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## INTRODUCTION

In 2019 the RAF Families Federation conducted research into the lived experience of RAF Personnel and family members on permanent overseas assignments. The work was carried out through the RAF Dispersed Families project.

The research covered a range of topics, from posting through to return to the United Kingdom. This report presents findings related to accommodation provision – both for families and unaccompanied personnel.

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## METHODOLOGY

The RAF Families Federation gathered data through an online survey (live from July to September 2019), family interviews, and a range of informal stakeholder meetings.

Survey questions relating to accommodation investigated:

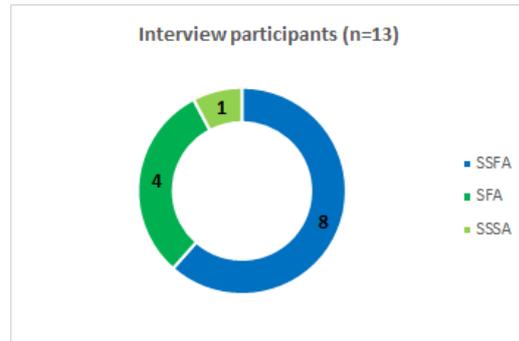
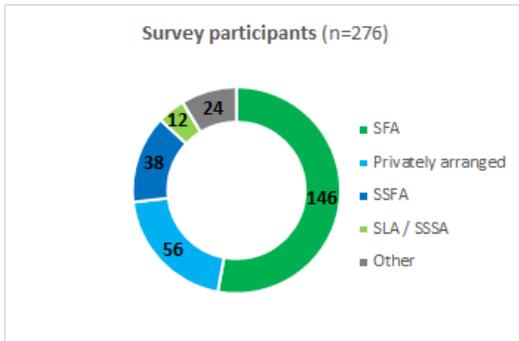
1. Influence of accommodation provision on willingness to volunteer
2. How effective information provided in advance was at preparing them for life overseas
3. How satisfied or dissatisfied they were with housing:
  - a. Allocation
  - b. Quality
  - c. Size
  - d. Location
  - e. Maintenance and repairs

Analysis was carried out both by country or region, and by accommodation type. A free-text box was also included to collect more in-depth views relating to this area.

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## RESPONSE OVERVIEW

Research participants provided views relating to postings to 28 countries in total. 53% of survey respondents had been allocated Service Families Accommodation (SFA), mainly at Firm Base locations, whereas a higher proportion of those interviewed were in SSFA.



Note: 'Privately arranged accommodation' was SSFA that was self-sourced by the family. Most 'Other' responses related to accommodation provided through an agreement with the host country – e.g. Loan Service and Exchange posts.

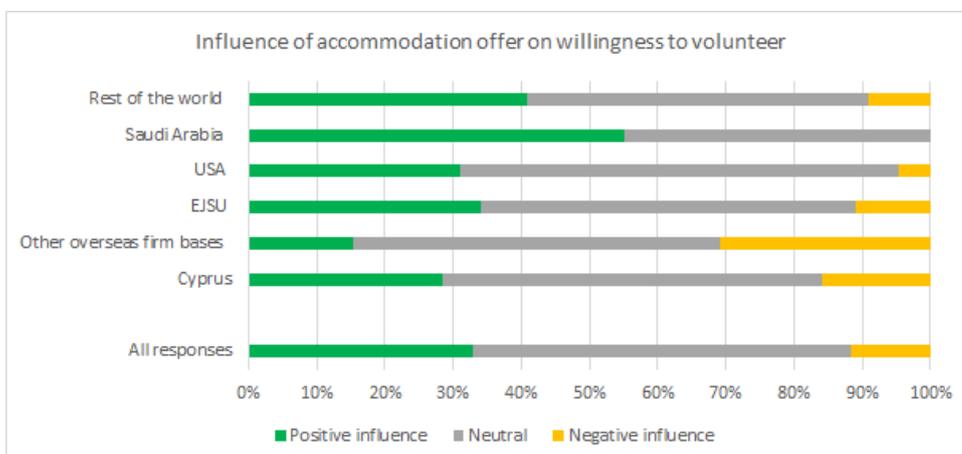
Regional survey responses, as presented within this report, were as follows:

