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SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

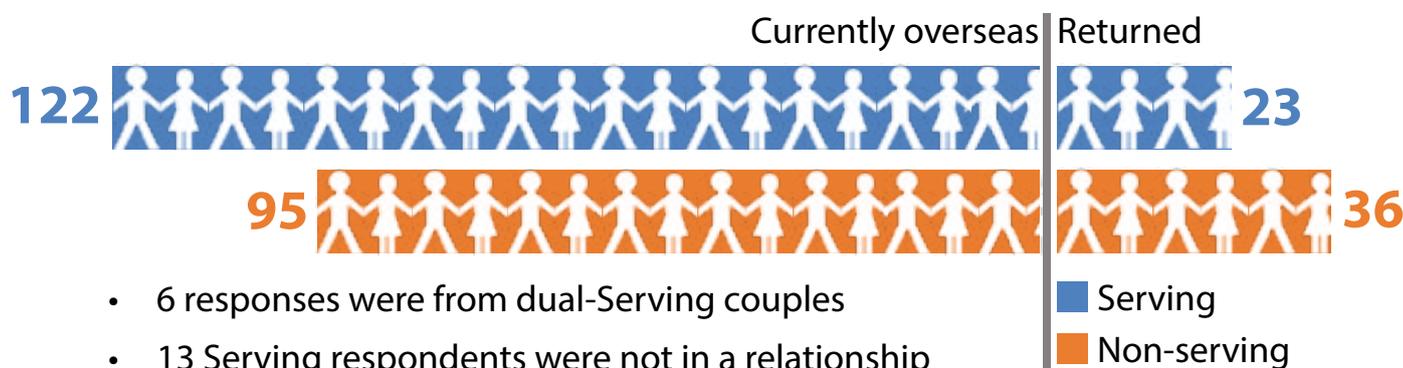
The RAF Family – experiences from around the world

2019

The RAF Families Federation ran an online survey between July and September 2019, looking into the lived experience of RAF personnel and families on overseas assignments. The survey was part of a wider piece of work, including interviews and other data collection, with full results to be presented in a more comprehensive report in early 2020. This Survey Highlights Report intends to highlight some of the key findings from our survey.

WHO TOOK PART?

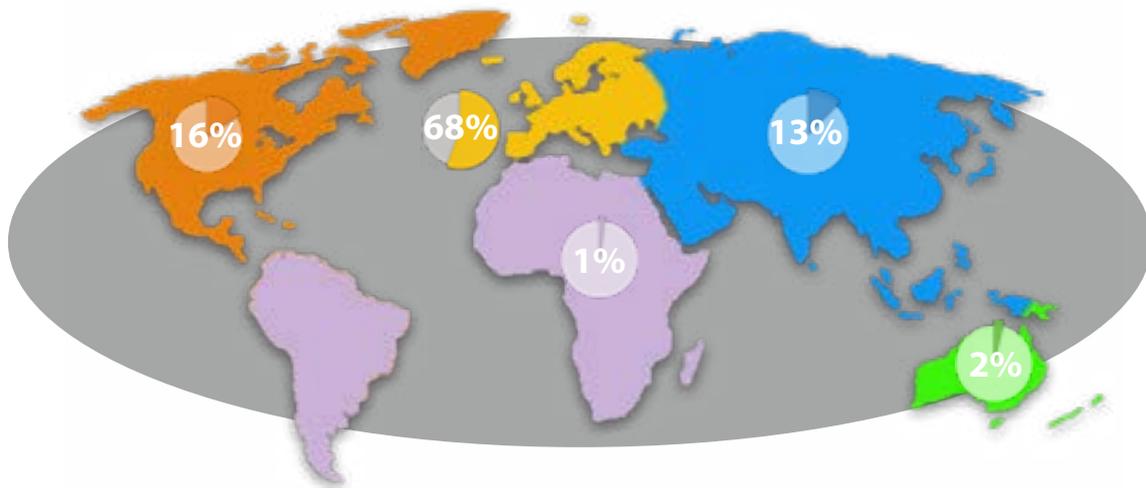
- **267** survey responses were received overall.
- **81%** of respondents were currently overseas, whilst the remainder had returned to the UK within the past 12 months



Family dynamics

- 66% of respondents had children under the age of 18; the majority of these had at least one school-age child
- 9% of respondents had children aged over 18 and still in full-time education
- 4% of Serving personnel said that their spouse/partner had not accompanied them on their overseas assignment

Location



MOVING OVERSEAS

The decision to leave the UK for an overseas assignment can be a complex one, so our survey looked into motivations for wishing to serve overseas, and how families obtained information about the location before volunteering.

