

Children in Service families

The quality and impact of partnership provision for children in Service families

This survey examines the quality of provision and outcomes for children and young people who are in families of Service personnel whether living in England or abroad. In particular, it looks at the support provided by a sample of schools, local authorities and other agencies to enable children and their families to cope with the experience of geographical mobility and the deployment of family members who are serving within the Armed Forces.

The following is an extract of the section dealing specifically with SEN.

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Provision for Service children with special educational needs and/or disabilities

1. While all Service children have unique needs, some encounter a number of other issues in relation to their special educational needs and/or disabilities, aspects of which may not be as prevalent if they were less geographically mobile. Some children do not cope well with change and the unfamiliar. They are genuinely fearful of a new home, a new location and a new school and having to make new friends; particularly when arriving midway through the year when friendship groups are already established. In the best practice, professionals recognised the potential difficulties associated with mobility for children with special needs and identified whose role it was within schools to help parents and children before and after the move. They helped to hasten the settling process and ensure the child's needs were met as soon as possible by liaison with other professionals, including the Children's Education Advisory Service, who were able to act as an advocate for the child and parents. In the worst cases, schools were not prepared for the arrival of a child with special educational needs and the Children's Education Advisory Service had not been informed. The specific needs of the child could therefore not immediately be met and the family and child were left feeling isolated, and sometimes frustrated because of the lack of coordination between the sending and receiving schools and the lack of documentation to make clear the child's needs.
2. Inspectors found that the main issues were related to the transfer of statements of special educational need and the decision by some local authorities in England to reassess these needs when a Service child moved to a school in their area.¹ This was sometimes coupled with inadequate information being sent to the receiving school and sometimes, as a consequence, led to support packages being delayed. In addition, some parents did not declare their child's special educational needs and/or disabilities so that, at best, they went unrecognised for a short period of time or, at worst, were not able to be met during their schooling abroad. In England, problems were worsened if a child could not be admitted to the school of their choice and that was most suitable for their needs due to a lack of available places.

¹ There is a statutory duty on local authorities in England and Wales to carry on maintaining statements and arranging the special educational needs provision in those statements for pupils who move into their areas; *The Education (Special Educational Needs) (England) (consolidation) Regulations 2001 – Regulation 23*. Local authorities have to state within six weeks whether they will review the statement and when they intend to do a new assessment, but they have to maintain the existing statement in the meantime. Children returning from overseas or another country in the UK will not return with a current statement. In guidance letters sent to local authorities and school governing bodies by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in January 2009, local authorities were urged to reassess returning Service children for their special educational needs as soon as possible and taking account of previous statements.

3. A considerable number of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities arrived in Service Children's Education schools without clear information about their needs and past provision being transferred with them. These were referred to as 'under the wire' pupils. In Cyprus alone, in October 2010, 49 of the 126 pupils identified as having special educational needs had arrived in schools with no record of their needs. This situation occurred for a number of reasons but primarily because parents had not registered with the Children's Education Advisory Service. Such registration is required to trigger a special educational needs enquiry to check that the child's needs can be met in a Service Children's Education school. Inspectors found examples of parents who did not notify the advisory Service when they should have done, either because they were not aware of the system or sometimes because they did not realise that their child's needs were the sort that needed to be reported. The following example highlights some of the difficulties surrounding schools not being appropriately prepared for the arrival of pupils with very specific needs.

When a primary aged pupil joined his new Service Children's Education school, it was apparent that he had severe special educational needs, including the need for support with his personal care. The child's needs had not been made known to the Children's Education Advisory Service. Therefore, there was no opportunity to prepare appropriate support prior to the child starting at the school. When he arrived, his behaviour was aggressive. The school had received no information from previous schools but the current school eventually tracked down a previous school and discovered that the boy had been excluded for violent behaviour. Such was the serious nature of the behaviour that the previous school had retained detailed records of incidents. The current school was not told the family was only there for a six-month posting and the boy was facing permanent exclusion, even though the parents were soon due to go onto their next posting. The parents felt unable to respond to the school's questions and presented the school with a letter stating that they were going to home tutor the boy from the very next day. This took place and the family went overseas shortly afterwards, where the boy continued to be home tutored.

