

Title: AFF Childcare Survey  
 Date of issue: May 2020  
 Audience: Chain of command, MOD  
 Issued by: Michelle Alston, AFF Head of Policy & Research

## Issue

Following the Government’s commitment to childcare support for the Armed Forces, AFF surveyed Service families to determine the unique childcare challenges they experience. There were 1,664 eligible responses to the survey<sup>1</sup>.

Whilst AFF acknowledges that childcare can also present a significant challenge for civilian families, Army families face unique pressures, primarily due to the mobile nature of Army life.

## Key findings

1. Cost is a significant barrier to childcare.
2. The nature of Army life provides unique challenges for families.
3. Army families are unable to rely on unpaid childcare support from family and friends.
4. Childcare provision has a significantly negative impact on spousal ability to gain and maintain employment and to have career progression.
5. Assistance with costs and more flexible hours would help Army families to access childcare.

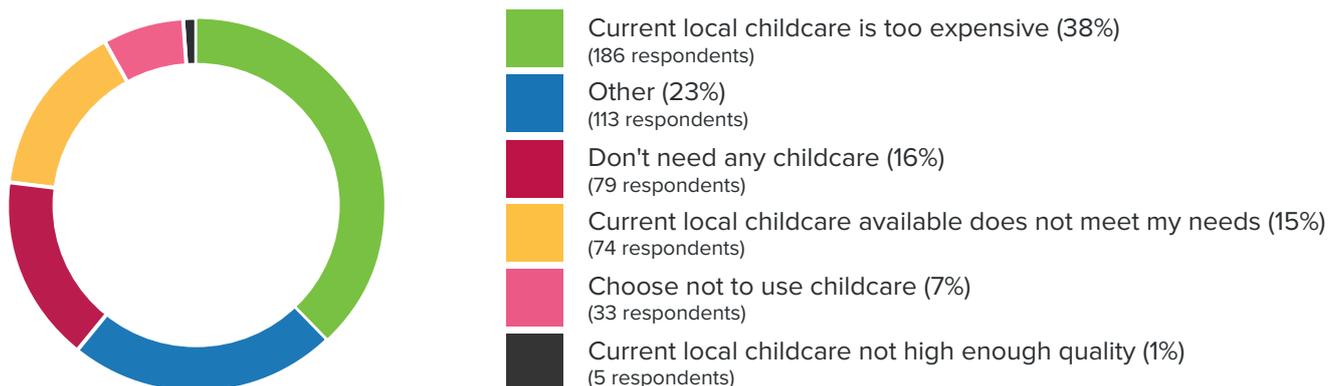
## Background

### 1. Cost is a significant barrier to childcare.

- 1.1. Current local childcare being too expensive was the top reason that respondents did not use paid childcare.
- 1.2. Families were asked to rate how satisfied they were with a number of aspects of childcare provision; such as cost, opening hours, availability and quality. Cost was the highest area of dissatisfaction in all aspects of provision in all types of childcare.
- 1.3. Comments from families highlighted that last- minute postings or confirmation of allocated Service Family Accommodation (SFA) could lead to difficulties in gaining a place at a preferred provider, increasing childcare costs for some families.
- 1.4. The cost of holiday clubs and pre-school childcare had the highest rates of dissatisfaction.

### What is the main reason for not using paid childcare?

Respondents 490



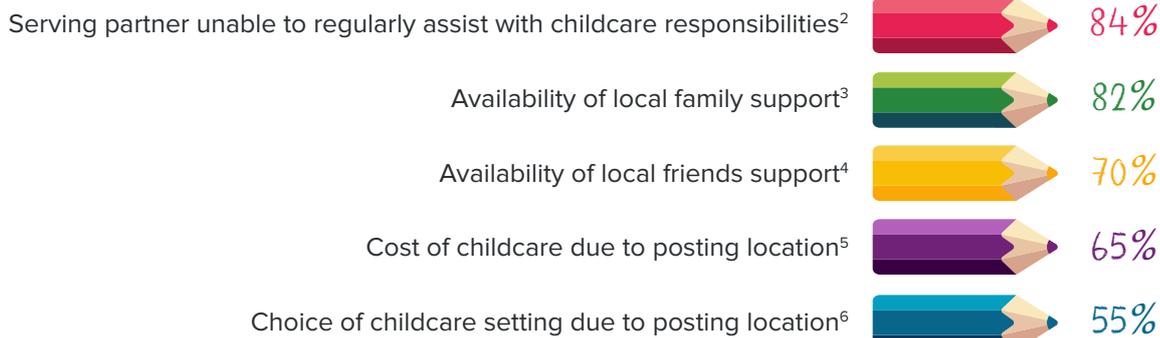
1. 1,783 people began the survey, with 1,664 being eligible to continue. Not all respondents answered all questions.

