

2021 Childcare Survey Report



Image by [Esi Grünhagen](#) from [Pixabay](#)



Introduction

To support the continued policy focus on childcare for Armed Forces families, the RAF Families Federation conducted a survey during 2020 to ensure that up-to-date evidence on the needs of RAF families was available.

We welcome the recent positive developments introduced to address some of the challenges for Armed Forces families including Flexible Working and Flexible Service, the Wrap-Around Childcare pilot scheme and the rollout of the new RAF Childcare Delivery Procurement Strategy to all stations. An expanded Childcare Support Team in DCYP will also focus attention and resources on this important topic. We look forward to seeing the longer term benefits to the RAF family of these initiatives.

The importance of childcare to all families and children is acknowledged by the Department for Education¹:

“Childcare is vitally important for many families in Britain: it supports parents to go out to work and high-quality childcare helps to boost children’s outcomes, particularly in the early years where it can narrow the achievement gap that opens up before children even start school”

However the Coram Childcare Study 2020² found issues nationally with cost and availability:

“Others who are not entitled to free childcare still face very high prices. These prices have risen above inflation this year. In many parts of the country, there is not enough childcare available – this has changed little since 2019.”

Access to and cost of childcare continues to be a significant stress factor for our Armed Forces families. This is reflected in the recently published Living in our Shoes Report³ and Stick or Twist⁴ where the topic is given much focus and generates several recommendations for improvement.

“Although the availability and affordability of childcare is a problem facing many civilian families, not just those in the military, there are additional challenges for military families.”³

It is acknowledged that childcare has implications for retention:

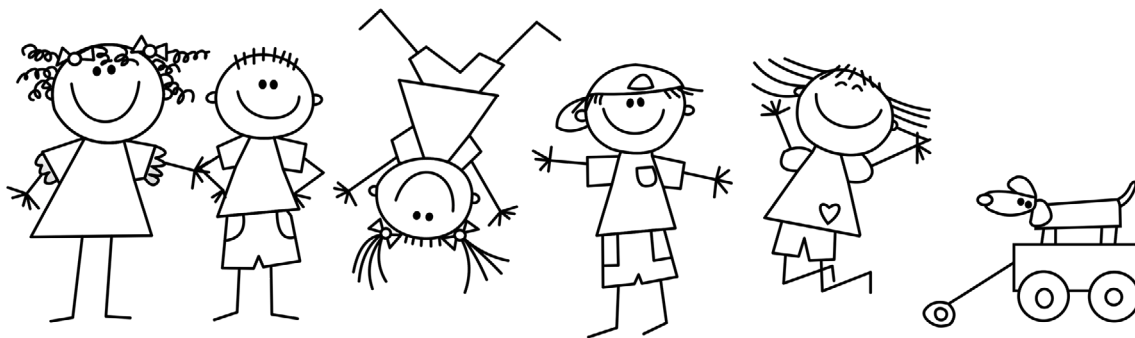
“The cost and availability of childcare is now a material reason why service personnel are leaving the Armed Forces and defence needs to think innovatively in order to provide increased capacity in childcare, including ‘out of hours’ and also needs to ensure that this is a cost which even junior ranks can realistically afford.” Mark Francois⁴

¹Department for Education (2015). How pre-school influences children and young people’s attainment and developmental outcomes over time. DfE: London [Online] Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf.

²Lester Coleman, Mohammed Dali-Chaouch and Claire Harding, Childcare Survey 2020, Coram Family and Childcare

³Janet Walker, Andrew Selous & Gabriela Misca, Living in Our Shoes – Understanding the needs of Armed Forces Families, MOD, June 2020. gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-our-shoes-understanding-the-needs-of-uk-armed-forces-families

⁴Mark Francois, Stick or Twist? A Report for the Prime Minister into Retention in HM Armed Forces – and how to improve it Feb 2020, markfrancois.com



Our Survey and Respondents

Our survey ran for two periods in spring and early summer 2020. The number of responses was lower than expected which we attribute to the impact of the COVID pandemic affecting our communications strategy and ability to engage with potential respondents.

The survey was available on our website and responses invited from all RAF Service Personnel and their spouses/partners with children. The survey was widely publicised across our website, news bulletins, social media and our partners' channels, such as RAF HiVE.

There were 400 responses to the survey, 395 responses were eligible.

The responses represented 538 children - 51% 0-4 years, 40% 5-11 years and 9% 12-18 years.