- Cyprus - 88
- Other overseas firm bases - 13
- European Joint Support Unit (EJSU) locations - 91
- United States of America - 42
- Saudi Arabia - 20
- Rest of the world – 22

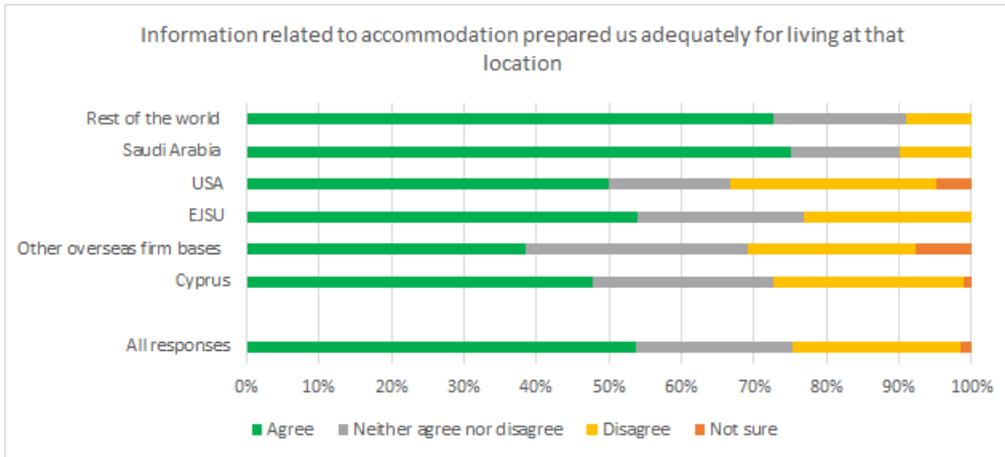
## PROVISION OF INFORMATION PRIOR TO ARRIVAL

88% of survey respondents said that information provided to their family in advance of going overseas had been either as a positive or neutral factor in their decision to volunteer.

Accommodation was viewed most positively by those investigating postings to Saudi Arabia, or the other more remote locations outside of Europe.



Most RAF personnel and their spouses/partners felt that the information provided to them about their accommodation was adequate.



A similar question was asked for a range of aspects related to overseas assignments (such as medical care, allowances, and education); this was one of the most positive responses received.

Survey comments regarding accommodation information highlighted some areas for improvement including availability of more up to date (or more detailed) particulars in advance of travel:

*"Pictures from housing would have been useful. Thankfully knew people posted to same location so we're able to take pictures for me" (Cyprus)*

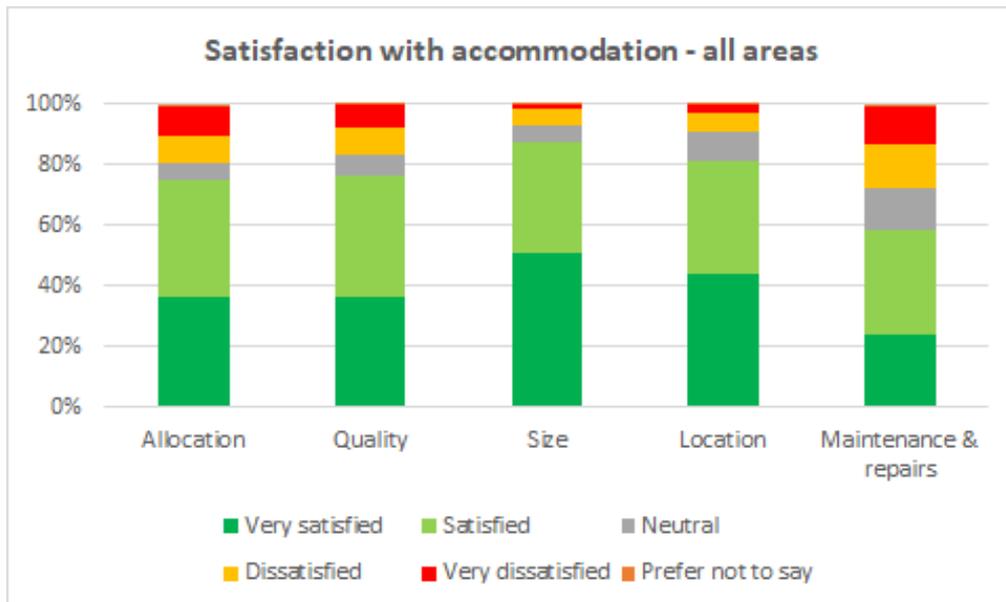
*"Generally all information could have been better, as the 'generic' Cyprus document issued by PSF was out of date, meaning listed contact numbers were incorrect. Took three days to obtain the correct number for the accommodation cell so that i could arrange accommodation."*

