SCISS
Service Children In State Schools

Supporting Service Children: The Voice of Schools

Consultation Findings

A report by Tiller Research Ltd on behalf of the National Executive Advisory Committee (NEAC) of Service Children In State Schools (SCISS)

Authors: Catharine Rose and Peter Rose

Tiller research

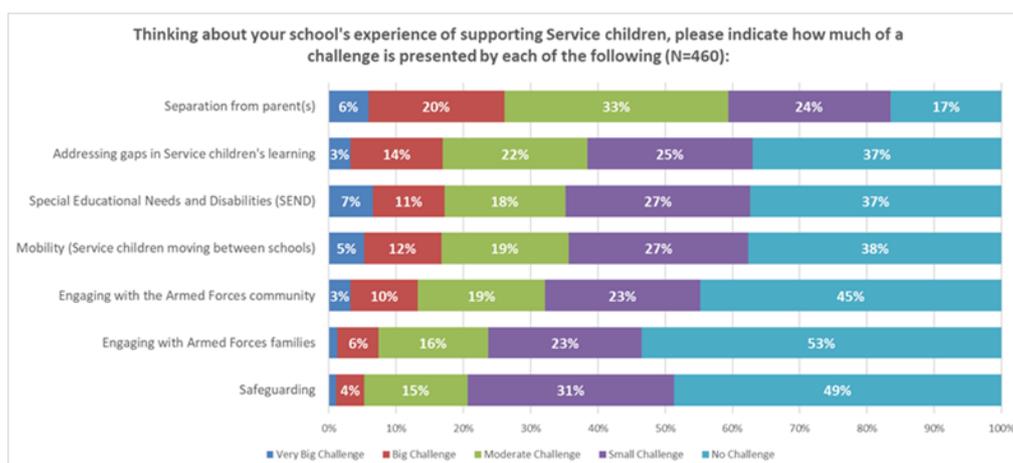**Executive Summary**

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Background

- Service Children in State Schools (SCISS) is a voluntary affiliated network of state-maintained schools in England that have any number of Service children on roll. A Service child is 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.

- SCISS aims to enhance the education and welfare of Service children, working with key partners and subscriber schools to achieve the best possible outcomes for this group of children and young people.

- SCISS is led by a National Executive Advisory Committee (NEAC). The core purpose of the SCISS NEAC is to be the '*Voice of Schools*' supporting Service children. This involves engaging with policy makers, and identifying effective practice to share with the SCISS network of schools.

- The SCISS NEAC commissioned Tiller Research Ltd to undertake a consultation with schools who have Service children on roll. The purpose of the consultation was to ensure that the group's forthcoming action plan truly reflects the areas of most importance for schools.

The Consultation

- The consultation contained three elements:
    - A core online questionnaire of Likert-type rating scales and free text responses. This was completed by 461 respondents, many from schools that had no previous involvement with the SCISS network;
    - An extended online questionnaire exploring a wider range of topics relating to a school's work with Service children. All respondents to the core questionnaire were offered the opportunity to complete; 234 responses were received;
    - A total of 17 semi-structured telephone interviews, undertaken with a representative sample of questionnaire respondents, exploring their responses in more depth.

- Data was analysed both as a complete set, and by looking at differences between key subgroups: school type; main service of a school's Service child cohort; number of Service children on roll; percentage of those on roll who are Service children; local authority quintile of Service Pupil Premium recipients; role of respondent.

- The proportion of responses received from schools in each subgroup were broadly in line with those in the overall population of Service children in England, both for the core and extended questionnaires. Over three-quarters of responses were from a headteacher (55%) or other senior leader (22%). A further 13% of respondents were a Welfare or Support professional.

