

The perceptions of FE leaders in supporting Service children: challenges and opportunities for further work

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November 2021

Summary

This paper explores some considerations for supporting post-16 education and training providers in supporting Service children. Drawing on the findings of a pilot research project to explore the perceptions of sector leaders regarding Service children, it highlights the general diversity of the post-16 sector and emphasises the need to take account of the specific contexts of different providers. The post-16 sector is not homogeneous; providers in the sector respond to a range of different educational needs and adopt different purposes in so doing. Furthermore, approaches designed in the context of schools are unlikely to translate directly to post-16 settings; support needs to be designed to take account of the particularities and circumstances of providers.

Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt appreciation goes to the interview participants and questionnaire respondents for giving their time during what has been a very difficult period for education providers.

Funding

Funding for this project was provided by: FutureHY, Higher Education Outreach Network, Higher Horizons+, Next Steps South West, Southern Universities Network, and Wessex Inspiration Network.

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Introduction

This paper reports on a pilot study to explore the perceptions of Service children held by post-16 sector leaders in England. The SCiP Alliance defines a Service child as a person whose parent, or carer, serves in the regular armed forces, or as a reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that person's life².

When considering Service children's educational journeys, the phase between school and higher education is not well understood. The reasons for this are several:

- There has been no regulatory impetus for post-16 providers to consider Service children as a distinct group. By comparison, state-funded schools in England are able to draw additional funding through the Service Pupil Premium; universities have been encouraged by the Office for Students to consider Service children as part of their Access and Participation Plans. Mechanisms such as this create both an imperative to engage with the Service children agenda and, through related accountability approaches, offer some visibility into institutional practice.
- The post-16 sector is diverse, comprising of a wide range of institutions with differing purposes and missions, different funding streams and differing governance. Thus, the sector is considerably more heterogeneous than either the school sector or the university sector. This is reflected in a difficulty in characterising and in scoping the precise size of the sector. It also means that providers in the sector become more complex to reach and engage with.
- No reliable statistics exist as to the number of Service children in the post-16 education and training sector. As noted, there has been no impetus for providers to identify and monitor Service children, nor has there been any systematic attempt by central government or any public agencies to collect such statistics. Therefore, very little is known about Service children's patterns of engagement in post-16 provision.
- Learners at post-16 level are in the transition phase between childhood and adulthood. The locus of the relationship is between the provider and the student; students are also growing in independence and taking greater responsibility for their

² <https://www.scipalliance.org/about/information-page/the-context-for-service-children>

educational journeys. As a consequence, and in the absence of mechanisms to prompt the identification of Service children (as exist in state-funded schools and, to a lesser extent, in higher education), there is considerably less motivation for Service children to self-identify.

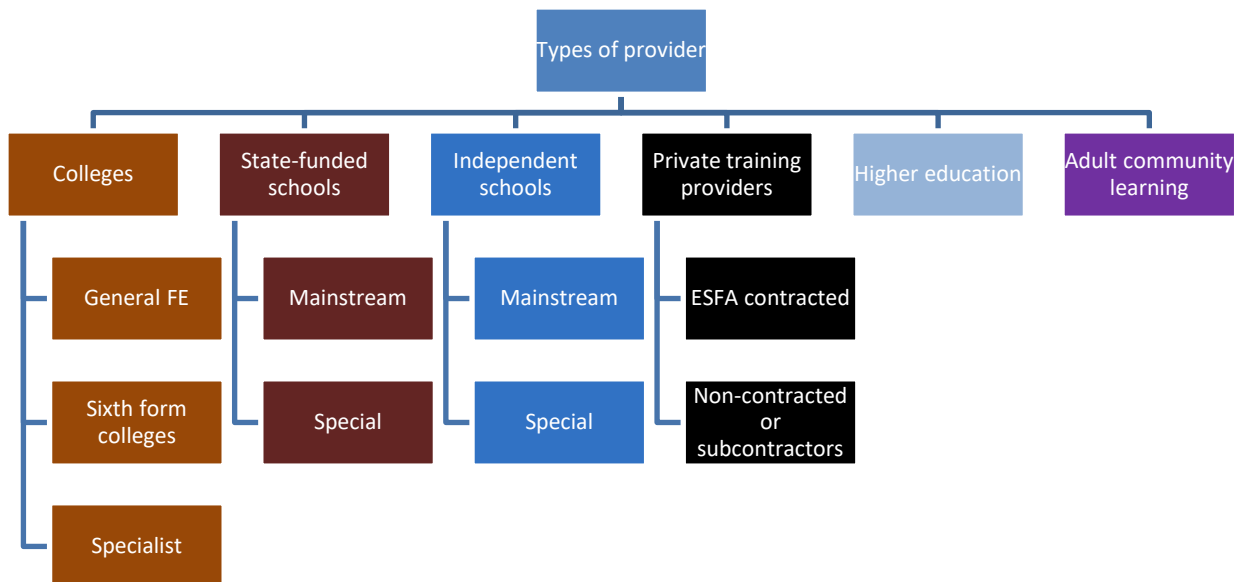
Thus, there have been few systematic attempts to understand the educational experiences of Service children between the end of formal schooling and higher education. While this pilot study cannot hope to offer a comprehensive view, it does offer some groundwork and guidance for future studies.