*"...it was as if the system knew nothing about the current circumstances of the role and post. The lack of clarity about housing allocation and its readiness to be occupied was absolutely unacceptable" (Italy)*

*"Information booklet felt very out of date. Limited support provided to find a house which was extremely stressful." (France)*

## ACCOMMODATION SATISFACTION SCORES

Survey respondents were relatively positive about their accommodation, especially compared to other areas of life overseas. Respondents told us that they were most satisfied with size and location of the accommodation provided, and least satisfied with maintenance and repairs.



	Allocation	Quality	Size	Location	Maintenance and repairs
<b>Satisfied or very satisfied (%)</b>	75%	76%	87%	82%	58%

Detailed charts are included at the end of the report, showing satisfaction scores for each area against:

1. Region
2. accommodation type

10% of all survey comments referred to accommodation (223 out of 2217); only Community Support/ Welfare and Allowances received more, suggesting that this is an area of importance for families.

Of the comments received:

- 51 related to the process of moving overseas
- 164 related to living overseas
- 8 related to returning to the UK

## 1. ALLOCATION

Our survey recorded high satisfaction levels for allocation of accommodation. Lowest scores were returned for those either in SSFA (arranged by DIO or a local embassy), or in privately arranged accommodation.

Although satisfaction scores were high, comments were provided identifying potential improvements to allocation processes.

- a) Applicability of procedures to local contexts. Comments reflected frustration where procedures and practices did not take local context into consideration, typically in sourcing SSFA.

*“DIO LMS took months, whilst I lived in a hotel... An utter lack of appreciation of the local market.” (Greece)*

*“DIO try their best to adhere to the JSP that was written for UK housing, it does not easily fit a UNESCO world heritage site. Location specific annexes are essential to allow staff to find appropriate housing dependent on the region. We have severe difficulties in finding appropriate accommodation which leads to little or no choice for the individual. In some cases we don't find housing in time which causes other issues.” (Italy)*

- b) Availability of suitable accommodation within the required area

*“Due to a shortage of suitable accommodation locally and DIO unable to find housing we ended up accepting a House well under entitlement.” (Italy)*

*“JSP 342 is very clear regarding travelling distances for children to travel to school yet the DIO footprint for the area does not enable pers to live near a senior school. Consequently I was not supported and left to find my own home and manage the contract, repairs and bills myself.” (Italy)*

- c) Timescales for allocation. This was of particular concern in locations where shipping is sent well in advance of march-in, or where the accommodation was not ready when the family arrived in country.

*“Allocation of accommodation was exceedingly poor at the best; I was allocated a house 6 weeks prior to arriving and the same week as my removals arrived to collect my property.” (Gibraltar)*

*“... approximately 6 weeks prior to our move, DIO informed us that they hadn't started their search to secure a property for us. We had to move to Germany and live between various hotels for nearly 3 1/2 months until DIO had a house ready for us.”*

*“...house allocation was not confirmed until 2 days before travelling to the location.” (Italy)*

d) Process for allocating SFA overseas

*“Some issues with allocation - and being told that we couldn't have above entitlement, as 'this was Cyprus and things are done differently' (however did eventually get above entitlement)”*