Understanding the Challenges

- The questionnaire listed seven previously documented challenges experienced by some Service children, their families, and/or the schools they attend. Respondents were asked to indicate how much a challenge these areas presented to their school, with five response options ranging from 'Very Big challenge' to 'No challenge'. The overall responses were:

Thinking about your school's experience of supporting Service children, please indicate how much of a challenge is presented by each of the following (N=460):

Challenge	Very Big Challenge	Big Challenge	Moderate Challenge	Small Challenge	No Challenge
Separation from parent(s)	6%	20%	33%	24%	17%
Addressing gaps in Service children's learning	3%	14%	22%	25%	37%
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	7%	11%	18%	27%	37%
Mobility (Service children moving between schools)	5%	12%	19%	27%	38%
Engaging with the Armed Forces community	3%	10%	19%	23%	45%
Engaging with Armed Forces families		6%	16%	23%	53%
Safeguarding		4%	15%	31%	49%

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- Respondents were asked to say more about the most significant challenges they experienced in relation to their work with Service children:

Separation from parent(s)
Emotional and behavioural changes in relation to life as a Service child were identified as presenting the single biggest challenge for one in five respondents (22%). These most commonly coincided with a parent starting a deployment, though the disruption and change of a parent returning after a significant absence was often noted as presenting a more complex challenge. Several headteachers told us they faced frequent term-time holiday requests and/or unauthorised absences when parents returned from a deployment. These were viewed favourably due to the benefits of the family having time together, despite the impact on the school's attendance figures.

Addressing gaps in Service children's learning
Gaps in core learning as a result of Service children moving between schools was the most frequent challenge identified in this theme. This was an even greater challenge where Service children have moved between the different UK educational systems, or overseas. Lack of post-16 funding for Service children was noted as a particular issue, increasing the challenge for schools supporting Service children progressing to higher qualifications.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
Significant issues were identified in relation to the lengthy processes for assessing SEND needs. This was particularly problematic for Service children when combined with mobility, as relocation typically means that assessment processes have to be restarted. This can leave some Service children without the support that other children with similar needs receive for many years.

Mobility (Service children moving between schools)
Short notice warning of relocation, both arriving and departing, caused significant challenges. Schools reported that it was common for Service children to arrive with no educational records, or other relevant information such as SEND needs. Inconsistent and/or incomplete information meant schools faced significant challenges and delays in providing appropriate educational and pastoral support.

Engaging with the Armed Forces Community
Levels of engagement with local Armed Forces communities varied considerably. There were many examples of excellent local practice, but this appeared to mostly depend on the work of specific individuals. Schools with members of staff with a background in the Armed Forces often reported better engagement, able as they were to draw on their knowledge and/or contacts, though this was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for effective engagement.

Engaging with Armed Forces families
Engagement with families was not generally regarded as a more significant challenge for Armed Forces families than with other families, although the nature of the challenge was at times distinctive. Several schools noted challenges related to the transitory nature of many Service families. Lack of contact with deployed parents was regarded as inevitable. Issues such as a lack of transport sometimes exacerbated challenges related to engagement between the home parent and the school.

It was also noted that some parents were reluctant to engage with schools on issues related to their status as an Armed Forces family. Some families chose not to identify themselves as a service family at all. This was often, though not exclusively, a greater challenge in schools with small numbers of Service children, and with service leavers transitioning to civilian life.

Safeguarding
Challenges related to safeguarding were often identified as a consequence of other challenges, especially in relation to mobility and lack of parental engagement. Some respondents felt that they did not receive information they needed from the Armed Forces community, including from welfare teams.

Additional Challenges

Respondents were asked if they experienced any significant challenges in relation to supporting Service children that were in addition to the presented themes:

Support for Parents

One in ten respondents (11%) highlighted challenges related to the needs of parents that impact on Service children. Examples included: mental health needs; impact of injuries; and practical challenges faced by lone parents (whether through permanent separation or deployment). Some respondents felt that parents may be reluctant to access Armed Forces welfare support, fearing that this would have a detrimental impact on the career of the serving parent(s).

Emotional Impact

Mobility and separation are the features of life as a Service child viewed as the most common sources of emotional challenges. However, the emotional impact of being a Service child is not always problematic.

Service children are often viewed as being emotionally resilient. Effective emotional support can enable a resilient person to thrive in the face of challenges. Therefore, providing support for the emotional impact of being a Service child might be usefully viewed as a core support requirement, rather than just a need for those experiencing difficulties.

Social Impact

Some schools felt that mobility and/or separation from parent(s) had a significant social impact. Service children sometimes experienced difficulties, or avoided, making friends. They were often less likely to engage with extra-curricular activities, and so missed out on other opportunities to socialise. Others felt that Service children had excellent social skills, but as they grew older experienced difficulties integrating fully into longstanding friendship groups.