78% of survey respondents received at least 90 days' notice of their overseas assignment

Why do families volunteer for overseas assignments?

These factors were most commonly identified as those that had made RAF personnel more or less willing to volunteer for an overseas posting.

"...the opportunities for travel, to experience living in another country and broaden one's own perspective on life have been invaluable."

Made me more willing to volunteer

Travel opportunities (90%)

Cultural opportunities (82%)

The overseas role (71%)

Made me less willing to volunteer

Spouse / partner's career (49%)

Welfare support at the location (25%)

Childcare provision (24%)

Information about the posting

RAF personnel and families were most likely to have sought information about the posting from friends (20%), the previous postholder (19%), internet searches (19%) and social media (17%).

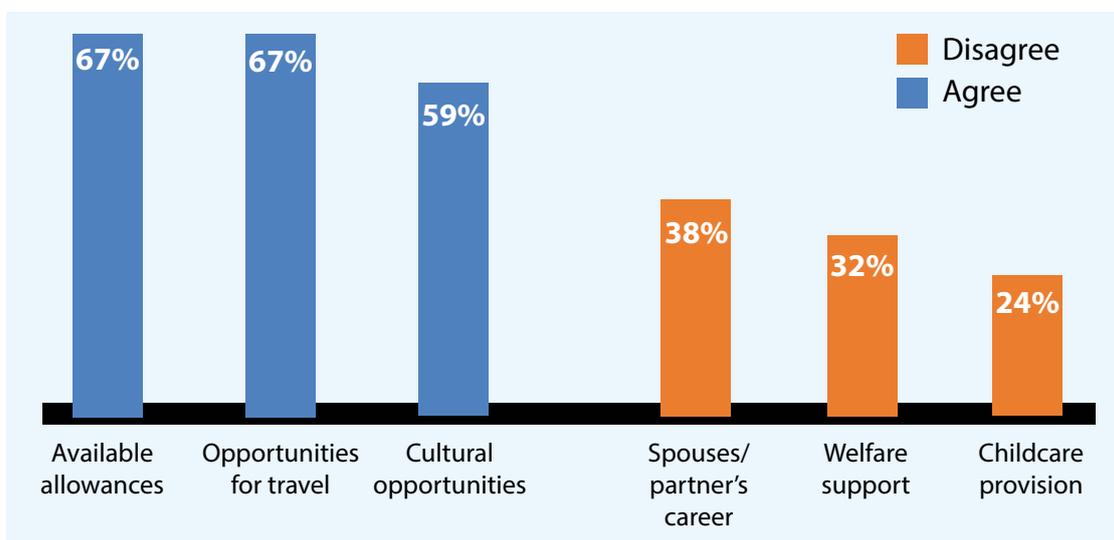
Official information sources (such as location guides, HIVEs, British Embassies, Families Federations and Career Managers) were used less frequently.



The RAF HIVE Information service offers support in areas such as relocation, housing, schools, and healthcare. The only overseas RAF HIVE is at RAF Akrotiri, but RAF families can also access the overseas network of Army HIVEs where available. There is also the online iHIVE, providing blogs, information and a range of location guides.

In the 2019 Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FamCAS) only 27% of spouses who had moved overseas said that they had been able to access Service-provided information without difficulty.

Survey respondents were asked whether they felt that available information had adequately prepared them for living overseas. The areas with the highest proportions of agreement and disagreement are shown below.



There were mixed responses for some areas, such as housing and medical care, most likely due to the different systems in place at differing locations.