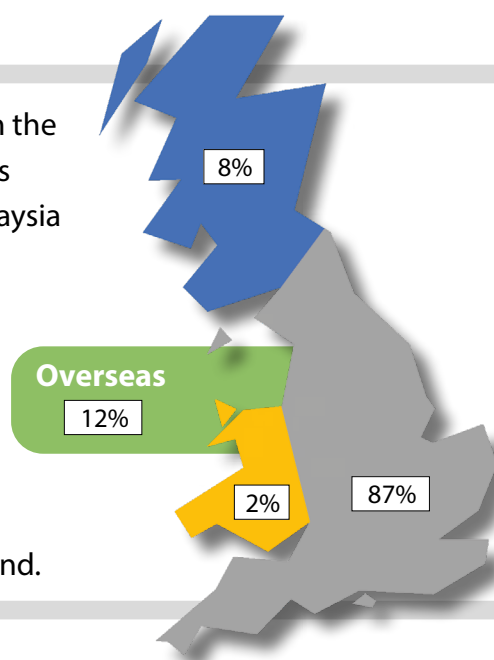
73% (286) of respondents were from other ranks/non-commissioned families - a similar distribution to the RAF as a whole (76% Other ranks and 24% Officers).⁵

70% (275) of respondents live in Service Family Accommodation (SFA). AFCAS 2020⁶ suggests that 36% of RAF Service personnel are living in SFA or Substitute Service Family Accommodation.

A range of locations were represented although the majority were from England. Overseas locations included Belgium, Falkland Islands, Cyprus, Malaysia and Germany.

England 87%
Scotland 8%
Wales 2%
Overseas 12%

There were no respondents from Northern Ireland.



⁵Quarterly Personnel Statistics 1 April 2020, gov.uk/government/publications/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-2020/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-1-april-2020

⁶UK Regular Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2020, government/statistics/armed-forces-continuous-attitude-survey-2020

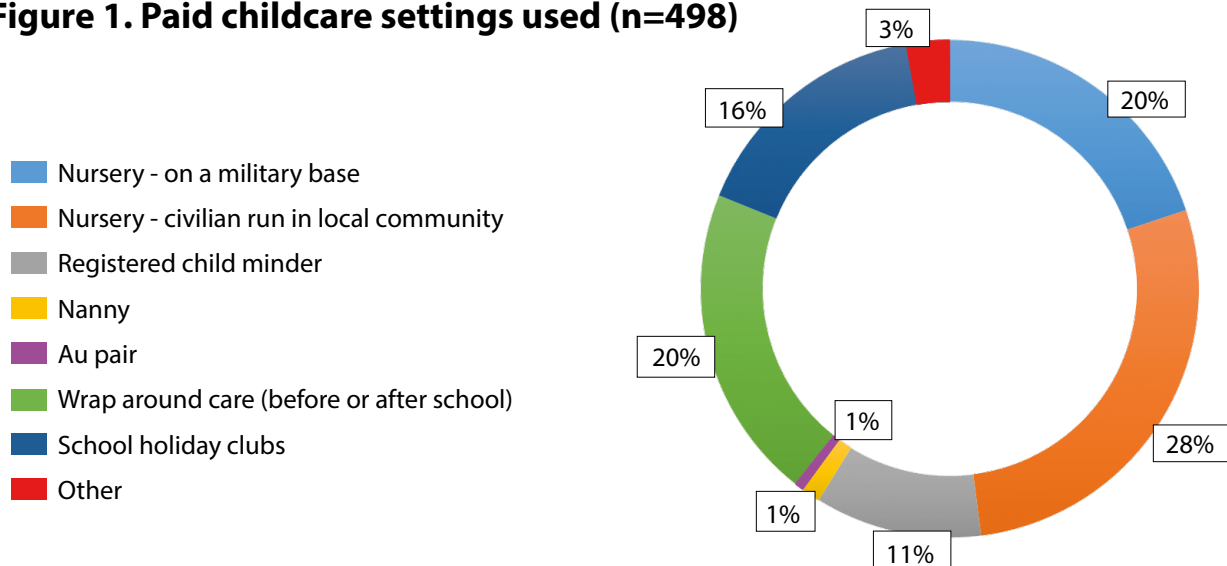
Settings and use of Childcare

Department for Education statistics for England suggest that 64% of 0-4 year olds received formal childcare in 2019, with the highest numbers using nursery settings.⁷

82% (325) of all respondents to our survey used paid childcare.

The highest proportion of respondents used nursery settings with some respondents using more than one type of setting:

Figure 1. Paid childcare settings used (n=498)



(Note - in all figures N denotes the total number of responses)

The breadth of settings represented by our respondents demonstrates that RAF children are spread across a range of settings. Widely targeted assistance would be welcomed that addresses challenges faced by families across all settings.