Many respondents felt that Service children benefited from connecting with other Service children. This was a particular challenge for schools with few Service children.

Low Numbers of Service Children

Several schools with low numbers of Service children identified qualitatively different challenges and opportunities to those with larger Service child cohorts. These schools were less likely to feel that they had the necessary experience or resource to meet the needs of the cohort, especially those with a greater level of need. Quality sources of support (e.g. through networking with schools with larger Service child cohorts) were typically seen as both important. Access to this type of support varied considerably.

Despite these challenges, some schools with small Service child cohorts highlighted advantages of their position. Schools with very small numbers of Service children typically felt more able to provide effective bespoke support than schools with larger cohorts.

Identifying Needs

Many schools found that identifying the needs of Service families could be difficult. Sometimes this was because families were reluctant to identify their service status. This was particularly likely in areas with low numbers of Service children, and when starting a new school following a parent's retirement.

It was also common for families not to think about notifying schools of deployments, and returns from deployment. Several respondents expressed frustration at this, as they felt it missed an opportunity to plan and/or provide appropriate support. Identifying effective ways to build trust and communication with families was seen as desirable, but particularly challenging for those schools with limited numbers and/or experience working with Service children.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

A small number of respondents identified specific challenges engaging with Service families where parents did not have English as their first language. Although this was not a widespread issue, it is likely to be quite pertinent in schools located near particular regiments.

Differences Between Subgroups

- Overall, the *order* in which the seven themes present a challenge was largely consistent across all subgroups. However, there were a few notable exceptions:
    - Mobility was identified as the biggest challenge for schools with predominantly British Army children, with 35% identifying this as a 'very big' or 'big' challenge. In contrast, mobility was the third ranked challenge for schools with mostly Royal Air Force children, with 26% of these schools identifying this as a 'very big' or 'big' challenge; and the fifth ranked challenge for schools with predominantly Royal Navy and/or Royal Marines children (9%);
    - Mobility was also the biggest challenge for schools with 25% or more Service children. In contrast, mobility was the fifth ranked challenge for schools with less than 5% of Service children on roll. It is likely that the disruption experienced by schools as a result of mobility is related to the number of Service children on roll;
    - Schools with less than 25% Service children identified 'Separation from parent(s)' as their biggest challenge. In contrast, separation was ranked fourth among schools with 25% or more Service children. This difference might be explained by the lack of the natural peer support/ shared experiences that are available in schools with a higher proportion of Service children. Schools with larger Service child cohorts also typically have staff with increased knowledge and experience of working with Service children, and are able to focus pastoral resources on the particular needs of this group;
    - Secondary schools overall identified 'Engaging with Armed Forces families' as a greater challenge than did Primary or Special schools. In contrast, Special schools identified SEND needs as their biggest challenge, with 'Addressing gaps in learning' much less of a challenge than for other schools. These differences are likely to relate to fundamental features of the different types of schools, more than they do to specific issues in relation to Service children.

- There were some differences in the *scale* of challenge experienced by the different subgroups. Even where there were similarities between the relative challenge presented by each theme, these often presented a bigger challenge for some subgroups than for others. The most notable differences were:
    - Primary schools were more likely to identify 'big' or 'very big' challenges than were secondary schools;
    - Schools with a majority British Army cohort were generally more likely to identify 'big' or 'very big' challenges than those with Service children cohorts from other services. However, in relation to 'Separation from parent(s)', schools with a majority RAF (42%) or Royal Navy/Marines (37%) Service child cohort were more likely to view separation as a 'very big' or 'big' challenge than those with a majority British Army cohort (33%);
    - Across all themes, schools with smaller Service child cohorts were much less likely to identify 'big' or 'very big' challenges than were schools with larger Service child cohorts;
    - Schools in both Local Authority Service Pupil Premium Quintile 5 (those areas with the highest overall numbers of SPP recipients) and Service Pupil Premium Quintile 1 (those areas with the lowest overall numbers of SPP recipients) were more likely to identify themes as 'big' or 'very big' challenges than were those in Quintiles 2-4. Particular challenges identified in the qualitative data for schools in areas with low overall numbers of Service children included a lack of local knowledge or support networks to draw on when needed.