The report comprises of three sections. The first section attempts to characterise the post-16 education and training sector in England. Given the challenges already discussed, this is by necessity a sketch to illustrate the diversity of providers and provision. The second section reports on an empirical study of the perceptions of Service children's educational needs and experiences as held by leaders of colleges. The third section sets out some conclusions and recommendations for those seeking to develop an engagement with, or support for, post-16 providers.

It is intended that the findings presented here will inform future work in exploring the educational journeys of Service children into, through and beyond post-16 provision. While the fieldwork by necessity addresses only a segment of the sector, it is a segment that accounts for a large proportion of younger learners in the post-16 sector. Thus, it speaks to the possibility of a more holistic understanding of Service children's journeys from school to college and to HE.

1. The post-16 education and training sector in England

This section offers a profile of the post-16 sector, with a particular focus on learners aged 16 and 17. The post-16 education and training sector is complex³. It is comprised of a wide range of providers, including: colleges (general FE, sixth form, and specialist), state-funded schools (including local authority, academies, free schools and special schools), independent schools (mainstream and special), and a large and diverse group of private training providers. Some post-16 FE provision is also offered by higher education institutions. Adult community providers comprise the remainder.



The overall numbers of further education students in England has declined from 3,281,671 in 2015/16 to 2,929,618 in 2019/20⁴. Nevertheless, participation in FE amongst younger learners (aged 16-17) has increased to the highest on record, with rates of young people not in education, employment or training at their lowest⁵.

The college sector

³ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016). *Understanding the Further Education Market in England*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/544310/bis-16-360-fe-market-england.pdf

⁴ Department for Education (2020). *Education and training statistics for the UK*.

⁵ Department for Education (2021). *Participation in education and training and employment*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2020>

The college sector educates in the region of 1.7 million students, and is thus the largest sector for post-16 provision by number of students. As at May 2021⁶ the college sector in England is composed of the following types of institutions:

Type of institution	Number
General further education colleges	163
Sixth form colleges	47
Art, design and performing arts colleges	2
Land-based colleges	12
Institutes of adult learning	10

Table 1: the college sector in England.

Adult learners represent the largest proportion of learners in the college sector, accounting for over half in 2019/20. Of these, 118,000 were studying courses of higher education. Furthermore, 188,000 people were enrolled on apprenticeship provision, of whom 55,000 were aged under 19.

