

Written evidence submitted by the RAF Families Federation

Introduction

1. The RAF Families Federation (RAFFF) provides an independent voice for all RAF personnel (single, married or in a partnership) and families. We work to improve the quality of life for the RAF community around the world – at work or at home.
2. The RAFFF welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Education Committee as part of this call for evidence. We recognise that some Armed Forces families do have positive experiences with regards to early years and childcare provision, but we are aware that others can face challenges due to the exigencies of Armed Forces life.
3. Whilst we are unable to respond to certain questions posed as part of this call for evidence, we would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the key challenges impacting RAF families and ask that our evidence is taken into consideration as part of the review.
4. To inform our response, the RAFFF put out a concise survey to members of the RAF community in January 2023 and insights from this survey form part of the evidence presented in this document.

Context

5. According to the Ministry of Defence (MOD) Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FAMCAS) 2022, 78% of Service families have children and 71% of families with children under five required early years (0-4) childcare.¹
6. 'Over half (54%) of all Service families have at least one child of school age. Of these families, nearly half (47%) required childcare such as breakfast/after school clubs in the last 12 months.'²
7. 'Over a fifth (22%) of Service families moved for Service reasons in the past year' and 'the proportion of families with school age children who changed school for Service reasons in the last 12 months remains unchanged this year at 15%.³

Key Findings

8. The RAF Families Federation has evidence to suggest that:
 - The affordability of childcare is a concern for some RAF families.
 - Insufficient childcare is a challenge for RAF families in certain locations.
 - Lack of affordable childcare (or in some locations, lack of any childcare options at all) can lead to difficulties in spousal employment and may in turn negatively impact Service personnel retention rates.
 - Parents/carers do not always understand what Government support they may be entitled to with the cost of childcare.
 - The impact of access to good quality, affordable childcare and early years provision that meets the needs of the RAF community cannot be understated.

¹ [UK Tri Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) Accessed 14.01.23

² [UK Tri Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) Accessed 14.01.23

³ [UK Tri Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) Accessed 17.01.23

Childcare Entitlements

Childcare costs

9. The Coram Childcare Survey 2022 reported that ‘the cost of childcare continues to rise steadily.’⁴ It identified that: ‘Price increases since 2021 for a part time (25 hours) place in a nursery for children in Great Britain, was 2.5 per cent for those aged under two, 2.0 per cent for two year olds and 3.5 per cent for three to four year olds using the free entitlement.’
10. The MOD FAMCAS 2022 reported that ‘Satisfaction with cost of early years childcare has fallen this year to 44%, down from 53%, back in line with the level reported in 2020.’ Additionally, it identified that ‘Four in ten families who required childcare for school age children are dissatisfied with the cost of their local childcare.’⁵
11. The RAFFF Support for Childcare and the Early Years 2023 survey found that respondents’ feedback on the current affordability of childcare varied: 60% of those commenting reporting that childcare provision is either fairly or very expensive compared to 32% of those commenting reporting it was either fairly or very affordable.
12. The Coram Childcare Survey 2022 identified that ‘Within the English regions, the price for 25 hours of nursery childcare for those aged under two is 50 per cent higher in inner London (£183.56) than in Yorkshire and Humberside (£122.17).’⁶ For RAF families who may be posted to different areas of the UK, sometimes at short notice, the challenges of this disparity are exacerbated as families may have limited time to prepare and plan new family budgets. One respondent to the RAFFF Childcare Survey Report 2021 commented that ‘*Personnel should not be financially penalised for posting - nursery fees vary greatly according to location, which is actually preventing some pers. accepting postings to certain areas. High Wycombe is £400 a month more expensive than the nursery at Brize Norton. Lossiemouth is half the cost of the nursery at Emerson Green in Bristol (Abbey Wood SFA (Service Family Accommodation)).*’⁷

Return to work

13. The summary of the Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces Families Report acknowledged that ‘Decisions about whether to work and the kind of job to pursue are often associated with the availability, accessibility and affordability of childcare.’⁸
14. The RAFFF are aware that, with the increasing cost of childcare, some families are considering the viability of parents/carers continuing with and/or returning to work due to the cost of childcare. Respondents to the RAFFF Childcare Survey Report 2021 commented that: ‘*My husband is away at least 8 months a year which makes me working either extremely expensive or impossible*’ and ‘*Without affordable childcare, many spouses can simply not afford to return to work. Which has a negative impact on the serving person, the spouse, and the child*’⁹ One member of the RAF community recently (2023) highlighted that ‘*...these increases [cost of childcare] will be more than 250 pounds extra per month for the same provision and seriously call into question my (non-serving) spouses financial ability to work.*’
15. The RAFFF Support for Childcare and the Early Years 2023 survey identified that 72% of those commenting reported that the cost of childcare is very likely to affect parents’/carers’ decisions to return to work full-time.