There were a number of concerns expressed regarding the processes to be followed to prepare for an overseas assignment, and we will be investigating these in further detail

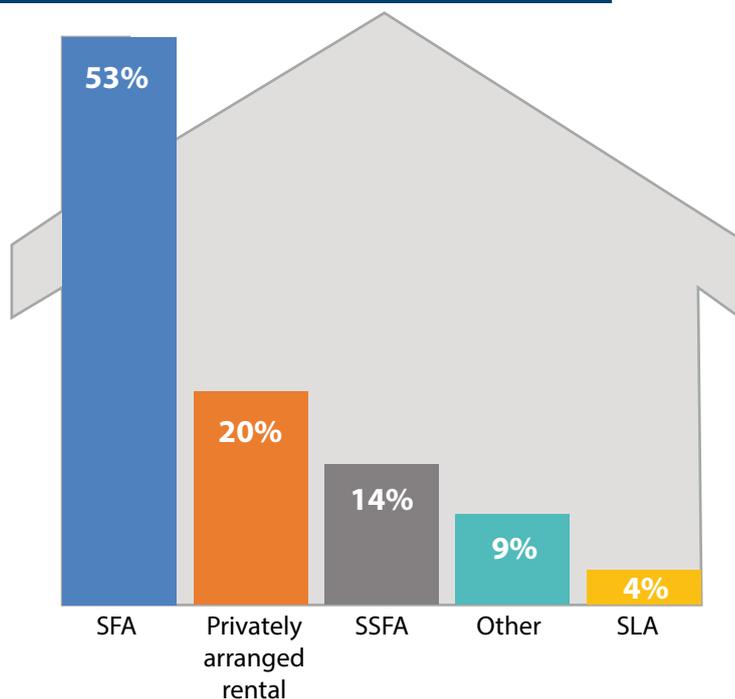
"It would be better if a pack was given to family with all the info about the above rather than having to search around different places."

"There is no logical order to the paperwork submission and ALL information was sought rather than offered and was usually gained from a friend/previous post holder rather than official sources."

KEY AREAS RELATING TO OVERSEAS LIVING

1. Accommodation

Over half of respondents lived in Service Families Accommodation (SFA) whilst overseas.



- For those posted to Cyprus or other UK military bases overseas the proportion living in SFA rose to around 93%
- Substitute SFA (SSFA) was most commonly used within Europe, usually arranged by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO)
- RAF personnel in the USA were most likely to have arranged their own accommodation (69%)

Overall, RAF personnel and families were positive about the allocation, size, quality and location of their accommodation overseas.

"Housing was excellent in Cyprus and managed brilliantly"

"We are very satisfied with our accommodation now, but it took a lot of effort, and correspondence with the Embassy to get the house."

- 🎯 Serving personnel and families living in privately arranged accommodation were most likely to be either satisfied or very satisfied with the location of their housing (91%)
- 🎯 Those in SSFA were least likely to be satisfied about location (21% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied)

Respondents were least positive about maintenance and repairs to their accommodation, with only 58% saying that they were satisfied or very satisfied. The most negative response was from those in SSFA (31% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied).

"The maintenance team are very good at coming out quickly when we request a repair but the quality of their work is not great and often it needs doing again!"



2. Medical and dental care

The majority of respondents were satisfied with the routine medical care provided to them whilst overseas (74% either satisfied or very satisfied).

The highest levels of satisfaction related to tours in Cyprus and other 'firm base' locations (85% satisfied or very satisfied).

- Respondents were less positive about routine dental care overseas, although 61% were still satisfied or very satisfied
- Respondents expressed frustration at the administrative processes in place to arrange and pay for, or refund, medical and dental care
- In some more isolated postings respondents described a lack of knowledge about the process to be followed when family members needed healthcare

"Dental and orthodontic care is tremendously difficult for children who are at boarding school but come home to foreign countries for the holidays."

"Medical and dental care for service personnel and dependants is exceptional in Cyprus."

"Dental treatment for families in USA is overly complex and utterly bound in red tape. Ridiculous amounts of hoops to jump through. Almost to the point of not wanting your family to see a dentist."

"...without doubt the biggest hurdle has been medical support, a year in I am still confused, still don't get it and still worry. So we now just go to hospital for everything."

- There was some dissatisfaction regarding medical and dental provision for children attending UK boarding schools.



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3. Welfare and community support

76% of respondents said that they knew where to go for welfare support, should they need it

This number dropped to just 52% in the USA, and 64% for other more isolated postings across the world.

Some respondents were aware of limitations to welfare support prior to volunteering, whereas others said they only discovered these once overseas.

"Nothing available at my location. I knew this before taking post."

"...nobody knew who actually owned me until the crisis hit."