A similar spread of different ages and hence childcare settings is indicated in FAMCAS 2020 with 35% of RAF respondents with children reporting at least one child under 5yrs (early years), 35% 5-11 yrs and 20% 12-17 years (wrap around and holiday care).⁸

Key findings

1. Cost and affordability of childcare is a problem – particularly variation in costs
2. The nature of RAF life offers a unique combination of challenges
3. Spousal employment and wellbeing can be disproportionately affected
4. Better affordability, assistance with costs and more flexible hours would make the biggest difference in helping RAF families to access childcare
5. The quality, distance/travel and safeguarding of childcare settings attract good levels of satisfaction

⁷Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England, Department for Education 2019

⁸Tri-service families continuous attitude survey: 2020 (FAMCAS 2020) [Annex B to FAMCAS 2020 Main report](#) (publishing.service.gov.uk) tables B3 8.1-B38.4

1. Costs and affordability

Figure 2. What is the main reason for not using Paid Childcare? (n = 122)

- Current local childcare is too expensive
- No spaces available
- Other
- Current local available childcare does not meet our needs
- Do not need any childcare
- Use unpaid childcare
- Choose not to use childcare
- Current local childcare is not of a high enough quality

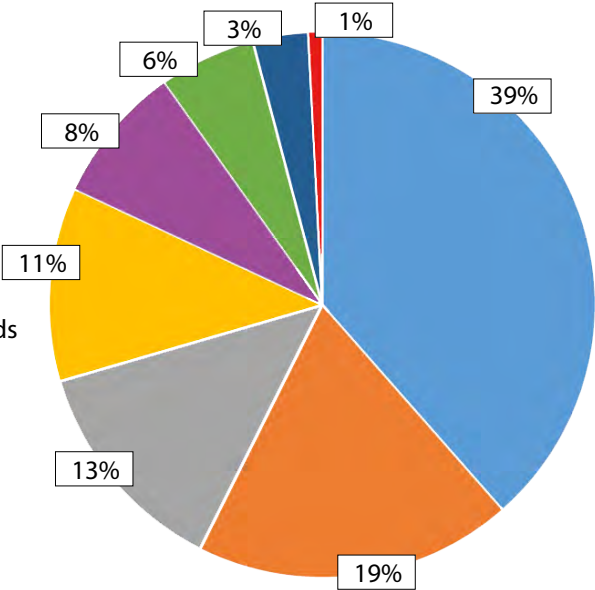
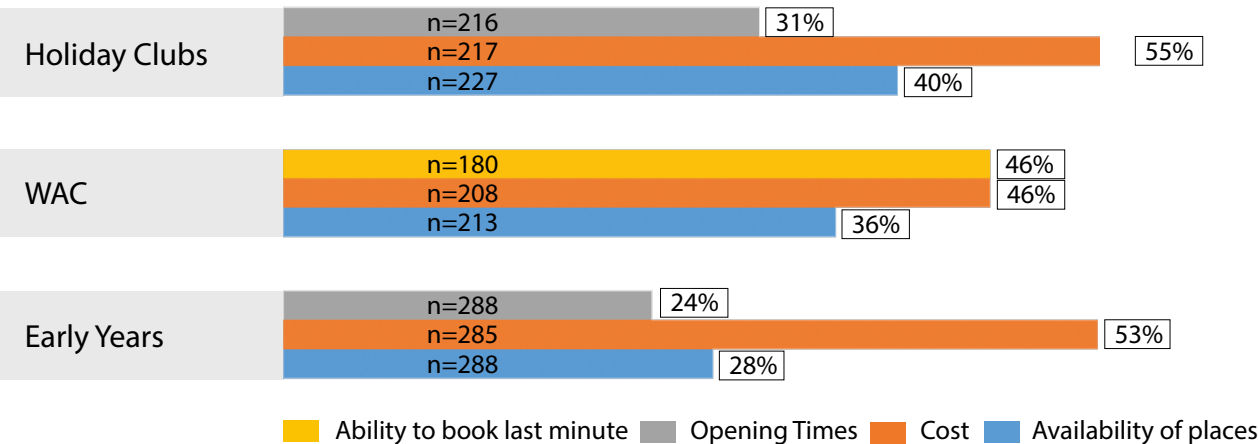


Figure 2 demonstrates that the single biggest reason for not using paid childcare is that the local provision is too expensive.

“Cost of childcare due to location, c£1300 a month is extortionate!”

When asked to rate levels of satisfaction with aspects of childcare, respondents reported high levels of dissatisfaction with costs/affordability, flexibility and availability across all settings. (Note - not all respondents answered all questions. Null values have been removed. Please see further notes under Figure 6 on page 14).

Figure 3. % Dissatisfied/Very Dissatisfied - Top three



These findings are not dissimilar to those from FAMCAS 2020⁹ where, asked a similar question, RAF respondents who had made use of Early Years and School Age childcare settings indicated the highest level of dissatisfaction with cost followed by opening hours, access or availability and quality.