⁴ [Coram Childcare Survey - 2022.pdf](#) Accessed 15.01.23

⁵ [UK Tri Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed 15.01.23

⁶ [Coram Childcare Survey - 2022.pdf](#) Accessed 15.01.23

⁷ [RAF-FF-Childcare-Survey-Report-2021.pdf](#) Accessed 15.01.23

⁸ [Living in our shoes summary report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed 15.01.23

⁹ [RAF-FF-Childcare-Survey-Report-2021.pdf](#) Accessed 15.01.23

Government support with the cost of childcare

16. The RAFFF are aware that the Government provides information on the support with the cost of childcare to parents on the Childcare Choices website. However, the MOD FAMCAS 2022 reported that 'Of those families who required childcare, nearly six in ten (58%) do not currently use any government childcare initiatives' and 'The top reason for not using these initiatives is uncertainty around eligibility.'¹⁰ This may suggest that some families do not understand the funding system for childcare entitlements and subsequently families may not be accessing Government support with childcare costs which they may be entitled to.
17. Wider promotion of the Childcare Choices website may help to increase understanding of the various initiatives in place to support families with the cost of childcare which may lead to an increase in uptake.

Accessibility

18. Childcare is one of the eight key objectives in the MOD Armed Forces Families Plan 2022 with the objective for families to 'have access to good quality, affordable childcare which meets their needs, improving wellbeing and providing greater opportunities for all the family.'¹¹ The RAFFF are keen to support this ambition. We are aware that some members of the RAF community are encountering challenges in accessing childcare provision in certain locations. As well as impacting on individuals and families, there is the potential for this to impact on RAF operational output capabilities.

Early Years Provision

Childcare availability

19. The MOD FAMCAS 2022 highlighted that 'Of those who require early years childcare, nine in ten are able to access it'¹².
20. The Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-2032 highlights that 'The mobile and unpredictable nature of service life alongside unsociable hours and lengthy deployment causes difficulty for families in accessing good quality, enriching childcare'¹³.
21. The RAFFF is aware of the challenges both civilian and Service families may encounter if they are unable to access childcare. However, mobility associated with military life may exacerbate this challenge as one family highlighted: '*We are due to move to an area where the nursery connected to the station has a 20-month waiting list. This is longer than our average tour length!*'

Cost of Early Years provision

22. The majority of families surveyed in the MOD FAMCAS 2022 shared that they are 'Satisfied with the quality, access and opening hours of early years childcare, but less so with cost...Satisfaction with cost of early years childcare has fallen this year to 44%, down from 53%.'¹⁴

Potential challenges for childcare providers

¹⁰ [UK Tri Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed 15.01.23

¹¹ [AF Families Plan 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed 17.01.23

¹² [UK Tri Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed 14.01.23

¹³ [UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-32 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed 14.01.23

¹⁴ [UK Tri Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed 14.01.23

23. In the RAFFF Support for Childcare and the Early Years 2023 survey, respondents suggested that early years providers may be facing challenges with the following matters: staff recruitment and retention; insufficient funding; lack of capacity; staff wages; increasing costs.

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

24. The RAFFF Childcare Survey Report 2021 highlighted that ‘Families who have children with SEND may face even larger hurdles when trying to access suitable childcare that meet the specific additional needs of their child(ren). Again, this can lead to there being nothing suitable available, leaving the family no choice but for the spouse/partner to be the main childcare provider.’¹⁵
25. Of the responses we received to the RAFFF Support for Childcare and the Early Years 2023 survey, all the respondents who identified that they have children in early years provision with any SEND agreed that their childcare provider is meeting their child’s needs. However, it was also highlighted in this survey that support for SEND in early years settings can be inconsistent.

Preparing for transition to primary school

26. In the RAFFF Support for Childcare and the Early Years 2023 survey, 62% of respondents who commented suggested that the early years system prepares young children for their transition into primary education either fairly well or very well.

Conclusion

27. We hope that this important evidence from the RAF community will help to shape and inform future improvements in the support for childcare and early years. We welcome the recent announcement of the MOD Wraparound Childcare scheme but are aware that more needs to be done to ensure that Serving personnel and their families can access sustainably priced and flexible childcare. Childcare is a vital piece of the jigsaw for so many personnel and families – we want to deliver better options for them. The RAFFF would therefore welcome the opportunity for further engagement with the Education Committee to discuss the issues raised in this paper in more detail.

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¹⁵ [RAF-FF-Childcare-Survey-Report-2021.pdf](#) Accessed 17.01.23