42% were satisfied or very satisfied with welfare support available to them and their families



58% of those with access to UK military welfare support delivered locally were either satisfied or very satisfied with this provision



67% of those who did not know how to access welfare support were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (compared with 16% of those who did)

In some locations RAF families have developed informal, self-managed networks to provide mutual support and advice.

"...there is no community support, we make our own entertainment and learn from each other's mistakes and experiences."

"...support needs to be improved for families with children of school age, otherwise we will not attract personnel in their mid 30's, early 40's, who are still ambitious..."

4. Spouse / partner's employment

49% of accompanying spouses / partners had found employment overseas

This included those working remotely or commuting back to jobs in the UK.

Although around half of accompanying spouses or partners had found employment overseas, 26% said that they were not working to their full potential.

Barriers to employment included:

- lack of suitable jobs
- UK qualifications not recognised
- childcare constraints
- not eligible for work visa
- time in country
- language

"...started my own small business which benefited the community."

"...no reciprocal arrangements in the US for recognition of professional qualifications and proficiency to practice"

"Very understanding UK company allowed remote working."

Where the spouse/partner was not able to find employment, the resulting loss of the income was a concern for some families.

"my wife cannot find employment our base living costs are much higher than in the UK, but we now have to manage on one income."

5. Spouse / partner's training

73% of spouses/partners wanted to access training or educational courses whilst overseas.

However only 27% had managed to do so.

Reported difficulties included:

- 🎯 Access to suitable courses (25%)
- 🎯 Affordability (8%)

"An education allowance for spouses would be massively beneficial so they have something positive to put on their CV after 3 years of being unemployed."

"I have been unable to study any UK courses as there has been no way to sit exams. I am beyond frustrated."

Respondents expressed a desire for access to courses or funding for spouses and partners who were unable to work whilst overseas.

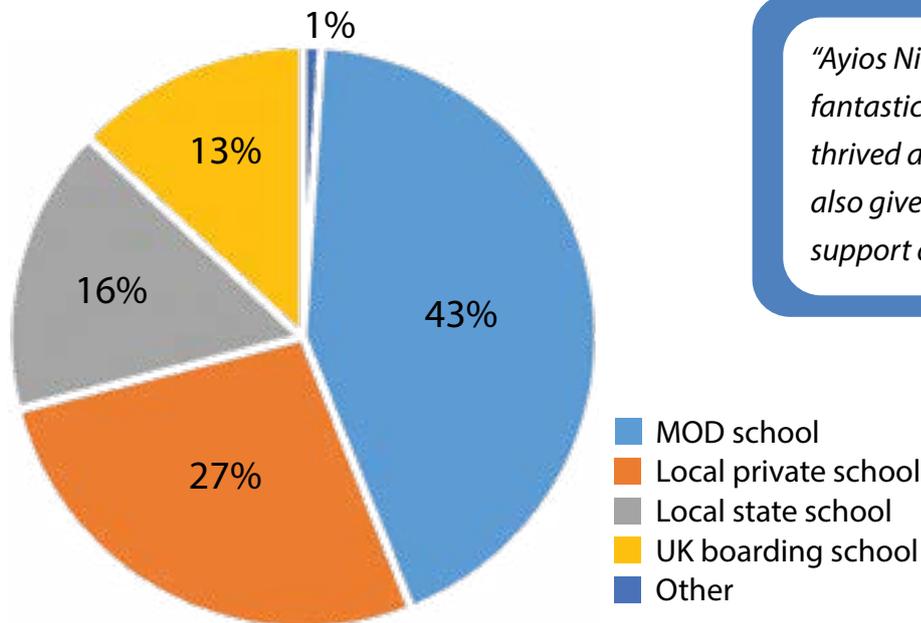
In particular lack of language training was felt to be a barrier to both employment and social integration, affecting enjoyment of the overseas assignment.

"A greater recognition of the importance of language training for spouses. This can often be the make or break aspect to enjoying rather than enduring the overseas tour."

"When the serving spouse deploys, I'm very much dependent on other people's input for communication over household maintenance issues (stuff not easily found in a language text book!)"

6. Education

Service Children attend a range of school types, depending on the local offer and parental choices. Further information about overseas education provision is provided on the Children's Education Advisory Service website.



"Ayios Nikolaos Primary school is fantastic... I feel our children have thrived at this school, which has also given fantastic emotional support during times of need."