*“The way SFA is allocation in Gibraltar is totally unsuitable. The process should be done electronically and then certified by one of the managers. Also, having to wait until 6 weeks before arriving in Gibraltar before knowing what accommodation has been allocated is farcical. Why does this process not follow that of the UK?”*

*“We declined our housing offer and were forced to accept or be separated. We moved into a house that was not fit to be occupied and were treated as though all the problems were our fault... We eventually got a betterment move after 6 months and had no support with it at all. The situation seriously affected our whole family.”  
(Cyprus)*

e) Lack of choice in location of allocated property

*“DIO offered us a house directly in the center of the area we had been advised, and had advised DIO, that we should avoid at all costs! We rejected the offered property and were told by DIO that we were not allowed to reject it.” (Germany)*

*“It is the last place I would wish to live in the center of a busy City. The outskirts would of been a lot better for me and also a lot cheaper for the DIO to pay for.”  
(Netherlands)*

f) Issues relating to self-sourcing accommodation.

Personnel and their spouses/partners identified several potential difficulties where they had responsibility for finding accommodation. Some survey respondents felt ill-equipped to find suitable accommodation within short timescales, given limited local area knowledge.

*“... had to search for and find our own accommodation even though we didn't know the area - had to do a lot of research into schools, housing” (USA)*

*“It was incredibly stressful finding our own house in two weeks with our children in tow. The embassy offered to find us a house but we wanted a say in which area we lived in due to the choice of schools.” (USA)*

*“The problem with overseas private rentals is that you can only rent what is available during your 2-week arrival window - the Embassy won't let you sign a lease until you are in country. Hence, you can end up somewhere unsuitable. You also don't know the area so you don't know what's good or bad.” (USA)*

Perceived lack of support for the process was also described as adding pressure to the Serving Person and family upon arrival in the country.

*“Given the onus on the individual to obtain private rented housing, this adds undue pressure on in-country arrival and it would be beneficial to allow proxy march-in arrangements prior to departure, especially when opportunities arise to take over the previous post holder's rental.” (USA)*

*“Not covered by DIO, had to be privately arranged. I was disappointed with the lack of support from the Service - I wasn't even given any advice about what type of accommodation to look for and rent levels, or help with translating the contract.” (Italy)*

In some cases families described how they had rented accommodation in areas with high crime levels as a result of poor knowledge and/or support.

*“There was no guidance about where to live. The first house we lived in was in a high crime area. There was a murder in our local restaurant and burglaries in our street.” (USA)*

*“No assistance was provided for allocation or sourcing rental properties in the area, in a city such as St. Louis with the second highest gun crime in the States it is kind of key to be situated in a safe location! Only because of my predecessors homework did we manage to source a 'safe' rental.” (USA)*

There were some concerns regarding personal liability where accommodation was self-sourced

*“I dislike that I have to pay the deposit, I feel this risk should be carried by the Service. Also no support in terms of maintenance/dealing with landlords.” (Italy)*

*“...rental agreement is in SP's name, not embassy/RAF. This causes issues with some landlords not accepting SPs and preferring large companies who sort thing out for their employees (e.g. Oil companies).” (France)*

*“One element not mentioned is the personal payment and recovery of utility bills by military personnel - it would be preferential if military personnel could elect to have bills paid centrally as per civil service colleagues and avoid the nugatory process of recovery, bill retention and audit.” (USA)*

However, other respondents told us that the ability to find their own accommodation had been a positive experience.

*“In spite of having to find the housing, this has enabled a solution that suits our particular aspirations for the tour i.e. without children we are not tied to schooling locations.” (France)*

*“Privately arranged accom is excellent if you are prepared to spend your own money to visit location multiple times to find the right place. Two authorised journeys would be better than 1!” (Italy)*

In the USA there were concerns regarding the Embassy’s capacity to assist with accommodation needs:

*“Anyone in the US relies on the BEET at the embassy for housing and furniture requirements. They are invariably understaffed, do not respond to emails within meaningful times ones and cannot be reached by phone. The staff are actually very good but there simply isn’t enough and they are overwhelmed.”*