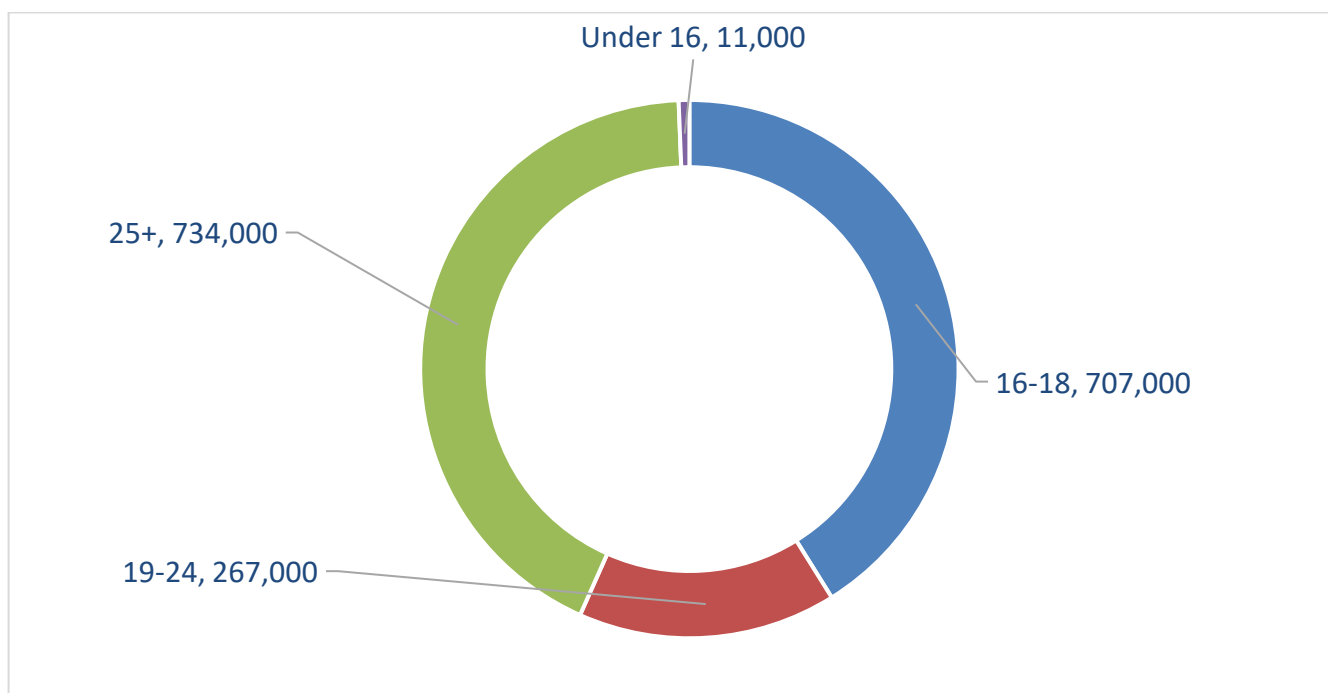


Figure 1: college learners by age, 2019/20

Learners aged 16 or 17

⁶ Association of Colleges (2021). *College Key Facts 2021/22*.

As of 2020, approaching 91.2% of those aged 16 or 17 were in some form of education or apprenticeship; 3.9% were not in education, employment or training. Of the remainder, 2.8% were in wider training and 2.1% in employment⁷.

By far the largest proportion of learners aged 16/17 were studying for level 3 qualifications. Of these, almost 70% were studying A levels. Around 12% were pursuing Applied General qualifications, while 14% were combining A levels with Applied General qualifications.

It should also be noted that 16% of learners were pursuing level 2 qualifications, over two thirds of whom were studying for GCSEs.

Type of qualification	N	%
Level 3	858,989	77.8%
Level 2	176,968	16.0%
Level 1	31,114	2.8%
Other	29,165	2.6%
Higher education	8,112	0.7%
Total	1,104,348	

Table 2: learners aged 16 or 17 by level of study.

The college sector (general FE, tertiary, specialist and sixth form colleges) accounted for almost half of 16-17 year olds in education. State-funded schools accounted for 42.5%.