Survey responses suggest that there are significant variations in the quality and style of education offered in schools outside of the UK, and that curricular differences can also pose a challenge for children being educated overseas.



Parents whose children attended MOD schools reported that they were most satisfied with the quality of education (91% satisfied or very satisfied)



Parents whose children attended local state schools were least satisfied with quality of education (31% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied)

"We had to homeschool all three of our children prior to their return home to boarding, to raise their knowledge to uk expectancy."

"...the education provided in the state sector was very narrow"

7. Childcare

44% of families with children under the age of 18 had required some form of childcare whilst overseas

67% of these families had used Early Years care, with 27% using wrap-around care for school-aged children.



Those requiring childcare were most satisfied with quality of childcare provision (63% satisfied or very satisfied)



Satisfaction was lowest for availability of childcare (56% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied)

- Respondents reported poor availability of childcare for school-aged children
- Respondents in Cyprus were particularly dissatisfied with availability of childcare (74% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied)

"When we first arrived childcare was an issue and a major factor in seeking employment."

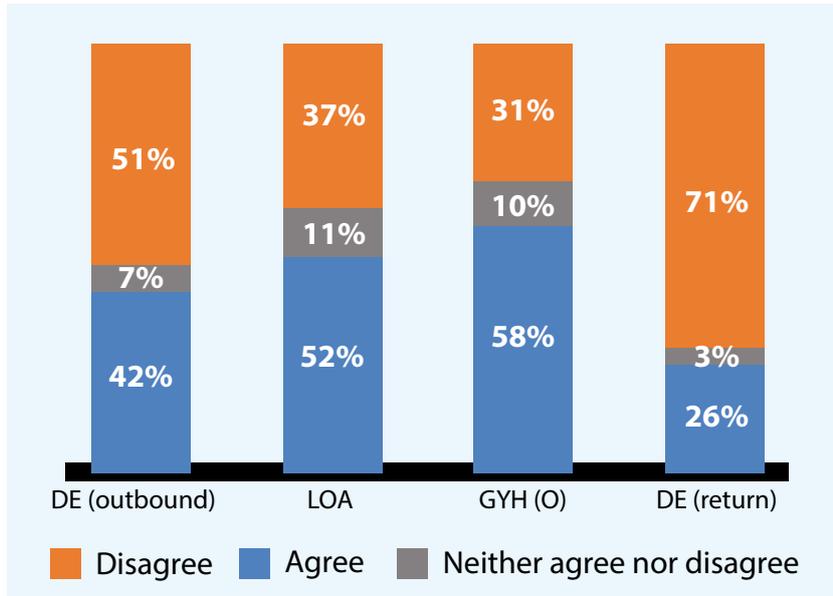
"Some provision for ad hoc childcare would be appreciated. My child is still very young, but without a support network and being remote from any other British families in a similar situation it becomes difficult to attend appointments"



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8. Allowances and family finances

There are a range of allowances available to RAF personnel serving overseas (full details provided in JSP 752, Chapter 9). In our survey we concentrated on those allowances that are required most regularly, and whether they were considered appropriate for actual costs incurred:



“DE was completely insufficient to cover the costs of our move... the initial outlay created cash flow problems at the beginning of the tour.”



Respondents were most positive about Get You Home Overseas (GYH(O)) with respect to actual cost of return travel to the UK



The least positive response related to Disturbance Expense (DE) for return to the UK, for those whose overseas assignments had ended

Over half of all respondents felt that DE was not appropriate to costs incurred whilst moving overseas

- There was particular dissatisfaction amongst those RAF travelling overseas unaccompanied, and hence receiving a lower level of DE and smaller entitlement for unaccompanied baggage, regardless of accommodation size
- There was a perception that the processes for assessing GYH (O) and Local Overseas Allowance (LOA) did not consider price variations within larger countries

“Although my accommodation is classed as SSLA it is in reality an apartment and the set up costs are similar to a family moving house.”

Set-up costs were described as being higher than expected due to a number of factors, including:

- Lack of credit history in the country
- Increased costs of car ownership
- Replacement of items stored in the UK due to unaccompanied baggage limitations
- Payment of house rental deposit

"LOA is standard across the US despite huge discrepancies internally in costs of living. GYH west coast is currently good but has varied by several hundred £... The extreme changes mean it can be difficult to financially plan for returning home."