*“We are very satisfied with our accommodation now, but it took a lot of effort, and correspondence with the Embassy to get the house. The Embassy were and still are slow to communicate and hard to contact by phone. The Embassy are the one massive negative in moving overseas and add to a very stressful time.”*

There were also concerns that allowances and size caps did not take into account that larger houses are the norm in parts of the USA:

*“The rent allowance is far too low for the area and the square footage allowance is too small for the type of houses built in this area. The allowance should be on a city by city basis and not a standard one size fits all, each state is like its own country with regards to pricing and size.”*

#### g) Positive reflections on allocation of accommodation

*“The housing process here is fantastic and DIO respond very quickly to all problems” (Netherlands)*

*“DIO sourced private rental as SFA in a lovely suburb close to amenities and around 20 minute drive to work.” (Belgium)*

*“The management of SSFA by the British High Commission in Canberra is excellent. It is excellent because of the community (schooling for us) aspects are thought of while allocating housing.” (Australia)*

## 2. QUALITY OF ACCOMMODATION

There were mixed views of quality, reflecting the mixed housing stock and rental availability worldwide.

#### a) **Positive experiences.** A number of respondents felt that their accommodation compared favourably with that available in the UK:

*“Much better than UK housing and repairs are carried out very quickly” (Belgium)*

*“The house is the best we have had in married quarters.” (Cyprus)*

*"Housing is 100 times better here than in the UK." (Cyprus)*

*"Housing is more than satisfactory here and of a very high standard of repair! The UK military could learn a lot from the systems and process out here." (USA, living in USAF accommodation)*

In general families living in compounds (typically in the Middle East) were positive about the accommodation provided to them.

*"MODSAP accommodation excellent and well looked after." (Saudi Arabia)*

*"Privately owned compound, outstanding accommodation, superb service. Having lived in SFA for three years in the UK there is no comparison to the service we have here compared to the run down council estate style accommodation we lived in before." (Saudi Arabia)*

## b) SFA overseas

Issues with quality and upkeep of SFA were raised at a number of locations, but may not be dissimilar to those seen in the UK;

*"Although large SFA they were very old and in need of repair and maintenance." (Germany)*

However, some families felt that the SFA provided to them did not meet UK standards in certain ways.

*"Child safety was not a consideration or provision in the housing - no stair-gates for larger than average stairwells were provided in country, or allowed to be installed by either housing maintenance or privately, despite this being a facility provided by UK stores." (Italy)*

*"Brown water. No electricity. Substandard in so many ways. No facilities for repairs - you do your own. The house is horrific. The most terrible experience." (Brunei)*

A number of comments identified discrepancies between the quality of 'old' and 'new' accommodation in Cyprus. In particular there were concerns that the older houses were not weatherproofed, had no air conditioning, and had poor heating.

*"Housing was excellent in Cyprus and managed brilliantly, the quality of the newer houses of which one we were allocated was excellent."*

*"Our first house (old build) was in shocking condition, had to apply for betterment move as our young daughter was at risk with the faults. Our new build now is much better though, Can not fault the new houses."*

*"We live in the old style house and in the winter we can not have any of our shutters open as as soon as it rains the water comes through. This is a problem for all these houses we have been told but no money in the budget to replace windows or shutters"*

*"We understand the old houses are not being updated however its going to be 30 yrs before they are knocked down so you need to do basic repairs and maintainance."*

*"Housing is riddled with asbestos (in all internal paint and plaster, walls and ceiling, in every room) meaning it cannot be disturbed."*

Respondents from Gibraltar highlighted problems with damp in the Service Accommodation.

*"Most/all accommodation in Gibraltar has an issue with damp and it is a constant battle to avoid it. Dehumidifiers are issued on request but an associated energy reimbursement programme is only available if the dehumidifier is issued AFTER a problem with damp. This does not promote an active stance against tackling it. Also, low level (cheap) actions (such as fitting vents to cupboards) have not been supported."*

## c) SSFA

There was less consensus regarding quality of accommodation sourced through the private rental market. It is understood that there may be less choice of accommodation sourced through this means, but survey participants gave negative responses where they felt that quality of accommodation was poor.