⁹Tri-service families continuous attitude survey: 2020 (FAMCAS 2020) [Annex B to FAMCAS 2020 Main report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) tables B3a9-B3a19

The expense of childcare is an issue shared with the civilian population – we recognise that in heavily populated areas of the country, demand is high, provision is stretched and running costs are higher than in other parts of the country. The OECD Family Database suggests that the net cost of childcare for a two-earner family can be as much as 55% of average earnings in the UK.¹⁰ Coram Family and Childcare¹¹ quote the Office for National Statistics (2019) noting that:



“The price of a part time childcare place for a child aged under three is about twice as much as the average household spends on food and non-alcoholic drinks each week (£60.60; Office for National Statistics, 2019).”



and



“A place in an after school club for 15 hours a week costs parents about as much as the average household spends on food and non-alcoholic drinks each week (Office for National Statistics, 2019). This is without the additional costs that parents will face if they are also paying for childcare before school, which is often necessary for parents working the typical 9-5.”



When paired with the mobility of the Armed Forces population, the inability to choose their location and sometimes relatively short timescales to prepare and plan new family budgets, the challenges of disparity are exacerbated. This continued to be a major theme of respondents' comments on their challenges with childcare:



“Personnel should not be financially penalised for posting - nursery fees vary greatly according to location, which is actually preventing some pers. accepting postings to certain areas. High Wycombe is £400 a month more expensive than the nursery at Brize Norton. Lossiemouth is half the cost of the nursery at Emerson Green in Bristol (Abbey Wood SFA).”

“I think the RAF needs parity with childcare or raise wages to reflect the cost of living in certain locations across the airforce.”

“All stations are different so a one fits all approach does not fit!”

“Frustrating that childcare differs from Unit to Unit and you can be financially penalised depending on where you are assigned due to childcare costs.”

“I believe for serving families that childcare especially for early years (0-4 yrs), should be subsidised at the very least”

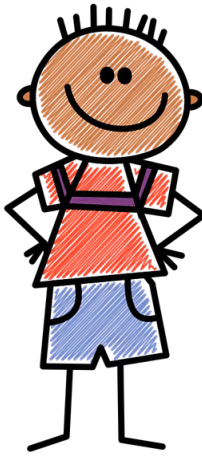


The disparity of cost around the country is recognised in the wider literature. Coram¹² recognises that across the UK, England has the highest costs for nurseries and childminders for under twos, and three- four year olds.

Within England, they offer evidence of price variation for nursery places for under twos of 61% higher in inner London (most expensive) compared to the North east (least expensive), and 69% higher in inner London than the North East for three and four year olds.

¹⁰OECD Family Database oecd.org/els/family/database.htm

^{11,12}Coleman et al, Coram Family and Childcare ibid



2. Nature of RAF life



"Cost of childcare with 3 children under 5 (one in reception) makes returning to work extremely difficult, alongside husband's work patterns and deployment and having no family support network. Village areas do not seem to have enough provision to accommodate the amount of children in the area, there are long waiting lists for places."



Respondents were asked to rate a series of factors on a scale of 'very significant challenge', through to 'no challenge at all'.

Top 5 challenges (rated 'very significant challenge' or 'significant challenge') across all settings

Figure 4.	Specific challenge	N.	%
1	Availability of local family support	303	76
2	Serving Partner unable to regularly assist with care responsibilities	251	63
3	Availability of local friend's support	248	63
4	Cost of childcare due to location	240	61
5	Choice of settings due to posting location	210	53

Responses indicate some of the unique challenges facing our community:

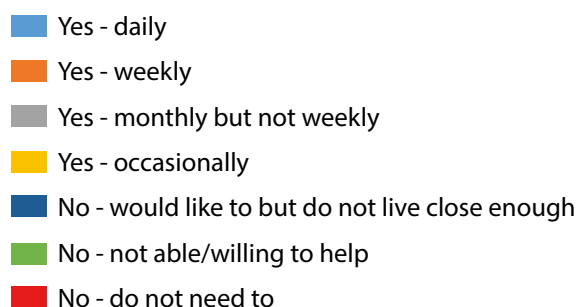
- 2.1 Unpaid childcare/availability of local family & friends support - for mobile RAF families unable to factor local help for childcare into where they live or to help with employment
- 2.2 SP unable to regularly assist – shifts, deployments, precedence of role
- 2.3 Choice and mobility and availability/capacity
- 2.4 Particular challenges of mobility for those families with children with SEND
- 2.5 Serving overseas – availability and flexibility of provision

2.1 Unpaid childcare (support from family and friends)

20% of our respondents access unpaid childcare. 69% (271) of respondents were unable to use unpaid childcare but would like to if they lived close enough to family.