Cost of childcare	Early Years 1,305 respondents	Wraparound 1,106 respondents	Holiday Club 1,087 respondents
Satisfied/Very satisfied	26%	27%	15%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	27%	33%	34%
Dissatisfied/Very dissatisfied	47%	40%	51%

## 2. The nature of Service life provides unique challenges for families.

### Top five challenges

### Very significant/significant challenge



- 2.1. Whilst civilian families also face issues of cost and availability of childcare, Army families face unique challenges, predominantly due to both the mobility, requirements and culture of Army life.
- 2.2. Service personnel are often unable to regularly assist with childcare responsibilities. This is primarily due to frequent exercises, training and operations, which left spouses feeling that there was no option but for them to take responsibility for childcare. Families also commented on the additional impact of the culture of the Army, where the Service person's role takes precedence. The prioritisation of the serving person's career led to many spouses feeling that childcare was their responsibility and cited the need for more flexibility from the Army.
- 2.3. Families commented on the impact of unpredictable requirements and long periods of absence on the non-serving spouse, with some commenting that they felt like 'single parents'.
- 2.4. Army families are highly mobile and cannot choose where they live, unlike civilian families, which impacts on their ability to access childcare. Comments from families indicated that many are forced to remain on long waiting lists for childcare, especially if their posting was short notice and/or in a rural location with limited options. In addition, frequent moves meant a repeated challenge to secure new and appropriate childcare in their new location.
- 2.5. Some families commented on the lack of flexibility in the childcare system, which caused issues when trying to manage childcare during the unpredictable and sometimes short notice absences or deployments of their serving partner.
- 2.6. For those families with additional needs, frequent mobility exacerbated difficulties in finding suitable and appropriate care.
- 2.7. Dual serving families and those where the non-serving spouse worked highlighted the challenge of managing childcare when the serving parent was deployed or away on exercise.

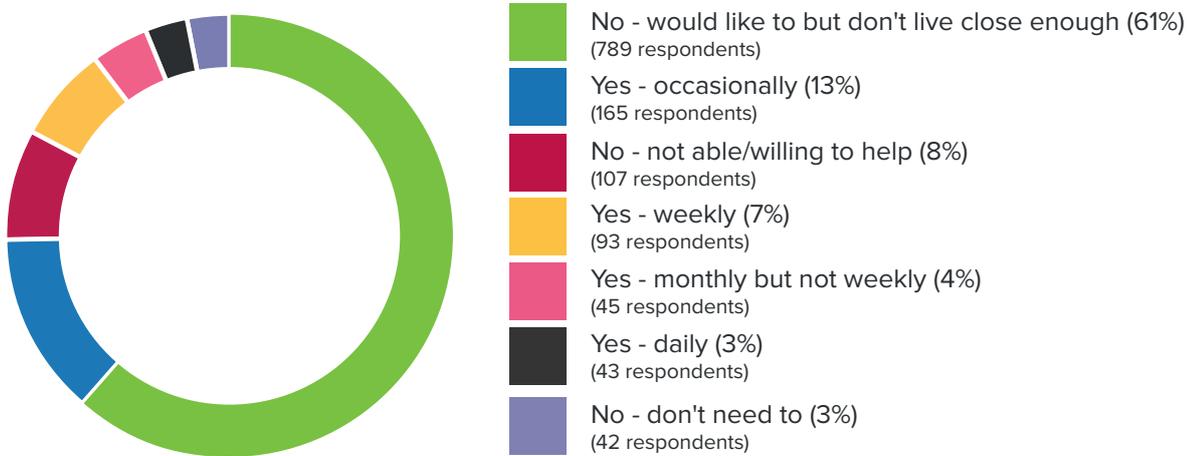
*"Unlike civilian families, we don't choose the timing or location of our moves and do not have the benefit of local knowledge when we are "parachuted" into new places. If I were a civilian, it is unlikely I would choose to deliberately base myself miles from any pre-existing support network. Unlike civilians, we do not enjoy the privilege of being able to settle in an area with the childcare provision that meets your needs. We are often allocated a school, rather than having the luxury of choosing one due to in year moves, and as such, the school may not have the childcare provision that we need for the spouse to continue with a career."*

*"Childcare is not at the forefront of the military mindset. I feel that the military believe that as the spouse of the military we should be the ones looking after the child, sacrificing our careers, there is no provision from the military for the working spouse."*

2. 1,234 respondents.  
3. 1,242 respondents.  
4. 1,240 respondents.  
5. 1,241 respondents.  
6. 1,245 respondents

### 3. Army families are unable to rely on unpaid childcare support from family and friends.

1,284 respondents



- 3.1. 84% of respondents not using unpaid childcare would like to but do not live close enough to those who can help.
- 3.2. Army families can be posted a substantial distance from their extended family. Whilst civilian families may also be employed away from their extended family, they can choose where they wish to be employed and can accept roles located near family support.
- 3.3. Frequent mobility of Army families can make it difficult to build relationships with neighbours and local people to establish a friend based childcare support network. Whilst civilian families may choose to be located away from their family, they can remain static and build local community support to assist them.
- 3.4. Some families commented that the patch community can provide informal childcare support. However, this could not always be relied upon.
- 3.5. Some families commented that they had chosen to live married unaccompanied to allow the non-serving spouse to be closer to wider family networks for childcare support. However, they highlighted that this resulted in them not being able to regularly rely on the serving parent during the week.
- 3.6. Families highlighted that overseas postings further exacerbated families inability to rely on wider family support.