*"While the accommodation is spacious and well located, the build quality is poor - paint and plaster constantly shipping away, issues with water provision, heating (amazingly it can get below 8°C during winter months) etc. The local contractor does what it can within the provision allocated by DIO (which is tiny), but it's mostly make do as opposed to fix the problem so that it doesn't reoccur." (Italy)*

*"The housing is low quality, with paint come off the walls, tiles come off the roof, and poor quality water and sewage removal." (Italy)*

*"The private house we moved into was appalling. we have a back garden which is all weeds, had fleas in the carpet, dead flies, dog hair in the lounge, a very awful smell of dead animal in the air vent, no ceiling lights or fans in any of the bedrooms, plug sockets were all needing replaced. 1 window is plastic, the air con was put in the year 1987 so makes an awful noise through the day." (USA)*

*"Had to move mid tour due to house unsafe faulty electrics mould and isolation" (Italy)*

### 3. ACCOMMODATION SIZE

Most comments received related to accommodation entitlement, especially where these were perceived to have been unfairly applied;

*“The accom allocated to me is a very nice one bedroom apartment, which is satisfactory for my daily needs; however, as a single...Wg Cdr with a grown up family... the apartment is too small to comfortably host any form of family visit. My neighbour is a married unaccompanied Wg Cdr who has been allocated a 3 bed apartment, presumably because she is married and I am not.”*

*“The housing regulations still remain very out dated. I had 3 children under the ages entitling us to a 4 bed house. Even though I could have rented a 4 bed under my allowance I wasn’t allowed. I ended up with a smaller 3 bed that cost more! “*

*“Our initial allocation was far too small for a family of our size. we waited 4 months for a betterment move.”*

*“We have had to go over budget and fund this ourselves to find a house of a similar standard to our property in the UK and able to fit all of our furniture. I am not willing to sell and then re-buy on return as this is a total waste of money and resources”*

### 4. LOCATION

Families living away from SFA told us that this could make them feel isolated from the British Armed Forces community (where one existed at that location)

*“Because on base housing is grouped, I was 40 minutes away from work which left the family isolated. This isolation was a key factor in their early return” (USA)*

*“It was a rural location with a 7km drive to the air base and nearest town. With 2 young children this was, at times, rather isolating. Overall however, the housing was superb.” (Germany)*

*“Being within a particularly poor area of Brussels and many miles from where the families/accompanied personnel are located is a significant barrier and would have made a big difference.” (Belgium)*

Conversely, some respondents felt that living within a local community provided them with a more culturally rewarding experience.

*“My greek has vastly improved, i have immersed myself in the village culture, and have a great social life away from the work environment.” (Cyprus)*

One difficulty with dispersal of accommodation was the need for an additional car and travelling time; for example, where housing was located away from work and schools.

*"Due to where we are allocated we definitely need two cars. I don't think LOA adequately covers this." (Belgium)*

*"Accommodation was both a long drive to work (50KM round trip per day) and away from city amenities." (Saudi Arabia)*

*"Fantastic huge houses but an hour away from the local school on very dangerous roads." (Oman)*

Some responses indicated that they had been placed in areas that they did not consider suitable for them and their families.

*"...the military accommodation has had a negative impact on the family due to the standards and issues with the local community. It's not a friendly neighbourhood unfortunately and none of my colleagues live in military housing as a result. The option of private rental should be offered so the member can choose what works best for their circumstances." (Canada)*

*"I had no choice as to where I was going to live. I was moved straight to what the DIO already had on it's books... It is the center of a City on a main road. It is extremely noisy. I have lost count the amount of times I have had disturbed sleep. This summer the windows have to be open as it's like living in a blast furnace and the noise is horrendous... the drug dealing that you openly see going on there is of great concern." (Netherlands)*

## 5. MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS

Many of the issues raised through comments related to SSFA, with repairs carried out through a maintenance contract or via the landlord.