Where set-up and living costs are high, there were concerns that this could make overseas assignments financially unviable for more junior personnel.

"The outlays when leaving USA was huge. Thousands of pounds we had to spend out of our own pocket and then claim back. We were lucky we had savings to use."

"..one of the most expensive cities in the world... LOA does not reflect this. Set up costs were particularly crippling. As an OF4 I was just able to cope. It would be prohibitively expensive for an OR or JO"



9. Overseas role and RAF career

Our survey uncovered varying views on career benefits or detriments of overseas service, which will be investigated further.

Many respondents enjoyed their overseas role, with some relishing the opportunity for 'a break from the RAF' and the chance to work in a different environment.

Only 30% of Serving respondents felt adequately prepared by career-related information provided in advance of the posting

Overall there was a perception that an overseas tour reduced opportunity for promotion, attributed to:

- UK-based managers' knowledge and perception of overseas roles
- Lack of appropriate challenge in some roles
- Reporting through non-RAF Chain of Command

"...where those serving in many more demanding roles than equivalent UK billets are viewed as 'out of sight, out of mind and on holiday' there will remain a prejudice against personnel wishing to serve overseas."

Lack of language training was also a frustration for some Serving Personnel, with respondents telling us that training was not provided where English was spoken in the workplace.

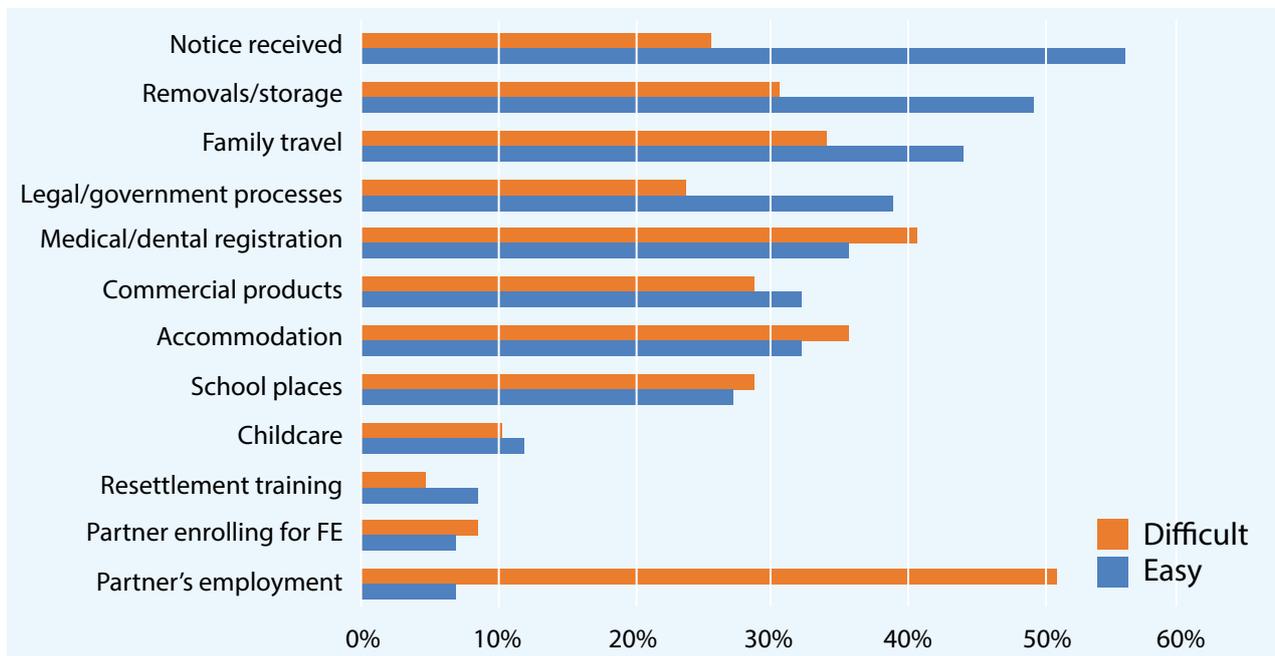
"I am constantly seeking professional challenges elsewhere and I have several secondary duties. This is not a career enhancing tour and a posting here straight after ACSC is a huge disappointment."

"I do not believe UK-based managers fully appreciate the unique challenges that an overseas tour presents to their employees, especially in an ISODET."