In comparison nationally, about a third of families make use of unpaid childcare – the most common being grandparents.¹³

Figure 5. Do you currently use any form of unpaid childcare? (n=413)



"The main issue we face with childcare is the distance away from family members and the cost of covering additional childcare needs"



2.2 Ability of Service personnel to assist

Our respondents, including married couples, single parents and dual serving couples, indicated issues around irregular working patterns, perceived attitudes towards the role of childcare from Chain of Command as well as support during the absence of a Service person.

Irregular working patterns:

63% (249) of respondents had non- standard working patterns for either serving and/or non-serving partners. Of these, 86% said that they were not able to find childcare to cover shift work or weekend duties.



"Most important thing is for greater flexibility of hours for on site childcare. If the base works shifts, this should be mirrored in opening hours."

"The lack of childcare to support shift working including night shifts is a barrier to women remaining in the workforce. The opening hours were really limited in the on-site nursery and did not align with shifts worked in the Base. Very much geared around standard opening hours. I had to use off site childcare which offered more flexible opening hours and this absolutely should be the reverse. If we are 24/7 we need 24/7 childcare."



¹³DfE 2019 ibid.

Several respondents commented on the perceived lack of flexibility from defence to support family duties:

“

“Military personnel unable to help with childcare due to inflexible work patterns and lack of compassion from superiors. If I work miles away from my child’s nursery, but my husband works around the corner, why is he refused permission to pick up our sick child from nursery?”

“Availability of places is a serious issue for dual serving couples but I find the chain of command often still believes there will be a wife at home taking care of childcare!”

“Finding some and then having work be flexible to work around it. Current military management are not willing to be flexible.”

”

However, there was also some evidence of welcome flexibility offered:

“

“Smart working in DE&S and line manager’s approach [with respect to] variable start and finish times make childcare management a lot more simple”

“the RAF are brilliant with my husband and he can normally take all his annual leave in the school holidays. My employer....restricts how much annual leave can be taken in the holidays...”

”

Support during absences/deployments:

The frequent absence of a Service person is one of the most unique features of RAF life, and this issue was raised on multiple occasions. Evidence suggests that support for families at this time would be particularly helpful.



“

“There is no provision for spouses who need to work weekends or evenings when their serving partner is away.This is the main difference between civilian and military childcare provisions in my opinion. Most families are no longer in the position where they can comfortably live on one wage, and I have known of spouses to quit jobs when their other half has been deployed or even on detachment /training courses as they have no childcare provision for weekend and evening shifts.”

”

Current assistance schemes for childcare do not address this need, or that of mobility requiring frequent periods out of work when moving. Whilst the timing of this survey was too early to collect particular evidence on the Wrap Around Childcare pilot, we would urge consideration be given as to how this scheme, could offer assistance in armed forces specific circumstances such as these.



Image by [Hans Günter Siewert](#) from [Pixabay](#)

“My wife, in order to support my deployments and variable shift pattern has to work in my standdown but to maximise lower childcare fees must work 12.5hr shifts. This just doesn't support childcare when deployed.”

“A lot of full time working parents would benefit from having subsidised childcare or extra holidays granted whilst the serving member is away on deployment.”

“[it is an issue] being posted and losing out on the tax free childcare”

2.3 Availability/capacity

Civilian families can also struggle with the more desirable childcare settings being full.

“Only around one-half of local authorities in England (56 per cent) have enough childcare for parents working full time. Fewer than one in five local authorities in England have enough childcare available for children aged 12 to 14 who need after school care, or for parents working outside normal office hours, or for disabled children.”¹⁴

Regular relocation can make this a re-occurring issue for mobile families. With 79% of Armed Forces families having children¹⁵, in some locations, a high number of Armed Forces families could lead to a higher concentration of young children, increasing demand on provision.

“Moving regularly poses significant challenges due to the demand of available spaces at wrap around care providers.”

“No room in the nursery on camp. I have had my child on the waiting list since April 2019, returned to work after maternity September 2019 and they still have no place for my child, 3 days a week and its June 20.”

“We are due to move to an area where the nursery connected to the station has a 20 month waiting list. This is longer than our average tour length!”

¹⁴Coleman et al, Coram Family and Childcare, ibid.

¹⁵Tri-service families continuous attitude survey: 2020 (FAMCAS 2020) [Tri-Service families Continuous Attitude Survey 2020 main report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

2.4 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities/Additional Needs

Of 395 responses, 22% rated 'Continuity of additional needs support due to postings' as a very significant or significant challenge. Eleven respondents raised further issues around childcare for children with SEND/additional needs – as is so often the case these are small numbers but complex with a significant impact. Families who have children with SEND may face even larger hurdles when trying to access suitable childcare that meet the specific additional needs of their child(ren). Again, this can lead to their being nothing suitable available which immediately leaves the family no choice but for the spouse/partner to be the main childcare provider.