Information and Support

- Respondents were asked to identify information or support that they currently access that they would recommend to other schools as being helpful for work with Service children. Around 40% of respondents answering this question explicitly said that they did not currently access information or support either locally or nationally. Some felt they were able to meet the needs of Service children within their existing resources, though others had been unable to find anything helpful. A few secondary schools commented that the available support was not suitable for their needs, as it was viewed as focussed on primary schools rather than the needs of older pupils.

- The most frequently identified useful support locally/ regionally were local Armed Forces (15.3%), including provision from local military bases and welfare services, and from Local Authorities (14.5%). However, provision varies considerably around the country. Many schools, in particular those located some distance from a local base, felt they lacked the support from the Armed Forces that they thought would be useful to them. Dedicated provision from Local Authorities for Service children and/or their families was highly valued, but is only available in a few areas.

- Armed forces charities (including specific programmes for Service children) were the most frequently identified useful support from national/ online sources (19%), followed by information from UK government departments (6%). SCISS were mentioned by several respondents, as were the Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP). There appeared to be some confusion about the differences between these two organisations. Together they were mentioned as a helpful source of support by just under one in ten respondents (9%).

- Given the emotional demands service families often face, it is perhaps not surprising that some schools (6%) sought out specific support for mental health. This support was almost always from charities, both local and national, as statutory/NHS sources of mental health support were identified as difficult to access.

- A range of suggestions were made for improving the information and support available to schools in relation to supporting Service children. These included suggestions related to both the content of available support, and the process for accessing this:
    - A directory of support for Service children;
    - Outcomes data for Service children;
    - Improved national co-ordination of support for Service children, such as an umbrella body;
    - Information and support tailored to the range of different circumstances of schools with Service children, including best practice examples from schools with similar characteristics;
    - More consistent connections with local or regional Armed Forces contacts;
    - Improved support preparing Service children for transfers, and the creation of consistent mechanisms to enable a smooth transition to their new school;
    - Timely access to professional support for Service children experiencing emotional difficulties.

Service Pupil Premium

- Almost all schools reported that their Service Pupil Premium was used for specific resources or activities focused on their Service children. Three-quarters of schools (76%) used some of their Service Pupil Premium funding to provide **emotional and/or mentoring support** for Service children.

- Almost half of respondent schools (48%) used the Service Pupil Premium to enable Service children to participate in **enrichment activities**. This included activities to increase 'cultural capital' as well as afterschool clubs and social activities. A similar proportion (47%) used this resource to provide **academic support**. This includes targeted catch-up support for Service children with gaps in learning, and access to additional resources and experiences relevant to the curriculum.

- Just under one quarter of respondent schools (24%) used the Service Pupil Premium to fund or part-fund **staff posts**. Through this action, schools were better able to meet the needs of Service children by having specific individuals with the time to understand and respond to the needs of Service children.

- Just over half of respondents identified a need for additional support or information in relation to use of Service Pupil Premium. The most frequent request, made by 26% of extended questionnaire respondents, was for **examples of evidence-based best practice**. There was a desire for examples that recognised the range of different school circumstances and/or the characteristics of their Service child cohort. Schools with small Service child cohorts were particularly keen to stress the need for best practice examples that reflected their situation.

Key Messages for Armed Forces Communities

- *Engage with us*
Around a third of respondents highlighted the value gained from networking and dialogue with their local Armed Forces community. Examples of valued support included: information on Armed Forces careers; trips and enrichment activities; officers visiting the school; joint-working between school staff and Armed Forces family welfare.

- *Keep us informed*
Schools appreciate information from the Armed Forces. Over a quarter of respondents (27%) felt the Armed Forces needed to provide schools with a key contact who could inform them about upcoming deployments, assist with transfers, and coordinate family welfare support.

- *We're proud of you*
Schools wanted the Armed Forces communities to know how proud they were to work with them. Armed Forces personnel and Service children were identified as positive role models for the school.

Key Messages for Local Authorities/Multi-Academy Trusts

- *We value your support*
Schools valued support they received from their Local Authority or Multi-Academy Trust, though this varied geographically. Support included: having staff dedicated to Service children; provision of useful resources; practical support to address key needs; supporting local networking between schools and the Armed Forces community. Schools looked to MATs to allow time to be allocated to these activities

- *We need you to be flexible*
Schools ask Local Authorities and Multi-Academy Trusts to acknowledge and understand the needs of Service children, and to demonstrate the importance of meeting these needs by allowing flexibility in their administrative processes, data collection and data analysis.

