



Listening to our Service children (2020) – findings

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Executive summary

SSCE Cymru is pleased that the Service children involved in this project represent a range of backgrounds and experiences. Special thanks are given to all of the schools that helped to facilitate these discussion groups. The responses will help stakeholders to understand the challenges Service children face and what support Service children feel is the most beneficial.

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

The findings from this project will provide evidence that may impact policy in Welsh Government and in the Ministry of Defence. That evidence will also support policy and system changes in schools and local authorities and contribute to new SSCE Cymru resources.



Introduction

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

How? The Service children discussions took place one-to-one or in small groups and were carried out by the SSCE Cymru School and Community Engagement Officer with a staff member from the school present. To start the session, the children were provided with information about SSCE Cymru, told about the purpose of the 'Listening to our Service children' project and given the opportunity to ask questions.

The project wanted to find out what they felt about being a Service child, including what they found positive and enjoyed and the things they found challenging, and why. It was explained that there were no right or wrong answers. The children were assured that they did not have to share any details they did not want to, and all of their responses would be anonymous.

Discussion topics (e.g. moving home) were explained to the Service children before questions were asked. The language used was adjusted depending on the age range of the

children involved in each discussion group, while still following the same structure and discussion topics. At the end of each discussion topic, Service children were given the opportunity to ask questions or share any further comments. The key elements of the discussion groups were to ensure each child had the time and opportunity to be listened to and have their view considered. Praise was offered to all who participated in the discussions, particularly when they shared a new idea, said something thoughtful or talked about their emotions or difficult topics. Clarification was requested by encouraging the Service child to give more detail when their response was unclear.

The themes of their responses were logged, providing important quantitative data that shows patterns and gives a general overview of the most common responses. Many quotes were noted, providing the qualitative aspect of this report: allowing SSCE Cymru to hear directly from Service children.

Who? One hundred and fifteen Service children (66 primary and 49 secondary) from 14 schools, in eight local authorities, took part in the discussion groups.

When? Discussion groups were carried out from September to December 2019.



Respondents

Percentages below have been rounded to the closest 1.0%.

1.1 Type of school

- 1 (7%) x All-through
- 8 (57%) x Primary
- 5 (36%) x Secondary

Two of the schools were independent (fee-paying).

1.2 Number of schools from each local authority

- 1 (7%) x Ceredigion
- 1 (7%) x Gwynedd
- 2 (14%) x Isle of Anglesey
- 3 (21%) x Monmouthshire
- 1 (7%) x Newport
- 1 (7%) x Pembrokeshire
- 4 (29%) x Powys
- 1 (7%) x Vale of Glamorgan

1.3 School language

- 9 (64%) x English-medium
- 4 (29%) x English-medium with significant use of Welsh
- 1 (7%) x Welsh-medium

1.4 Parents' service

- 63 (55%) x British Army
- 41 (36%) x Royal Air Force
- 11 (10%) x Royal Navy/Royal Marines
- 88 (77%) x currently serving
- 24 (21%) x ex-Service personnel/Veteran
- 3 (3%) x Reservists



Service children's experiences: mobility

2.1 77% have moved to a new house. During discussions about their experiences:

- 51% made negative comments about leaving friends/family, while 31% made positive comments about meeting new people/making friends
- 25% made positive comments and 24% made negative comments about a new house/home
- 24% made negative comments about changing school.

Comments included:

- *"I'm happy as I get to make new friends."*
- *"I don't get to bring my dogs with me."*
- *"I like getting a new bedroom."*
- *"It's scary."*
- *"You have to get used to your new home and where you live."*
- *"I don't like moving from friends."*
- *"It is stressful moving to a new house."*
- *"I like hearing his stories about his journeys."*
- *"It's hard getting used to moving; I don't like packing all the time."*



2.2 37% have lived abroad. During discussions about their experiences:

- 28% made positive comments and 7% made negative comments about the physical environment (weather, animals, etc.)
- 14% made negative comments about being away from family/friends
- 9% made positive comments about learning a new language



Comments included:

- *"It was a good experience."*
- *"The food was tasty."*
- *"I didn't know the language."*
- *"Lots of people looked after me."*

88% have moved schools at least once due to the relocation of their parent(s). 52% have attended at least three schools, and 23% have attended at least five.

2.3 During discussions about their experiences of moving schools:

- 41% made negative comments about leaving a school/teacher/friends
- 28% made positive comments and 23% made negative comments about meeting new people/making friends
- 23% made negative comments about settling into a new school

Comments included:

- *"I don't know when the breaks are."*
- *"It takes me a long time to make friends."*
- *"I'm nervous and scared because it's my first time at the school."*
- *"I'm scared because you don't know your way around and you don't know anyone."*
- *"I'm sad when I go to the new school as I have to leave my mum, but I made a friend and it made me happy."*
- *"I live closer to Nan and Grandad."*
- *"I worry about bullies."*
- *"I miss my friends."*
- *"I keep in contact on my iPad."*
- *"Excited to see friends who I had met before – they were in the school I was moving to."*
- *"My new school was a small school, which I preferred as it's easier to get to know people."*
- *"I don't know who to trust and make friends with."*
- *"I didn't like telling people we were moving."*



2.4 When asked what activities helped them when moving school:

- 41% talked about buddy/peer support
- 30% talked about visiting the new school and meeting new teachers
- 13% talked about learning some of the new language.