"Having children with disabilities enhances all of these problems"

"Having a child with additional needs. There is no option for childcare. Nothing suitable to send him to therefore do not work as between husbands work and having a child with additional needs it is not possible."

"SEN transfer has been traumatic and has presented significant challenges to getting education and childcare sorted in a timely fashion..."

"The biggest issue for our family is the disconnect between the need for flexibility to cater for my son's SEN and the Local Authority's rigid application of policy and slow speed of action following assignment to the new area."



2.5 Serving Overseas

Twelve respondents were from overseas locations. Limited childcare and/or hours available in some locations and the perception of sometimes restrictive rules around schemes to offer equivalent assistance to the UK feature in their evidence:



"Wrap around and holiday care for school aged children is needed here to enable parents to work without added challenges." (Cyprus)

"[there is no] choice [for parents] of where they would like to use their funded hours.... [the nursery] finishes at 1:30 and working full time has been taken away from me due to this" (Cyprus)

"[there is no] flexible part time care [and] limited holiday clubs" (SHAPE)

"Overseas nursery allowance [Authority] scheme is good however application is chaotic....and difficult." (Malaysia)



3. Spousal/Partner Employment

The Coram Family Childcare Report 2020¹⁶ states that:



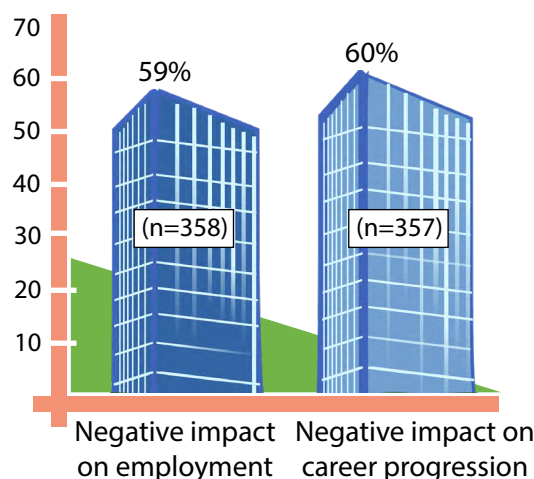
"Without affordable childcare, parents can be forced out of the workforce or stuck in lower-skilled jobs – this is bad for them and bad for the economy. Without high quality childcare, children miss out on a potential boost to their outcomes which lasts all the way to GCSEs."



The negative impact that childcare can have on spousal/partner employment was notable with a high proportion of respondents indicating a 'somewhat negative' or 'significantly negative' impact on the non serving spouses's ability to 'maintain or gain employment' or 'have career progression'.

Half of respondents indicated the same for 'undertaking training/education'.

Impact of local childcare provision on spouse/partner ability to work or study



"Without affordable childcare, many spouses can simply not afford to return to work. Which has a negative impact on the serving person, the spouse and the child. If you want to retain and recruit then the family unit as a whole needs to be addressed holistically. Many spouses are expected to give up their careers and their lives to become a spouse and given what amounts to very little support during deployment. By support, I don't mean coffee mornings or play groups. I mean tangible help when we are trying to juggling children, work and life on our own..... "

"My husband is away at least 8 months a year which makes me working either extremely expensive or impossible."

"It's always the non serving spouse's career that suffers. If there was more impact on the serving person would the military do more to improve childcare provision near its bases?"



Eligibility for many Government assistance schemes rests on both partners being in employment and working a certain number of hours. Leaving employment due to a move, or reducing hours to look after children due to the absence of a parent, could both affect eligibility for the assistance.



"Currently I can't search for work as I can't afford childcare in order to get a job - to teach you need to be able to visit a school, write an application form, plan and teach a lesson AND have an interview, this is impossible with a toddler who doesn't qualify for funding."

"The removal of the childcare voucher scheme has a significant impact on us as with one working at a reasonably high wage and one off work there isn't really anything available to help now. The tax free childcare system is not open to us currently so we have to pay full price."

