London, December 2024.
- Chappell, A., McHugh, E. and Ince, C. (2024) *Bodies in place? Reflections of 'Grown-Up Children' from Armed Forces Families*, presentation at the (Inter)Disciplinary Bodies Conference, Brunel University London, June 2024.
- Chappell, A., McHugh, E. and Ince, C. (2024) *'Grown-Up' Children from Armed Forces Families and their Childhood Experiences*, presentation to SCiP East Anglia Hub, online, June 2024.
- Chappell, A., McHugh, E. and Ince, C. (2024) *'Grown-up' Children from Military Families: The Impact of Their Childhood Experiences*, presentation to Forces in Mind Trust Research Centre Conference, London, May 2024.
- Chappell, A., Ince, C. and McHugh, E. (2023) *Conversations about support for children from military families: exciting possibilities*, presentation to Service Children Progression Alliance (SCiP) Annual Conference, Birmingham, November 2023.
- Chappell, A. and McHugh, E. (2023) *Saying goodbye: grown-up children from military families*, Masterclass presentation to Bangkok University International (BUI), November 2023.
- Chappell, A., McHugh, E. and Ince, C. (2023) *Saying goodbye: 'Grown up children' from military families*, presentation at the British Sociological Auto/Biography Study Group Conference, Oxford, July 2023.
- Chappell, A., Ince, C. and McHugh, E. (2022) *Nostalgia and affinity: Auto/Biographical accounts of place in the experiences of 'grown up children' from military families*, presentation at the British Sociological Auto/Biography Study Group Conference, Oxford, July 2022.
- Chappell, A., Ince, C. and McHugh, E. (2022) *Auto/Biographical experiences of 'grown up children' from military families*, presentation at Brunel University London, King's College London and Queen's University 'Life as a Service child: Experiences of mental health and education' Symposium, Online, 28th September 2022.

## 6.2 Collaboration and support

During this study, the authors have consulted with, and presented the preliminary findings and analysis to, a number of stakeholder and charitable organisations. We are very grateful for the support and encouragement from colleagues in the organisations detailed below.

- Academic Consulting and Educational Services (ACCESS)
- Anglia Ruskin University
- Armed Forces Families Federation
- Canterbury Christchurch University
- Community Development Team at RAF Northolt
- Dandelion Therapeutic Support
- Forces Children Scotland
- Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) Research Centre
- Help for Heroes
- King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London
- Little Troopers
- Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada
- Naval Children's Charity
- Naval Families Federation
- NHS Somerset
- North Yorkshire Council
- Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research, University of Northumbria
- Oxfordshire County Council
- Owl Therapy Centre
- Queens University, Canada
- RAND Europe
- Royal Air Force Families Federation
- Royal Air Force Northolt, Community Development Office
- Royal British Legion
- Service Children's Champion at North Yorkshire Council
- Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance
- Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance East Anglia Hub
- Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance London Hub
- Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru
- UK Ministry of Defence

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SSCE Cymru (Supporting Service Children in Education in Wales) <https://www.sscecymru.co.uk/evidence/data/default.htm#:~:text=Welsh%20Governments%20definition%20of%20a,and%20Royal%20Air%20Force%2C%20Or> [accessed 20 January 2025]

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Questionnaire

About you:

1. What is your age?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. What ethnic group do you identify with?
4. Are you registered disabled?
5. Do / did you have any siblings?
6. Do / did you have any dependent children in the following age groups?
7. Have you ever been a 'looked after child' (e.g. lived with foster parents; lived in a residential children's home; lived in a residential setting like a school or secure unit; been adopted)?
8. Where do you live now?
9. Please list the towns, counties and countries where you have lived between the ages of 18 and now.
10. Do / did you have one or more serving parents/guardians?
11. Were they UK military?
12. Who was / were the serving parent(s)/guardian(s)?
13. Which of the armed forces was / were they in (Army, Navy, Royal Air Force)?
14. Did your serving parent(s)/guardian(s) get posted anywhere without the family?
15. Did your serving parent(s)/guardian(s) get a deployment to active service?
16. Serving parent/guardian: What rank do they hold?
17. How old were you when the most recent serving parent / guardian retired?
18. List the towns, countries and countries where you lived before you were 18.
19. How many schools did you go to?
20. Which schools did you go to and where were they?
21. Did you face any particular challenges in school?
22. Do you feel that moving around had an impact on your education?
23. What qualifications do you have?
24. Did you go to university?
25. What jobs have you had since you were 18?
26. What do you feel were the best bits?
27. What do you feel were the greatest challenges?
28. What impact did these highlights and challenges have as you grew up and in later life?
29. What advice would you give the military?
30. What advice would you give to schools and teachers?
31. What advice would you give to the children?
32. What advice would you give to the parents/guardians?

## Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Category/Theme		Prompts
Introductions	Context and researcher background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you read the participant information?</li> <li>• Do you have any questions?</li> <li>• Do you give your permission for this interview to be recorded?</li> </ul>
Opening question	Reflection on the questionnaire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were your reflections when you filled in the questionnaire and since?</li> </ul>
Family background	Serving parent/guardian and rank Role of mother/father Siblings Ethnicity Social class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell me a little bit about your family background? (Probe class, ethnicity, occupation of non-serving parent/guardian)</li> <li>• Siblings? Occupations?</li> </ul>
School Experiences and Home Life	Challenges Progress Emotions Qualifications HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you get on in school – socially/academically?</li> <li>• Did you enjoy school? If not, why?</li> <li>• Explore impact of mobility/movement – friendships; education; relationships with family members (positive and negatives) Moving? Travel? Why/Why not?</li> <li>• Did you enjoy moving? Probe – challenges, impact on schooling, friendships, family relationships.</li> <li>• Overseas posting – highlights and challenges</li> <li>• Did you progress to University? Why/Why not? First in families to attend?</li> <li>• Return to education?</li> <li>• Have you ever talked to your parents/guardians about it?</li> </ul>
Identity	Family UK Abroad School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced any challenges related to your identity?</li> <li>• Challenges around being a ‘grown up’ child from a military family?</li> <li>• How do you identify?</li> <li>• When people asked, where did you say you come from?</li> </ul>
Post-education	Jobs Challenges Emotions Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did you do after school/university?</li> <li>• How did you get on?</li> </ul>