*"Local repairs are sometimes poor and the process is slow in getting the landlords to agree to any further remedial works that are not DIO responsibilities." (Italy)*

*"Our house is in a relatively poor state of repair... DIO relies on the landlord to fund repairs, and these are often refused, or take several months to effect." (Turkey)*

*"On first arrival the maintenance provision was fantastic. It has been made significantly worse following change of supplier." (Saudi Arabia)*

*"We are unfortunate in the way that the Spanish do business-manana mañana. Things are very slow and there is no 2-way communication" (Spain)*

*"...we have been without water several times and we had to wait because the plumber would not come out over the weekend according to the landlord" (France)*

There was also some dissatisfaction with the process and quality of maintenance carried out on SFA.

*“Interserve in Cyprus do poor repairs, appear unqualified for all roles and regularly have to re attend to fix again. Often repairs are dangerous.”*

*“The general standard of maintenance is poor - often having to call out the Macaltalia repair team several times for the same issue (faulty boilers, blocked drains, leaking aircon units...)” (Italy)*

*“The repairs/request process is terrible - I have been waiting 2 months so far for keys to a part of my property and a few weeks for a light to be fixed from reporting it.” (Italy)*

*It is very difficult to arrange repairs to the property as you have to email a completed form to a very small team. When I last sent in a form I had to ring them to chase it and it turned out that they had lost it. Consequently I don't request repairs unless it is an emergency. (Germany)*

However, there were also some positive comments regarding maintenance and repairs.

*“We are well looked after by the DE representative - far better than my experience in the UK” (Portugal)*

*Repairs are carried out, however no appointments are given and they arrive whenever they can. Always friendly and helpful, just obviously very different way of operating to the UK! (Falkland Islands)*

*“When we moved in, there were a few small things wrong with the house. We wrote everything down on the 14 day report and interserve were quick to come out and sort almost of the issues we had.” (Cyprus)*

*“Housing was amazing. The housing office and team were extremely competent and helpful. Maintenance was taken seriously and resolved within 24-48hours.” (USA)*

## 6. ISSUES RELATED TO SSSA

There was some dissatisfaction from unaccompanied personnel who had been allocated a house or apartment (due to lack of SLA), saying that they wished to receive an enhanced removals allowance to reflect this.

*“I like the property that I am in however I feel disadvantaged by the fact that I was unable to bring my own furniture etc due to my marital category. Occupants that are PStat 1 or 2 have the option to do this. As PStat 5 I do not get the same option.”*

*“Removals policy not matching size of Substitute SLA allocation”*

*“The SSLA is not properly equipped. The attitude of the local manager is appalling and it is not clear what is taken into consideration with LOSLOA. You end up having to buy lots of household goods but are then not entitled to move them in the single removals allowance.”*

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## RETURNING TO THE UK

Respondents noted that delays in applications or changes to allocation can impact their return to the UK, especially when they need to apply for schools and provide an address for shipping ahead of their return.

*“Despite the good notification of assignment you cannot apply for a house until 4 months prior to posting. This delay caused no end of problems with schooling and housing.”*

*“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. An alternative SFA 10 miles away was offered which was of very poor quality and not acceptable. 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.”*