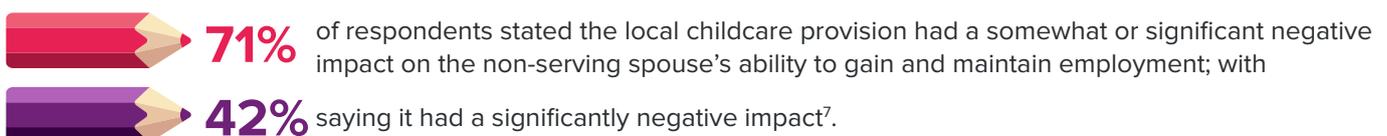
*“Based overseas and husband is due to get deployed too! Which is resulting in me losing my job as no help with childcare out of school hours and holidays.”*

*“Many here try to get the help but it is not that simple. The community rallies around a lot to help each other but this does not capture everyone.”*

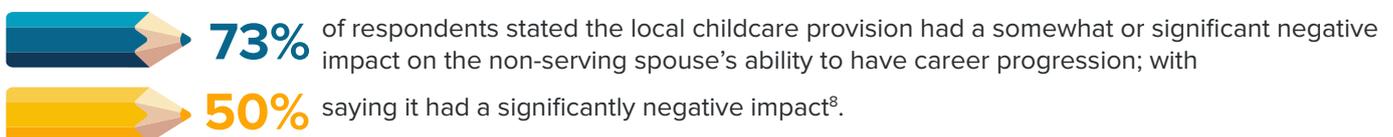
*“Military life can be quite isolating living unaccompanied & relying on family/friends to help with childcare to make it more affordable. It's hard to ask for help with childcare for anything other than to allow me to work so time for myself whilst little one was small (but very much needed) was rare.”*

### 4. Childcare provision has a significantly negative impact on spousal ability to gain and maintain employment and to have career progression.

4.1.



4.2.



7. A total of 1,067 respondents.  
8. 1,065 respondents.

- 4.3. Families commented that their inability to source affordable childcare which met their needs had resulted in the non-serving spouse taking lower paid roles, as they offered more flexibility.
- 4.4. Some families commented that they were unable to find employment that was flexible enough to accommodate the Service person's unpredictable schedule and the pressure that places on the childcare arrangements.

*"I feel as a working mum who is married to someone in the Army, it's always down to me to find suitable childcare, which gives me so much stress and anxiety. There is no warning from the Army when they go away, so last minute childcare is always an issue. I feel we are punished for working and being mums."*

*"As a result of the local childcare provision & costs I have made the decision to remain working part-time in a low paid job in order to be available to my children after school hours and during holidays. This prevents me from progressing in my previous or a new career or improving my earning potential."*

*"The spouse's career is the one who is affected by child sickness, school holidays etc rather than the serving personnel and this is extremely unbalanced in this day and age!"*

*"Left military due to childcare costs. We were both serving."*

*"Due to moving and lack of childcare support, I have had to remain a junior in my profession while people I have trained are now more senior than me, affecting my pension. Even now I have been turned down for a promotion due to being unable to provide more hours due to the demand on me alone for childcare. I was informed, other than the hours, I am ready for this promotion. My partner's career offers him no flexibility or understanding to contribute to childcare or that he is a father in a partnership."*

## 5. Assistance with costs and more flexible hours would help Army families to access childcare.

5.1. Families were asked to rate a number of support options in preference, with the top three being:



## 6. Conclusion.

- 6.1. Whilst civilian families face difficulties with childcare, the nature and culture of Service life places additional pressures on Army families, impacting childcare provision and spousal employment.
- 6.2. Whilst families had significant concerns with the costs of wrap around care, they also had significant concerns regarding pre-school care and holiday club provision. Therefore, AFF recommends that the MOD childcare scheme should widen its provision to include pre-school and holiday care.
- 6.3. Whilst cost was a significant barrier to childcare, the nature and culture of Army life has a substantial impact on accessing childcare provision. Therefore, AFF recommends that as much notice as possible of the Service person's posting location and housing allocation should be provided to allow them to plan their childcare arrangements. In addition, the chain of command should encourage opportunities for Service personnel to work flexibly and practice should be reviewed to ensure fairness and consistency across units and locations.