Type of provider	N	%
State-funded schools	469,071	42.5%
General FE, tertiary and specialist colleges	431,857	39.1%
Sixth form colleges	101,762	9.2%
Independent schools	80,843	7.3%
Special schools	13,238	1.2%
Total	1,104,348	

Table 3: learners aged 16-17 by type of provider, England, 2020

⁷ Department for Education (2021). *Participation in education and training and employment*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2020>

Learners in state school and independent school post-16 provision, and in sixth form colleges, were overwhelmingly pursuing A levels, while those in the college sector pursued a greater diversity of qualifications. This illustrates the differing ‘missions’ of providers serving younger post-16 learners. The general FE college sector, in particular, plays a significant role in provision of level 2 qualifications e.g. as a means of catching up or correcting for under-attainment at school.

Type of provider	A levels as % of learners	Other level 3 as % of learners	Level 2 as % of learners
State-funded schools	85.4%	12.5%	1.9%
Independent schools	82.9%	2.7%	9.7%
General FE, tertiary and specialist colleges	10.3%	43.8%	36.0%
Sixth form colleges	73.0%	21.7%	4.7%
College sector total	22.3%	39.5%	30.0%

Table 4: qualifications as proportion of total of learners aged 16-17 by type of provider, England, 2020⁸

Post-16 provision in secondary schools varies according to locality and type of school. Around 61% of all state-funded secondary schools in England have sixth form provision; these schools have a total of almost 2.2 million students aged 11-18 on roll. Secondary academies and free schools are more likely to have sixth form provision than are local authority maintained schools. As of 2021, academies represent the largest group of state funded secondary schools in England, and approximately 1.7 million pupils attend academies that also have sixth form provision.

⁸ Department for Education (2021). *Participation in education and training and employment*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2020>

Type of secondary school	Number with sixth form	% with sixth form	Total pupils on roll
Local authority maintained schools	362	52.5	419,228
Academies	1461	63.1	1,738,039
Free schools	155	63.5	72,748

Table 5: secondary schools with sixth form provision by type⁹.

The proportion of students attending state-funded secondary schools whose schools have sixth forms varies by region. In London, around 81% of state-funded secondary schools have sixth forms; these account for 86% of pupils who attend state-funded secondaries. In the North West, this declines to 41% of schools and 47% of pupils respectively. At local authority level further differences reveal themselves. In fourteen local authorities¹⁰, eight of which are in London, all state secondaries have sixth form provision. By contrast, two local authorities¹¹ have no state secondaries with sixth form provision. This indicates the potential for different patterns of institutional choice, different patterns of provision and therefore also different routes from secondary education to FE and beyond.

Region	% of state-funded secondary schools with sixth forms	% of pupils attending state-funded secondary schools whose schools have sixth forms
East Midlands	66.1	73.0
East of England	62.8	72.9
London	80.9	86.3
North East	45.5	60.1
North West	40.8	46.9
South East	66.1	71.2
South West	61.9	70.4
West Midlands	61.4	69.1
Yorkshire and the Humber	51.6	60.0

Table 6: state-funded secondary schools with sixth forms by region

⁹ Department for Education (2021). *Get Information About Schools*. <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

¹⁰ Barking and Dagenham, Bath and North East Somerset, Bracknell Forest, Brent, Buckinghamshire, Camden, Coventry, Hillingdon, Medway, Merton, North Northamptonshire, Sutton, Wandsworth, Westminster.

¹¹ Bury, Rutland.

These differential patterns of provision and choice may be significant in the experiences of Service children in accessing post-16 provision. In Hampshire, which has the largest number of Service children, the vast majority of those in state secondary provision attend schools without sixth forms. Thus, the majority of Service children in post-16 institutions are likely to be found in the college sector, whether studying for A levels, vocational qualifications or apprenticeships. By contrast, in localities such as Plymouth and Kent, the vast majority of Service children are likely to attend schools with sixth forms, and therefore may be more likely to be dispersed between institutions. This suggests that strategies for engaging the Service child community and their post-16 providers are likely to need to reflect the local organisation of post-16 provision.