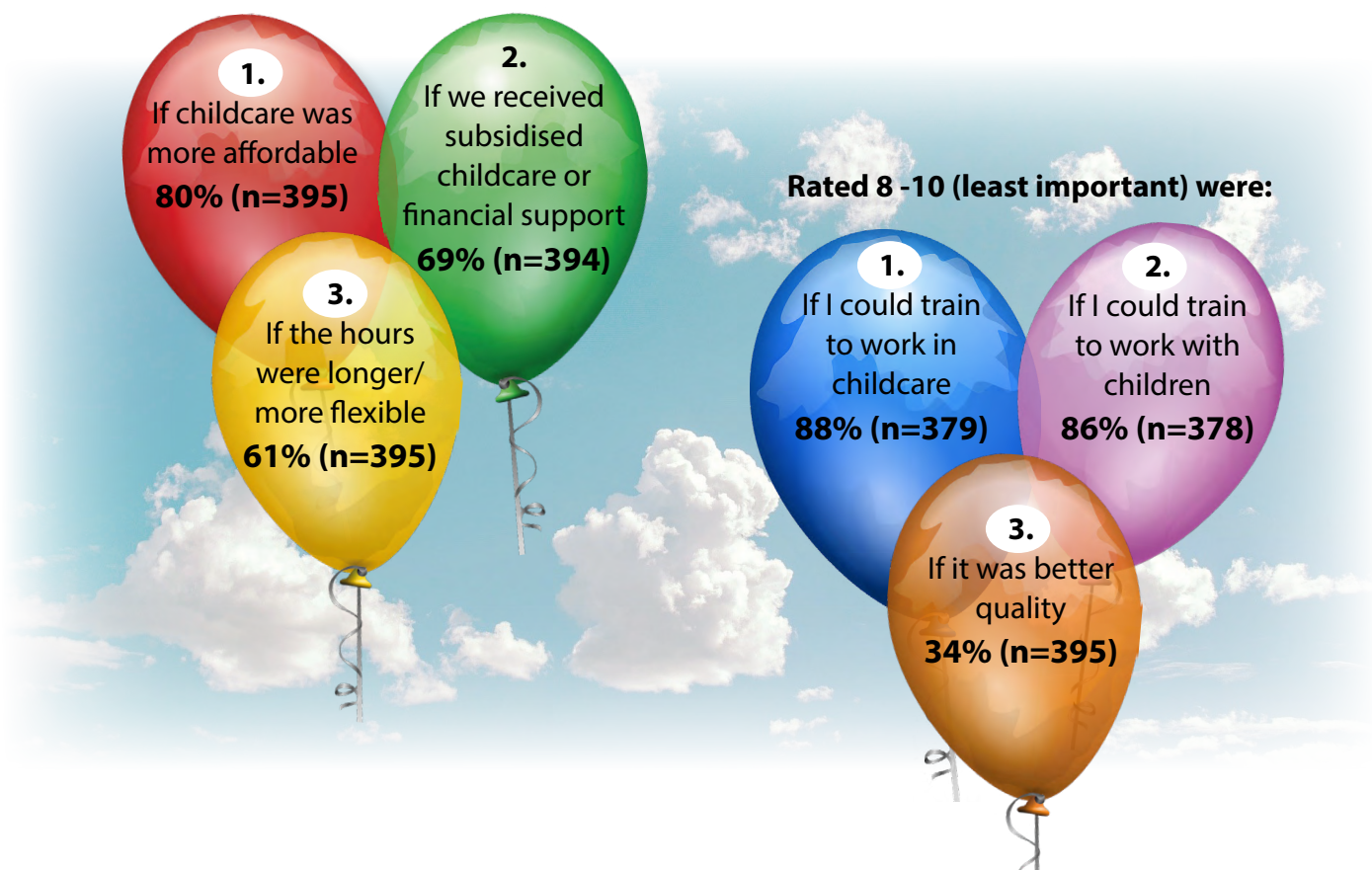


¹⁶Coleman et al, Coram Family and Childcare, ibid.

4. Better affordability, assistance with costs and more flexible hours would help RAF families with childcare.

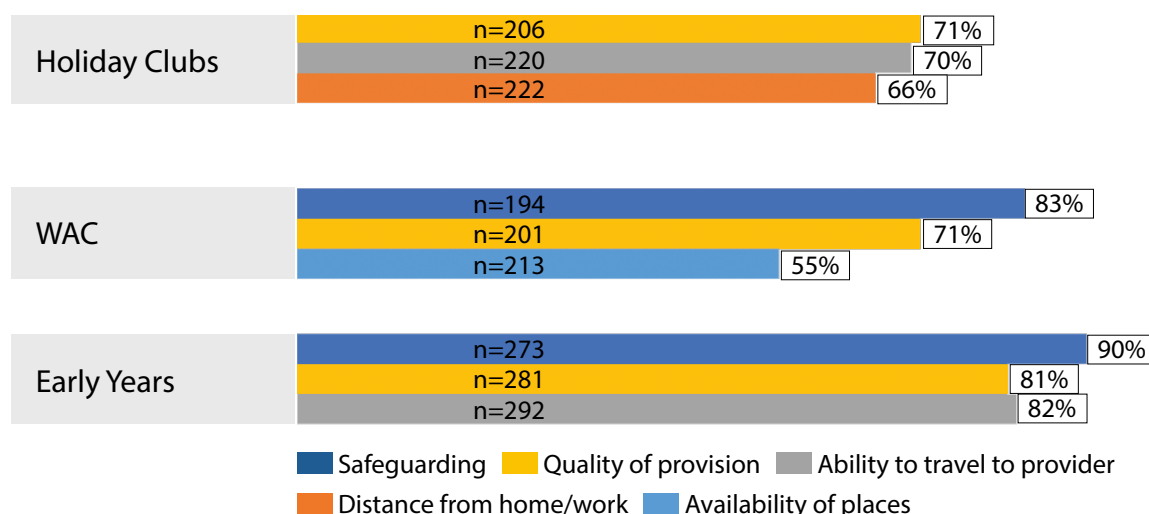
Families were asked to rate a number of options indicating what would make the biggest difference in helping them access childcare. Ten options were offered with respondents asked to rate from 1 (most important) to 10 (least important).