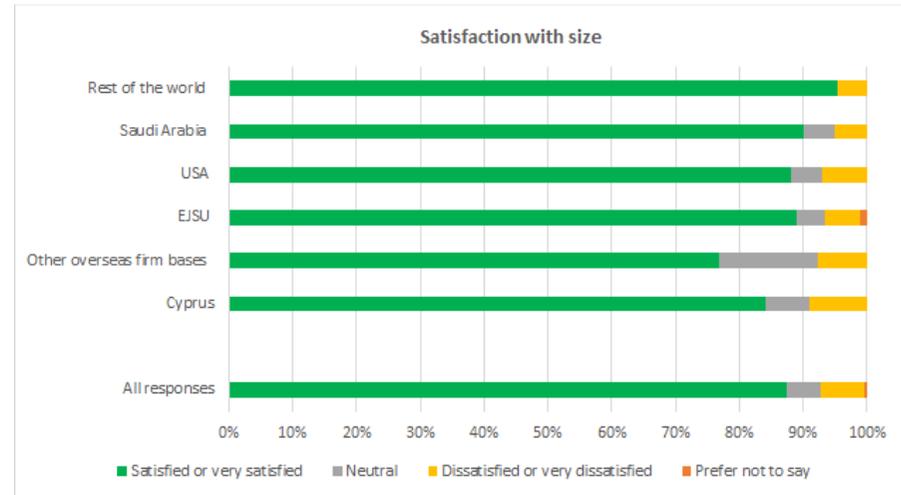
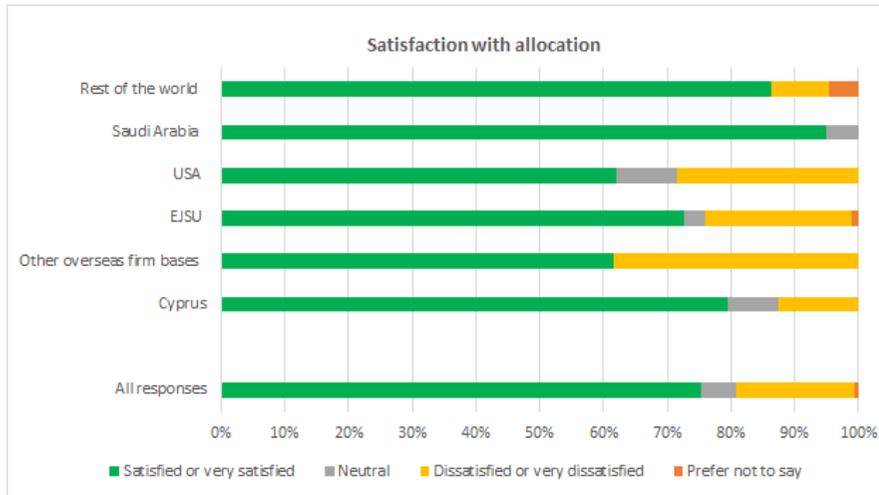
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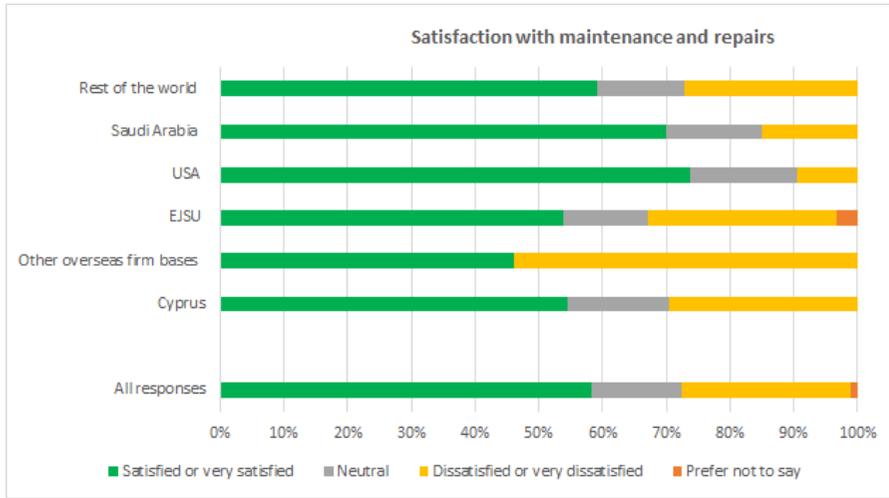
## SUMMARY

The information provided above must be taken in the context of relatively high satisfaction levels overall. However there is clearly capacity for improved communications and support in some areas, in order to improve the accommodation experiences of those on overseas assignments. In particular it would appear that those sourcing their own accommodation would benefit from additional support; for example when choosing an area, or when dealing with contracts and legal issues which are unfamiliar to them (or potentially in another language). In addition, there appears to be capacity for increased flexibility when sourcing accommodation in new areas, or locations with no established footprint.

Given that accommodation provision was seen as a positive influence on the decision to apply for overseas assignments, any improvements in this area could be beneficial for ongoing recruitment to such roles.

## SURVEY RESULTS – BY REGION





## SURVEY RESULTS – BY ACCOMMODATION TYPE