Local authority	Number of Service pupil premium recipients (secondary) (January 2020)	% of state-funded secondary schools with sixth forms	% of pupils attending state-funded secondary schools whose schools have sixth forms
Hampshire	2735	11.9	15.7
Wiltshire	2583	69.0	79.7
Lincolnshire	1994	69.8	81.3
North Yorkshire	1302	58.1	71.8
Plymouth	1192	94.4	96.3
Oxfordshire	984	84.6	91.8
Cornwall	957	38.7	48.6
Kent	891	94.9	97.0
Devon	837	53.9	60.2
Dorset	749	50.0	70.0

Table 7: top ten local authorities for secondary-aged service pupil premium recipients by proportion of state secondaries with sixth form provision.

However, at present there are no definitive statistics as to the proportion of Service children in post-16 provision. Whilst the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) has enabled an approximation of school-aged children from armed forces families in the state sector, schools cannot claim SPP for children beyond year 11. Thus, no similar estimate of the Service child population in post-16 provision can currently be made.

Service children attain approximately as well at Key Stage 4 as their non-Service non-disadvantaged peers¹². Hence on the basis of attainment alone, Service children might be expected to progress to post-16 provision in similar patterns. However, no definitive data exists as to the patterns of types of institution attended and subject choices made by Service children entering post-16 provision.

Conclusions

The landscape for post-16 learning in England is complex and diverse. A range of providers – public and private, generalist and specialist – deliver a wide range of qualifications to a diverse group of learners. The college sector accounts for the largest proportion of learners in further education. Adult learners represent the largest group, accounting for over half of learners in the college sector. Amongst learners aged 16-17, almost half are to be found in colleges, with just over 40% in state-funded schools.

However, these headline figures mask a diversity of provision and educational purpose. Colleges, for example, play a significant role in the provision of level 2 qualifications (e.g. GCSEs) to post-16 learners, and have also cultivated a range of higher education provision. Schools with sixth forms, by comparison, tend to focus on A levels as the mainstay of their post-16 provision.

Thus, in engaging with and supporting post-16 providers, careful account needs to be taken of the context of each institution – its educational provision, the needs of the local population it serves, its position in the market and so on. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be satisfactory.

Furthermore, there are geographical differences in the organisation and provision of post-16 provision. This means that:

- (a) Service children's patterns of progression from school to post-16 education can vary;
and
- (b) Post-16 providers are likely to vary in the extent to which Service children's education is a live issue.

¹² Ministry of Defence (2020). *Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report*.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/943501/6.6856_MO_D_Covenant-Annual-Report-2020_Full-Pages_A4_v16.1_web_3_.pdf

Therefore, consideration of the local structure of post-16 provision, particularly for younger learners, is also critical.

2. Exploring the perceptions of post-16 staff

Introduction

A small-scale pilot project was conducted to explore the perceptions of staff in post-16 providers – in this case, the college sector in England - regarding Service children’s educational experiences. The college sector was chosen as the focus of this study for three reasons.

- Firstly, as noted in chapter 1, the college sector accounts for around half of all learners aged 16-17 in post-16 provision. Hence is likely to be a significant destination for Service children following school.
- Secondly, the college sector is considerably less disparate than the school sector, and certainly less complex than the private training sector. Thus it is more straightforward to identify key providers in localities with large numbers of Service children.
- Thirdly, schools with sixth forms *and* significant numbers of Service children on roll are likely to be able to apply their existing understanding of Service children’s experiences into their post-16 provision (for example through staff teaching at Key Stages 3 and 4 and post-16). The college sector, by contrast, is under-researched in terms of Service children’s education.

The objective of the research was not to produce generalisable conclusions about the state of Service children’s experiences in the college sector. Rather, it aimed to generate some key points for consideration by those seeking to begin a dialogue with post-16 providers, and to provide some groundwork to support future larger-scale research into Service children’s experiences in the post-16 sector.

Method

A short online questionnaire was circulated to principals of general further education and sixth form colleges in localities with significant numbers of Service children. The questionnaire asked the following questions:

- Approximately how many Service children are there in your institution?
- How strong would you say is your understanding of the experiences of Service children? Please give yourself a score on a scale of 1-10, where 1 = weakest and 10 = strongest.
- Does your institution provide any targeted support specifically for Service children?