The top three responses rated 1- 3 (most important) were:



5. A range of factors including quality, safeguarding and travel attracted the highest satisfaction ratings:

Figure 6. % Satisfied/Very Satisfied - Top three



It is positive that issues of quality, distance and travel attract good levels of satisfaction. Availability for WAC is a slightly surprising result given the overall feedback in comments.

Figure 6 demonstrates the responses after removal of null responses from the data.

Respondents were offered a 'not applicable/don't know' response and these have been treated as null. Not all respondents answered all of the questions so total responses varied between 349-395.

Between 19-21% of responses to the early years questions were Not Applicable/Don't Know; between 40-49% of responses to wrap-around childcare questions and between 43-49% to questions on holiday childcare.

Respondents may have answered in this way to indicate that a question isn't relevant or they didn't have an opinion - or to indicate that they do not use this type of childcare. With the lowest proportion of Don't Know/Not applicable responses offered on the early years question, this assumption would correspond with the large proportion of respondents with 0-4 age children (70%).



"the on-base facility is excellent"








Conclusions and Recommendations

The timing of the survey to RAF families has doubtlessly affected our response rate. Our survey launched initially in early March, just as the COVID crisis deepened and lockdown started. Promotion of the survey restarted in July for a further two weeks and responses doubled.

The concerns and challenges highlighted in this survey are supported by the wider evidence on childcare provision looking at the population more widely, but the unique characteristics of Armed Forces life exacerbate these.

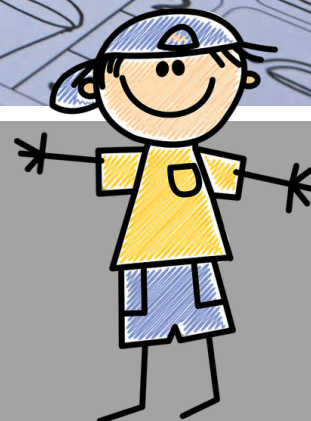
We strongly welcome the positive progress made in the last few years for our families, in both policy and provision. There is even more that could be done to support RAF families – and in doing so, support retention for the RAF:

-  Our findings in 2016¹⁷ around affordability/cost and parity across the country is still supported by the evidence families have submitted. There is little evidence to suggest that anything has changed for families. In 2016, 30% of the 1417 respondents highlighted cost as the most challenging issue for childcare and 21% as accessing out of hours childcare. As we acknowledge here, childcare is expensive for the whole population and as we commented in 2016, is not something that should be done 'on the cheap'. However for RAF families who may not have a choice of where they live in order to prepare for, and manage, varying costs around the country, the feeling of disadvantage is very real. We would strongly support any measures that reduce costs for families in more expensive areas, and look forward to working closely with DCYP to understand better the levers for doing this
-  Government assistance with Wrap Around Childcare costs is very welcome – but consideration needs to be given to a fully developed support package for childcare across all stages, given costs are at their highest during the early years
-  Assistance needs to address the unique challenges of military life – especially deployment and separation, and the subsequent issues around spousal employment. Initiatives that are specifically for Armed Forces families should ensure that these are recognised and supported, rather than simply mirroring those available to the wider population
-  The RAF needs to continue to ensure that wherever possible, career and line managers are accommodating of the need for Service personnel to contribute to family life, and consider childcare responsibilities when planning/assigning
-  The RAF should continue - in partnership with the RAF Families Federation - to publicise the importance of communicating family circumstances to career managers and chain of command, and keeping JPA records up-to-date. When children have SEND or partners/spouses have illnesses or disabilities, it is vital that this taken into consideration – and personnel have their part to play by making this information available.

¹⁷RAF Families Federation 2016 Childcare Report raf-ff.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2016-CHILDCARE-report.pdf



Image by [anncapictures](#) from [Pixabay](#)



raf-ff.org.uk

enquiries@raf-ff.org.uk 01780 781650

RAF Families Federation, 13-15 St Georges Road,
Wittering, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, PE8 6DL



The RAF Families Federation's contract is held by the RAF Association registered Charity 226686 (England & Wales), SC037673 (Scotland).



The RAF Benevolent Fund is a supporting partner of the Families Federation