- *Guidance and best practice*
Around 15% of respondents looked to Local Authorities and Multi-Academy Trusts to collate and/or signpost to guidance and best practice examples on supporting Service children, and to provide CPD opportunities around issues related to the needs of Service children.

Key Messages for Government Departments

- *Recognise the impact*
Some 21% of extended questionnaire respondents wanted government departments to recognise the impact of Service life on children and families, and for this to be reflected consistently in policies and government priorities. A desire was expressed for cross-departmental work to mitigate the impact of service life on schools, such as flexibility on term-time holidays.

- *Service Pupil Premium*
Some 13% of schools wanted government to understand that, although the Service Pupil Premium is highly valued, it is not always adequate to meet more complex needs.

- *Mitigating the impacts of mobility*
Several respondents felt that government departments should provide information, support and access to additional/ short term resources to meet the specific challenges of mobility. This particularly related to the fast-tracking of SEND assessment and support provision, which was identified as an area in which Service children were particularly disadvantaged as a direct result of mobility.

Resilience and Adaptability

- A key message for all practitioners and agencies was to recognise the adaptability and resilience of Service children. These are strengths that should be built on; but may mask a need for support and/or be a barrier to engagement.

Messages for SCISS

- Schools were very positive about the potential value of SCISS. Awareness of SCISS was mixed, but those who had previous contact were complimentary, and those who had not previously heard of SCISS were typically of the view that the aims of SCISS would benefit their work.

- Direct contact with schools via email newsletter/updates were seen as important. Facilitating networking (including on-line networking), in particular for those in areas with low numbers of Service children, was also identified as a potentially helpful means of communication.

Priorities

Respondents were asked their opinion on what the SCISS NEAC's priorities should be over the next 2-3 years. The most frequent suggestions were:

- Just under 20% of respondents felt that the SCISS NEAC should focus on collating and/or signposting to **guidance and/ or best practice examples** for supporting Service children. A 'directory' to signpost to high quality support would be welcomed, with the SCISS NEAC viewed as well placed to oversee this.

- Some 16% of respondents felt the SCISS NEAC should focus on supporting schools in meeting the **emotional needs** of Service children. This included advocating for timely access to support services.

- Schools often felt that they required **funding** above the level of Service Pupil Premium, when presented with Service children with complex needs. Some 15% of schools felt the SCISS NEAC could consider its role in researching and advocating for additional targeted resources to meet complex needs.

- Around 8% of respondents felt that the SCISS NEAC could advocate for standards to be agreed in relation to **Armed Services communication with schools**, in order to build consistent relationships.

- Around 7% of respondents feel they would benefit from **high-quality specialist CPD** on specific issues relating to the needs of service families.

Next Steps

- This report presents the findings of the SCISS *Voice of Schools* consultation. This was the first stage of the process to identify action plan priorities for the SCISS NEAC. The next step is for the SCISS NEAC to reflect on these findings, and agree a way forward.

- The consultation identified a wide range of challenges, opportunities and priorities in relation to supporting schools to achieve the best possible outcomes for Service children. There is considerable variation in the challenges that are felt to require the most support, based on the different characteristics of schools and diverse experiences of Service children.

- It is recommended that the SCISS NEAC pays attention to achieving an appropriate balance between the most commonly identified challenges and opportunities, and acute challenges experienced by particular subgroups.

- The areas of challenge that appear to have the greatest overall need for support are:
    - **Separation from parents**- in particular providing effective emotional support both during a deployment and at the points of departure and return;
    - **Communication with the Armed Forces**- in particular contact with local bases and the local service community.

- Issues with high need for specific groups, but lower overall relevance, include:
    - Support in areas with low overall numbers of Service children;
    - Support for schools with low numbers of Service children;
    - Support for the impact of mobility. In particular, specific, practically-focussed, short-term support or targeted additional resources to smooth the transition process;
    - Support to address the potential tension between meeting the needs of Service children and fulfilling expectations made of the school, e.g. from OFSTED, in particular for schools with significant numbers of Service children;
    - Addressing areas where Service children appear to experience specific disadvantage, e.g. in relation to EHCP processes and securing SEND support.