



army families federation
the voice of the Army community

Briefing

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The overseas supportability process

A number of Service families have been refused permission to accompany their spouse or partner on an overseas assignment due to their educational, medical or welfare needs with, in some cases, the additional impact of the decision being made late in the process. AFF would like to see certain aspects of this process reviewed.

Karen Ross
Health & Additional Needs Specialist
07552 861983
additionalneeds@aff.org.uk

Background

AFF has investigated the area of overseas supportability and the pre-screening process. This has included a visit to the Families Section, Movement Support Service (MSS) and speaking with other professionals such as AH Overseas, the chain of command (CoC) involved in the supportability process and Defence Attaché & Loan Service Teams, as well as collecting data about Service families' experiences from the enquiries we receive. As a result of our research, AFF has identified five main areas of concern.

Issues

1. Lack of informed choice due to limitations and timing of current information available

The information currently available on overseas locations has limitations. For families to make an informed choice about an overseas assignment they need easily accessible, current, reliable and realistic information about the provision available prior to submitting an Assignment Preference Proforma. Often, families only receive information on supportability limitations once they are in receipt of an assignment order, which can have a significant impact on any decision they make. AFF believes that receipt of accurate information at the right time in the process can be crucial to the success of an overseas assignment.

AFF has seen a steady increase in the number of families requesting accurate, realistic information about the provision available in overseas locations; families rely on word of mouth, the current incumbent, an informal 'buddy' system or, more often, social media for information.

Although there is some overseas location information available on the Defence Intranet, this is not accessible to families. Families can access the GOV.UK website for information but it isn't always current and some information provided is generic, so does not always accurately reflect the actual provision available. HIVEs provide information on most overseas locations, but not on the more remote locations where, typically, supportability considerations are greater. AFF is aware that AWS are developing some Overseas Location Guides to be available through the new iHIVE, which will be invaluable for families and will enable them to make an informed choice about an overseas assignment.

2. MOD guidance and policies

AFF recognises that it is an individual's responsibility to identify and communicate what their supportability requirements are. However, with such a myriad of different policies and procedures that families and the CoC have to navigate, this can lead to some confusion.

AFF has also identified that there are different processes for individual augmentees, unit movers and those on Loan Service or Defence Attaché assignments, demonstrating that the process is not straightforward and may prevent vital information being shared before an assignment overseas is agreed.

Families and the CoC are not always aware of all the tri -Service and single Service policies that advise on the overseas supportability and pre-screening process. When families do have access to this information, they often find it repetitive with ever-increasing requests to share additional personal and medical information, or do not find it relevant to their situation.

For example, a family were refused an assignment to Cyprus; the spouse did not think the policy related to her situation, so she had not registered her specific requirements.

“The policy the military have in relation to this states, ‘overseas assignments are generally unsuitable for individuals who require enhanced medical or welfare support’, ‘multi-disciplinary care is often not possible in BFC’. Although I do have multi-disciplinary issues, I do not fall into any of these categories as the only healthcare I require is my medication.”

Registration according to AGAI 108 is mandatory for Army personnel, but not for the other Services, even when they are mobile. Mandatory registering of a family member’s additional (whether educational or medical) and/or welfare needs can be negatively perceived by families as a career limiter. Avoiding potentially negative career consequences can be a greater priority for a family than declaring their family’s additional needs and this can lead to some ‘slipping through the net’. This in itself can result in a rushed alternative career option or disruption to the soldier’s career pathway. There are also currently no consequences for not registering additional requirements and yet there are if an accompanying spouse leaves the overseas location within twelve months. If there is no consequence for not registering a families’ additional needs, this may encourage families to slip through the net and find there is no or inadequate support available.

3. Review of educational, medical and welfare supporting documentation

Often, families feel that a review of their medical, educational or welfare requirements is purely a paperwork exercise without an option for personal representation and full disclosure if their case is refused. AFF is aware that in certain overseas locations capacity is the issue rather than availability of support or provision, but this is not always made clear to families, which adds to their frustration.

In some case, families compare the decisions made by the CoC and often feel frustrated when other families have been accepted on accompanied overseas assignments with similar additional requirements to their own, yet they have been refused this opportunity. It is also apparent from our investigation that in certain overseas locations some conditions, for example mental health illness, cannot be supported at all, regardless of the type of mental health condition. AFF is also aware that in some overseas locations the provision for regular age related well-women check-ups are not routinely available and yet higher risk dependants are not made aware of this, as the current screening process does not include this provision. This information must be made available to families before starting the process, so they are fully aware of the provision available.

4. Decision timescales and the impact

On occasion, some families are issued an assignment order prior to their pre-screening and supportability checks, so a decision is made after they have started their moving process. Whilst the majority of decisions are positive, for those that cannot accompany their spouse/partner on an overseas assignment, this can have a significant impact both emotionally, financially and can also have career management implications. Families are often not given the reasons why their application for accompanied assignment has been refused and this can affect their appeal process. One spouse speaks of her experience and the impact this has had,

“[My husband] will have to remain in Cyprus until a replacement is found [...]The decision to be inflexible and discriminatory is costing us my £700 a month wage, loss of allowances, cost of two lots of utility bills, possibly loss of my children’s continuity of education as well as massive stress and emotional pressure on us all.”

5. The appeals process

AFF believes that Overseas Assignment Orders should be provisional until supportability checks are complete. There should be clearer, more robust guidance available about the whole supportability and appeals process. Family members should be given an opportunity to make their own case and be assessed as individuals, and the appeal decision should be given within an appropriate timeframe, so that families do not begin their plans for relocation overseas. One family received the decision that their 19-year-old son with additional needs could not accompany them on assignment to Cyprus. However the family were already living in a hotel waiting for their flights to be booked. They were unclear about what options they had whilst waiting for the appeal decision.

“The letter is very extreme and I am going to appeal it, but it will take time.”

Some families are expected to stay in the UK whilst the serving person takes up post overseas, and then are left unsupported.

AFF view

AFF would like:

- the opportunity to engage with the CoC to ensure that families' concerns are being considered in any review of the current supportability process
- to see accurate, appropriate and accessible information available to families at the correct time in the process
- more streamlined guidance with a reduction in all the paperwork that is involved in this process and clear guidance for each individual that is relevant to their assignment pathway
- greater consideration to be given to the individual involved in the screening process, particularly those with a medical additional need or disability
- a more robust and coherent appeals process that ensures families fully understand the reasons why they have been refused an accompanied assignment and how they can effectively appeal this decision.