4. Systems for dealing with referrals from schools and assessing children's needs varied within the local authorities visited. When a child who formerly had a statement of special educational need transferred back to the UK, it was usual for the special provision previously identified not to be provided until such time as an assessment was completed and a new statement was drawn up. The time taken to reassess children varied considerably. Parents were frustrated when moving back to the UK from overseas when they found that their child's previous statement of special educational need was not recognised by the receiving local authority. A child would usually have to go through the assessment procedure again before the school could access funding and obtain the highest level of support required by the child. For some children moving between local authorities, statements were honoured but too slowly. This reflects the finding of Ofsted's 2010 review of special educational needs and

disability.² There were further challenges for parents and children moving to and from other countries in the UK, with different regulations and procedures, often leading to further time delays. Parents told inspectors that, due to the period of time needed to have their child's special needs identified and provision determined, it could take the duration of more than one posting to obtain a full assessment of need. The following case study provides an example of the repercussions of delayed assessment. Again, this reflected findings from Ofsted's review of special educational needs and disability:

A family with a severely dyslexic child, who had attended five schools in as many years, stated that they had encountered problems getting formal assessments carried out. In addition, there was no consistency in the level of assessed need and no transfer of assessment information from one local authority to another. This resulted in delays in assessment and consequently in getting appropriate support. The mother said that one school had been unreceptive to her son and the family felt forced to remove him. Following this further move, the assessment process had to be started over again. This was frustrating and stressful for all the family.

5. Four of the 15 local authorities inspectors visited as part of the survey recognised the challenge in continually reassessing Service children and had honoured a Service child's statement and support packages immediately without the necessity of immediate reassessment. However, as not all local authorities adopted this approach, and resources were often already stretched, there was no consistency for a Service child arriving with additional needs.³ In two local authorities visited, Service children were given priority with other groups of children considered to be the most vulnerable. They were assessed promptly, not only for their special educational needs but also for their immediate social and emotional needs. Educational psychologists coordinated the provision alongside other related professionals.
6. Inspectors found some deficiencies in the system for assessing whether Service Children's Education could meet a child's emerging special educational needs once a family was already deployed. There had been delays in agreeing appropriate support or provision in a small number of cases. The assessment panel was made up of different partners, not necessarily all with an educational or special needs background or specialism. There were a small number of cases brought to inspectors' attention where the panel was reported to not fully understand the needs of the child or able to be fully objective. Sometimes, the educational placement depended on the availability of non-educational provision abroad, for example specialist health services, or on the viability of

² *The special educational needs and disability review* (090221), Ofsted 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090221.

³ Some local authorities devolve their special educational needs funding to schools in their area. Schools in these areas are therefore responsible for funding interim support for newly arrived children, including Service children.

returning to England for such services. These services were outside the responsibility of Service Children's Education. The military Command had the final decision on retaining the serving person and their family in a particular location.⁴

7. In practice, however, inspectors found that the substantial majority of Service children with low-level special educational needs in the schools visited were fully supported in Service Children's Education schools in accordance with the organisation's policy on inclusion. Service Children's Education schools provided appropriate support for children with special educational needs as soon as they arrived, regardless of the time in the school year when this occurred, providing they had information about the child's needs and these needs had been assessed and could be met.
8. There was a good range of specialist services available to provide low-level support for children and young people with special educational needs attending the Service Children's Education schools abroad. However, because of the small numbers of children with higher level needs, the full range of expertise and provision was not retained overseas. Service Children's Education commissioned appropriate specialist Services as and when required, for example to support hearing and visual impairments. Where a child needed specialist medical support which could not be made available in the overseas location, arrangements were made for the family/child to return to the UK on a temporary basis to attend specialist appointments or to receive specialist treatment. Only a tiny minority of cases (four out of approximately 10,000 children in the last six and a half years) had required a permanent return to the UK.
9. Inspectors found instances where good support from unit commanding officers, and unit welfare officers, had enabled the specific needs of children and young people to be met in certain circumstances. A good example was of a family in Germany whose eight year old child had significant medical needs. This required the family to return to England every six months to attend a specialist children's hospital. This was possible because of the flexible approach the Commanding Officer adopted towards the family's leave arrangements in order to facilitate these visits.

⁴ Inspectors came across similar instances in local authorities in England where not all assessment panels, for children with special educational needs, had representation from professionals who sufficiently understood the possible additional needs of Service children.