The questionnaire also contained an invitation to participate in a qualitative follow-up interview.

A total of 9 out of 40 questionnaire responses were received, giving a response rate of 22.5%. Three participants were subsequently interviewed.

Sampling strategy

The aim of the sampling strategy was to ensure coverage of the branches of the Services, ensure a balance of geographical representation, and to reflect the geographical concentrations of Service children. Given the diversity of Service families, this approach aimed to avoid over-representation of types of experience. Using the SCiP Alliance online targeting tool¹³, using data derived from the allocation of Service Pupil Premium in England (a proxy for the population of Service children in schools) and tacit understanding of the locations of key Service populations, thirteen local areas were selected. As of the January 2020 school census these localities collectively account for 37% of Service Pupil Premium recipients and have Service children in 69% of state schools. Forty general further education and sixth form colleges were identified in these areas using the Department for Education's *Get Information About Schools*¹⁴ service.

Some localities with comparatively small numbers of Service children were included because, as key urban centres, they contained FE providers with catchment areas that extend into more rural localities with larger numbers of Service children. Also note that some localities are served by consortiums of providers that operate multiple centres in multiple localities.

¹³ <https://www.scipalliance.org/map>

¹⁴ <https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

Locality	Number of Service Pupil Premium recipients (January 2020)	Proportion of schools with Service Pupil Premium recipients	Number of general FE and sixth form colleges included in sample
North Yorkshire	3705	46%	4
Darlington	375	67%	1
York	495	64%	1
North Lincolnshire	245	47%	1
North East Lincolnshire	210	57%	2
Lincolnshire	4640	58%	3
Rutland	600	50%	1
Peterborough	405	35%	1
Cambridgeshire	985	42%	3
Hampshire	7585	61%	12
Portsmouth	940	64%	2
Southampton	115	41%	3
Wiltshire	7400	72%	2
Devon	2020	50%	4

Table 8: localities included in the sample

Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams and analysed by the researcher. Analysis proceeded via *bricolage* approach¹⁵ that employs both the objective representation of interviewees' statements and interpretation in terms of the researcher's own understanding. The approach thus aims to understand the key issues in their particular contexts¹⁶. Given that the interviews represented but three perspectives within a complex and wide-ranging sector, it would not be appropriate to overly-generalise from the findings. Rather, the perspectives of the interviewees and the researcher's interpretations are intended to point to possibilities and considerations that may inform larger-scale work.

Results

Questionnaire results

¹⁵ Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing Interviews*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

¹⁶ Hargreaves (1994) in Kvale (2007).

Nine responses were received from a total sample size of 40. By default the questionnaires were anonymous, but respondents were invited to provide their contact details should they be willing to engage in a follow-up interview. From this it was evident that, although the questionnaire invitations were explicitly directed at college principals and chief executives, many chose to delegate their institution's responses to colleagues, notably vice principals and leads for student support.

Respondents were asked to indicate how many Service children there were in their institution. Notably, given the numbers of students served by participating institutions, only one participant reported having more than 50 Service children on roll. Two respondents indicated that they did not know how many were on roll, while one reported that there were none:

Number of Service children	None	1-10	11-20	21-50	More than 50	Don't know
Number of respondents	1	2	2	1	1	2

Respondents were asked to score their own understanding of Service children's experiences, where 1 indicated weakest understanding and 10 indicated strongest understanding. Responses varied widely, with responses spread across the scale. All respondents therefore indicated at least some understanding:

Score	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Respondents	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	2	0	1

Interviews

Three interviews were conducted with staff members of varying levels of seniority and responsibility. All three were employed in different providers.

Interviewee	Role	Institution type	Locality
A	Student services lead	General FE college	East Midlands
B	Principal	Sixth form college	South East
C	Tutor	Sixth form college	South East

The following emerged as key themes:

Perceptions of Service children and their needs

Interviewees expressed a range of perceptions about Service children and their needs.