<p>Reflections on military childhood</p>	<p>Challenges Highlights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please reflect on your military childhood? Probe the following:</li> <li>• independence;</li> <li>• pride;</li> <li>• sense of belonging;</li> <li>• home (where do you say that is? has this changed at any point?);</li> <li>• friendships;</li> <li>• impact on relationships with family members/friends/partners;</li> <li>• what do you say about your childhood to others? (different things to different people?);</li> <li>• civilians.</li> </ul>
<p>Advice</p>	<p>Military Teachers Parents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What advice would you give to armed forces/schools and teachers/parents/children –use questionnaire to probe etc.</li> </ul>
<p>Close</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that hasn't already come up?</li> <li>• Would you be willing to be involved in further research?</li> </ul>

## Appendix 3: Participant Information

### Study title: 'Grown Up' Children from Military Families

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

**What is the purpose of the study?** The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of 'grown up' children from military families and develop recommendations, guidelines and further research.

**Why have I been invited to participate?** In order to improve the experiences of children from military families we want to hear from those who have had these experiences. You have valuable experiences to share with us and have indicated that you are interested in participating in this project.

**Do I have to take part?** Participation is entirely voluntary, and the decision to take part is yours. The research process requires your time, and so we anticipate that those who volunteer will have a genuine interest in the topic. There is no obligation for you to participate.

**What will happen if I take part?** We are keen to undertake this research 'with you' rather than 'about you' using two methods:

1. Questionnaire: an online questionnaire which will include a prompt to seek your interest in being involved in this next stage of this research and future research.
2. Interview: we would like to talk to you to give you an opportunity to share your experiences of being a 'grown up' child from a military family. The interview will take place either by phone or online.

**Are there any lifestyle restrictions?** There are no lifestyle restrictions.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?** There are no anticipated disadvantages or risks associated with taking part in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?** There are no benefits for individuals taking part in the research but the findings will generate recommendations and future research that will have benefit for students more broadly.

**What if something goes wrong?** The person to be contacted is the Chair of the CBASS Research Ethics Committee (see details at the end of this document).

**Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?** Pseudonyms will be adopted and you will remain anonymous in data presentation. Any data that may identify other individuals, groups or specific locations will be omitted.

Anonymised data will be retained confidentially in a locked/secure/password protected location on the Brunel University London network for up to five years and may be used as the basis for future research, in line with University policy. If during the course of

the research evidence of harm or misconduct comes to light it may be necessary to break confidentiality. We will tell you at the time if we think we need to do this, and let you know what will happen next.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used?** The questionnaire data will be analysed and the interviews recorded, transcribed and analysed to produce the findings from the research.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?** Findings of the project will be disseminated via a report and recommendations. In addition, the research team will present findings at conferences/seminars, through writing academic papers/chapters for publications and create some resources that can be shared with current children from military families and those that work with them.

**Your right to withdraw from the study** If you agree to take part in the study, you are free to withdraw at any stage prior to submitting the online questionnaire without giving a reason. Voluntary participation is key and you can decide whether or not you want us to use any interview data we have collected by 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

**Who is organising and funding the research?** The project researchers are Dr Anne Chappell, Dr Chris Ince and Dr Ellen McHugh in the Department of Education, Brunel University London and the project is funded by the Global Lives Research Centre at Brunel University London.

**What are the indemnity arrangements?** Brunel University London provides appropriate insurance cover for research which has received ethical approval.

**Who has reviewed this study?** The College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has reviewed this study to ensure that it complies with university guidelines in terms of anonymity, confidentiality, data protection, and potential harm to participants. All this is part of our standard procedure and ensures that research is conducted ethically.

**Research Integrity** Brunel University London is committed to compliance with the Universities UK: [Research Integrity Concordat](#). You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from the researchers during the course of this research

**If I agree to be involved, what happens next?** The research team will provide you with a consent form which you will be asked to sign and date. This will demonstrate that you have been fully briefed about the research process, have read the information provided, and had any questions answered.

**Contact for further information and complaints** If you have any questions, thoughts or observations at any point during this research please contact the researchers: Dr Anne Chappell (anne.chappell@brunel.ac.uk). Alternatively, if you wish to discuss any concerns please contact the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair (cbass-ethics@brunel.ac.uk)

## Appendix 4: Consent Form



### 'Grown Up' Children from Military Families project Participant Consent Form

Approval has been granted for this study to be carried out between 22/02/2021 and 31/08/2022

<b>The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.</b>		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? (via email/phone for the online questionnaire)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? (via email/phone for the online questionnaire)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Who have you spoken to about the study?		
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that:		
• You are free to withdraw from this study at any time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• You don't have to give any reason for withdrawing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect you in any way	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• You can withdraw your interview data any time up to 30/09/2022	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to my interview being audio recorded	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to the use of non-attributable quotes when the study is written up or published	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree that my anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in this study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Signature of research participant:	
Print name:	Date:

## Request for Feedback

If you have any comments or questions about the research we would be really pleased to receive them via the link below.

You can also add your contact details if you are interested in hearing about our future research in this area.



<https://app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk/s/brunel/grown-up-children-from-armed-forces-families-report-feedback>

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