Comments included:

- *"Going to an open day."*
- *"Having outdoor activities to do."*
- *"Making friends."*

2.5 When asked who helped them with moving school:

- 38% talked about support from friends/other Service children
- 37% talked about support from parents/carers
- 33% talked about support from school staff at the new school.

Key findings:

- A number of discussion topics prompted responses and comments that were both positive and negative.
- One consistent message that is seen throughout the discussions regarding mobility is the importance of the support Service children receive from friends and family, and the negative view of leaving/being away from them. Similarly, as indicated in the [SSCE Cymru school survey \(2019\)](#), one of the most significant challenges schools felt Service children faced in education was the impact of making friends (19% in primary and 33.5% in secondary school) and missing friends and family (21% in secondary schools).
- Despite some very positive comments from Service children regarding their experiences of moving home and living in different places, it is clear that the increased complexity that this aspect of their life can add may have a negative impact, which could affect their educational outcomes. The [SSCE Cymru school survey \(2019\) findings](#) indicate “many of the responses suggest schools are unaware of the experiences of Service children and are therefore unprepared to support them with their unique needs”, which highlights the need for additional support for Service children.





Service children's experiences: deployment

3.1 85% have experienced parents being deployed. During discussions about their experiences:

- 62% made negative comments about their emotions (sad, angry)
- 50% made negative comments about missing the deployed parent(s)
- 12% made negative comments about being worried their parent(s) could get hurt
- 7% made positive comments about experiences of taking on extra responsibilities and 7% made negative comments about the change of family dynamics and responsibilities.

Comments included:

- "I have a picture of Daddy when he goes away."
- "I like Mummy putting me to bed and I miss her."
- "I feel shocked when I forget he isn't here."
- "I feel sad. I can't sleep and I really miss him."
- "I had to learn to cook."
- "My nan and grandad come to stay and we go on holiday."
- "I read Harry Potter with my mummy, and I can't read with her when she goes away."
- "I can Skype him."
- "He has a different way of reading stories."
- "My mum can't drive."
- "I'm proud about what my parents do."
- "I worry what might happen to my dad. Is he in danger of being killed?"
- "I get to see other relatives more."

3.2 When asked what helped them to deal with their emotions/feelings while their parent(s) was/were deployed:

- 42% talked about support from friends or buddies
- 39% talked about communicating with their deployed parent(s)
- 36% talked about family support (discussing their feelings)
- 20% talked about support through engaging with the Armed Forces community
- 19% talked about counselling/support from school staff.

Comments included:

- "When I am angry I do mindfulness and meditation."
- "I was supported by a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) in school and my nan."
- "I use the worry jar and put my worries in it."
- "I have a picture of Daddy when he goes away."
- "I use the buddy bench to find a friend."
- "I talk to my sister or my mum."
- "I enjoy being with my dog."
- "I play a game."
- "I play with my friends."
- "We get to FaceTime sometimes."
- "Being with people who also understood how I was feeling."
- "I would like to know more about where my parent is and what they are doing."
- "Being on the school council."

Key findings:

- Understandably, the majority of comments and views from Service children regarding their experiences of deployment were overwhelmingly negative. This is supported by the findings of the [SSCE Cymru school survey \(2019\)](#), where the top answers from primary schools regarding the challenges Service children face were all in relation to the emotional impact of separation due to deployment.
- A wide range of coping mechanisms are used by Service children to deal with their emotions and feelings during deployment. Some are individual and others involve support from others. The [SSCE Cymru school survey \(2019\) findings](#) indicate that the most beneficial support that schools offer is tailored pastoral support, which requires funding/resources.

Service children's experiences: living in Wales

4.1 During discussions about their experiences of living in Wales:

- 55% made positive comments and 12% made negative comments about the physical location (geography, weather, etc.)
- 16% made negative comments and 8% made positive comments about learning Welsh. The Service children at the Welsh-medium school that took part in the discussion groups did not make positive or negative comments about learning Welsh.
- 10% made positive comments about the available activities.

Comments included:

- *"I like my school."*
- *"I like being outdoors on my bike."*
- *"I live near the secret RAF beaches."*
- *"I am far away from my friends and family."*
- *"I get to play where my friends live."*
- *"I don't get to see my dad when we live in Wales."*
- *"There is more countryside."*
- *"I get to make new friends."*
- *"I live near the sea and beaches."*
- *"I like Welsh cakes."*

Key findings:

- Discussions about their experiences of living and being educated in Wales prompted responses and comments that were both positive and negative, but were primarily positive. The [SSCE Cymru school survey \(2019\) findings](#) indicate that 17% of primary schools and 21% of secondary schools felt learning Welsh was one of the most significant challenges Service children face in education in Wales.



What next?

- SSCE Cymru will continue to carry out these discussion groups in order to listen to our Service children about their experiences.
- The evidence from this report will be used to support policy and system changes in schools, local authorities and Welsh Government.
- SSCE Cymru will be encouraging and supporting schools in Wales to identify their Service children.
- The findings from this report will impact the content of the new SSCE Cymru Toolkits, due to be launched in 2020.
- New SSCE Cymru resources/tools will be developed, considering what the schools and Service children have indicated they would find beneficial.
- To ensure SSCE Cymru gathers a strong understanding of the experiences of Service children in education, a survey for parents of Service children will also be developed and responses captured in 2020. Contact SSCE@wlg.gov.uk for more information.



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