"I do not qualify for any formal training, as I am in a NATO post; however, I live in a local community where English is hardly spoken"

RETURN TO THE UK

Those respondents who had returned to the UK were asked how easy or difficult various aspects of their departure and reintegration had been.



"We were given 8 weeks notice for my husbands new posting. This meant we had to be off Cyprus in 6 weeks. Despite how quick it all happened. It was done really well. You could tell the military were behind getting us moved."

Although many of the difficulties identified above are common to any Service relocation, families described additional complications whilst making arrangements from a different country, or trying to adapt back to life in the United Kingdom.

"I had taken a career break and was returning to work and so trying to co-ordinate postings and schooling for our children was incredibly challenging."

"We had an amazing experience in Cyprus but the return to the UK has been challenging."

Respondents described unanticipated problems relating to time spent living outside of the UK, including:

- Loss of No Claims Discount on car insurance policies
- Broken credit rating and address history restricting access to financial products
- Lack of entitlement to state benefits due to time abroad

"The much vaunted forces Covenant seems very hit and miss. On return the need to gain finance for a car and to set up in the UK again was very disjointed... many agencies refused to assist me because of a broken address history."

"When I arrived back, I found out I was not able to get any help from the job centre getting work or and benefits, as I had been out of the country."

"The NHS GP surgery where my wife has registered has still not obtained her medical notes 10 months after we returned to the UK."

Families returning from overseas assignments experienced similar difficulties in finding dental care to other Service families. However, they could face additional challenges through delays retrieving medical notes from NHS storage.

Issues relating to school places included:

- Lack of space in local schools
- Transition to English, Welsh or Scottish education systems
- Issues with SFA allocations

"Amey withdrew my SFA a month after allocation and could not provide the same Type of house at the same location although school placement for my youngest daughter had been confirmed... The impact on our return to the UK was severe, affecting HMRC customs paperwork, forwarding addresses, schooling etc. This was an unnecessary burden that could have been avoided."

Although these issues are also common to Service moves within the UK, they are potentially more challenging for families to address whilst still residing overseas.

Some respondents felt that there was a lack of support for those returning to the UK, compared to the processes in place for accompanying overseas.

"No one could give us information or help. No one could guide us through our move and who to speak with and when. We weren't asking for a handout, just a little guidance. These people do this every year. Why is it so complicated? Why is there no communication?"

SUMMARY

The following were most frequently selected as the most positive aspect of an overseas assignment:

1. Opportunities for travel and new experiences: 47%
2. Quality of family life: 28%
3. Living within a different culture: 11%
4. Access to MoD or international schools: 4%

"Overall this was a great experience for our family."

"For us our quality of life was the most important."

A number of challenges were also commonly identified:

1. Being away from family & friends: 29%
2. Understanding & dealing with local systems and legislation: 18%
3. Additional financial expenditure: 15%
4. Availability of advice and support: 10%

"Living overseas is a challenge, the most difficult part of which is getting here or leaving - actually living here once established is the easy part."

"The language and beauracy (sic) has been so frustrating. I think it would be a completely different experience had we had some language training first."

On balance, the majority survey respondents felt that an overseas assignment had been a positive experience for them and their families.

66% of respondents would volunteer for another overseas assignment

Overall only 17% of respondents said that they would definitely not volunteer to go overseas again.

RAF personnel and families assigned to the USA were least likely to want to serve on another overseas assignment (31% would not)

"Overseas service is outstanding, but it remains quite challenging at times, even if a lot of people in the UK assume it's all LOA and champagne..!"

"Without the support of previous commanders and colleagues this ISODET would have been untenable... Per Ardua ad Astra it was very difficult to get up and running but I would strongly recommend an international exchange"

NEXT STEPS

Our research into the experiences of RAF personnel and families posted overseas has provided us with a valuable insight into the challenges and benefits faced throughout the 'lifecycle' of these assignments; planning, moving and living abroad, and subsequent return to the UK.

There is additional work to be completed into differing experiences – for example by location and assignment type.

Survey data and interview findings will then be used to:

- 🎯 Work with the RAF and other stakeholders to address concerns raised
- 🎯 Review RAF FF provision of information relating to overseas Service
- 🎯 Ensure that RAF personnel and families living overseas are provided with effective support from the RAF Families Federation, should they experience an issue



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