

What it's like to be an RAF family in Wales



Audience

RAF Families moving to Wales.

Background

Moving to a new area can be daunting, especially if you don't have family and friends nearby. Moving to Wales can present challenges as well as benefits, due to Wales being a Devolved Administration (having its own Government as well as UK Parliament.) It is important to understand the differences in the systems with regards to **education, housing and healthcare**, notwithstanding the **language** and strong Welsh heritage and culture. Understanding and embracing these differences and encouraging your children to do so will help make your move as smooth as possible.

There is a huge amount of support for the Armed Forces in Wales. The Welsh Government has embraced the **Armed Forces Covenant**, and worked hard to ensure it is recognized and adhered to so that no personnel or their families are disadvantaged. The Welsh Armed Forces Expert Group meets every 6 months to raise issues that may be affecting our Serving Personnel (SP) and their families.

We know that there are many more RAF families residing in Wales compared to the number of RAF posts at the two main stations, suggesting there is a large dispersed community in Wales who don't live near a RAF unit.

Each Local Authority within Wales has specialist staff who work with the Council, local Health Board, and other local military and civilian organisations, to help our Armed Forces families integrate successfully. Contact details of the **Armed Forces Covenant Liaison Officers** can be found here: wlga.wales/armed-forces-covenant-national-wales-project-

Introduction

There are plenty of examples of how our Armed Forces families are supported in Wales. These include the production of the excellent 'Welcome to Wales Guide' which explains how the **education system** works, **accessing healthcare** via NHS Wales and various **housing schemes** in existence to give Armed Forces families more options if they choose not to live in Service Family Accommodation:

<https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/commsafety/160915-welcome-to-wales-armed-forces-en.pdf>

Aside from the Welcome to Wales Guide, another source of information for families with **school aged children** is SSCE (Supporting Service Children in Education) Cymru. The website also includes a very helpful toolkit:

<https://www.sscecymru.co.uk/toolkit/parentToolkit.php>

Topics include an explanation of the differing education establishments available in Wales, authorized term time leave and the Welsh language curriculum. This briefing note highlights the support and policies in existence that help mitigate the challenges faced by Armed Forces families in Wales.

Policy in Place – benefits for you:

- One of the commitments in the '**Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021**' programme is that the Welsh Government will provide 30 hours a week of government-funded early education and **childcare** for working parents of three and four year olds, for up to 48 weeks of the year. This was rolled out across various pilot areas but, importantly, does encompass the Local Authorities of Vale of Glamorgan (MOD St Athan) and Isle of Anglesey (RAF Valley.)
- Recognising that Service children can face specific challenges as a result of mobility and deployment, a bespoke fund of **£250,000** (Supporting Service Children in Wales Fund) was introduced for the academic year of 2018/2019. This means that Service children can access additional help and support if they need it when settling into their new school. Some of the ways that schools can use this can be found on the SSCE Cymru website (www.sscecymru.co.uk) It is, as yet, unconfirmed if this is to be an annual award.
- As part of the package of support for armed forces personnel and veterans, the Welsh Government continues to fund **free swimming** for ex-Service personnel.
- Service personnel receive **free bus travel** throughout Wales whilst they are recovering from a Service related injury.
- The Welsh Health Specialised Services Commission has provided £120k between 2016 and 2018 to support the **Armed Forces Fast Track Pathway**. This means that Serving personnel who are categorised as non-deployable and are referred to NHS Wales will be triaged quicker (depending on clinical need) so that treatment can begin and they can return to duty sooner.
- The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 received Royal Assent in December 2018. This makes provision for a new statutory framework for supporting children, including Service children, with additional learning needs (ALN). In order to contribute to the new ALN code and ensure Service children were woven into the content where appropriate, SSCE Cymru commissioned research on experiences of Service families with children with Additional Learning Needs in education in Wales. The report can be found here: <https://www.sscecymru.co.uk/alnreport> <https://www.sscecymru.co.uk/alnreport>.

What is on our radar?

Armed Forces Fast Track Pathway – we have had reports that Service personnel at RAF Valley are experiencing delays in gaining access to secondary health care. Although the fast track service is in place, some frontline healthcare staff seem unaware of the policy. *This has been raised to the relevant forum and we are working with the agencies involved to gather more information.* If this has impacted on you, please let us know.

Additional Learning Needs – we welcome the new ALN code of practice and hope that it will offer better support for children with ALN and their families. The new code of practice which will replace the current code will be fully rolled out and operational by 2020. This focus on children with ALN is a positive move. However, parents should be aware that moving into Wales will involve different assessment processes, different curriculums and different levels of support, sometimes with the need to go through elongated assessments in order to gain access to that support.

A more consistent and standardized package for school moves for all children is needed, in particular for children with ALN. Disruption should be minimized, and the receiving school should have as much information as possible about the student in advance.

PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census) – we welcome the introduction of a Service pupil flag in the next census to identify where our service children are, and where additional support may be best placed. Kirsty Williams AM, Minister for Education has committed to capturing data on Service children through PLASC which will help immensely with ensuring resources are being targeted to the correct areas.

Welsh Language – many families express concern that upon moving to Wales, their child will need to learn Welsh. As the national language of Wales, Welsh is part of the curriculum **and all children in the Welsh education system will be expected to learn it.** Some schools (particularly in North Wales) also teach in Welsh which does present additional challenges but additional resources to help support children in these circumstances should be available from the school. Day School Allowance is to support families who live in North Wales to access education taught in English – subject to eligibility, **the allowance is a contribution towards school fees and transport costs** but not extra curricular activities, wraparound childcare, equipment and uniform. **Parents should fully investigate the cost impact before deciding on this education option.**

Spousal Employment - We are aware that many spouses find it difficult to find employment in some areas of Wales if they do not speak the national language. It may not be realistic for the spouse to learn Welsh if the posting only lasts for a couple of years so this could have a detrimental impact on their career. There is no easy answer to this and we do hope that the launch of Forces Families Jobs will offer some opportunities, but families need to be aware that this could pose a challenge if their spouse intends to be employed during their posting.

Free swimming - We would welcome the Welsh Government extending the free swimming to all members of the serving family including serving personnel, spouses and their children with no charges back to the military unit by the Local Authority.

Summary

There are many positives for our RAF families living in Wales:



I hadn't really given much thought to what living in a Devolved Administration would mean before we were posted to Wales and it was only after we had been there a while that I began to realise the differences in the administrations (particularly in relation to health and education) and what impact they would have on us as a family. For the most part the differences don't have a negative impact on our day to day lives and there are many positives, such as there being no prescription charges and free hospital parking. In terms of education, we made the decision to send our children to a local state school where they would be taught Welsh. We received plenty of support from the school when we arrived and there are a lot of resources out there to help both children and parents experiencing and learning Welsh for the first time. It has been a truly positive experience and our children have thrived with no disadvantage to their English. Whilst it may be daunting for parents to consider their child being taught in a difference language I have personally found it be a brilliant opportunity for my children to gain language skills and I am now attending an evening class to learn the language myself! We enjoyed our posting to Wales very much and are now settled here. **The Brooksbank Family**



Where there are complications, there are strong partnerships in Wales and a desire to resolve any issues swiftly. The forthcoming Forces Families Jobs portal which assists with spousal employment is another example of how our RAF families are being better supported by Government and businesses in Wales.

For updates on this and all other RAF Families Federation news, please sign up to our e-Bulletin <https://www.raf-ff.org.uk/publications/>