Mobility was raised as a particular factor; this was associated with disruption to friendships:

“Do they make close relationships wherever they go now? Because if you know that you're going to move in a year or two years, is it worth it?” (Interviewee A)

Mobility was also associated with disruption to attainment at school level, with a subsequent impact on progression post-16:

“It not only has an impact on their GCSEs, it then has an impact with us or with any college you're looking at because you're going to be going ‘actually, you don't have as many qualifications and they're not as at high a level’ because you suddenly moved and had like six months of teaching at the new school trying to get set, get used to everything” (Interviewee C)

The same interviewee noted that such students might then face a situation where they were unable to access the post-16 provision that they would have wanted as they did not meet the entry requirements, whereas the provision that was accessible to them may not be as appealing.

However, mobility was also recognised as a potential source of strength in comparison to non-mobile peers. This might have the benefit of enabling Service students to deal with transitions, or to maintain a clear sense of their priorities:

“...because they often have travelled a lot, they're often very independent and very able to navigate that transition in ways that some of our other people find more difficult” (Interviewee B)

“...maybe because you go ‘right. I'm not going to make loads and loads of friends at school because I might be moving. I'm just going to focus on this’” (Interviewee C)

The fact of being from a Service family was not in itself viewed as a vulnerability, though it was recognised that an intersection of life factors meant that Service children could fall into

other categories of vulnerability. There was a recognition of perceived strengths gained through Service life. However, the diversity of Service children's backgrounds was recognised, along with the complexity of their experiences. Service children were thus recognised as bearing a mixture of challenges and strengths, thus there was the need to respond from a strengths-based perspective and to avoid stereotyping:

“So it's really that they have an advantage and a disadvantage, and what can we do to kind of capitalize on their strengths?” (Interviewee A)

Links with the Services

Interviewees mentioned few specific links with the Services. Where links were highlighted, these tended to be in the context of careers events for current students, curriculum enrichment activities, and in providing skills training to Service personnel. However, no interviewees mentioned dialogue with the Services regarding the education of Service children. Improved knowledge about the local context for the Services was highlighted as a particular need, which indicates the potential for closer liaison between providers and the local Service community.

Significance of local and institutional context

Similarly, interviewees highlighted the significance of both the local and the institutional context in terms of their provision. The particular contexts for the populations served was held to be significant in understanding institutions' priorities:

“we've got a very broad curriculum from pre entry all the way through to Level 3 so, you know, very very sizably inclusive in what we do, but predominantly serving the town and the areas around us” (Interviewee B)

Where providers undergo mergers or other forms of restructuring, this can have an impact on institutional priorities and provision. One interviewee noted that their institution had merged with another provider serving a distinctly different locality; this has required the alignment of working practices across the two providers, and in some cases the development of new approaches. This can be challenging and time-consuming:

“If it’s obvious that one institution’s got the best processes, it’s really easy when that’s the case. But if they’ve both got, you know, areas of improvement, you really need to scratch them and start from square one again” (Interviewee A)

As noted earlier, knowledge of the local context for the Service community was identified as important, particularly where the local populations exhibited particular needs or requirements. In addition to formal institutional links with the Service community, the knowledge and understanding of Service family life amongst colleagues and senior leaders was noted as a potential asset:

“But some of the senior leadership within college grew up as service children, so I think there is an understanding there that it certainly can have an impact” (Interviewee C)

“I’m quite fortunate I’ve got guys that are ex-RAF, I’ve got people that have been married to service people that are still in the services and they’ve got kids and you know and all the rest of it. So I’m quite lucky with the resource that I’ve gotten” (Interviewee A)

In some providers individual staff members may become recognised as *the* key point of contact regarding Service matters:

“I know now that a lot of my colleagues know that if they’ve got issues with service [children] and I’ll come and talk to me and [can] say "what do you think? What about this?" And I’ll be like, yeah, 'cause I’ve now become the expert, apparently” (Interviewee C)

However, it is also possible that Service children will not have been identified in such terms at a strategic level. As the sole principal interviewed notes:

“I mean, if we’ve got students wanting to join Midway the admissions team will usually come and talk to me about that... I can’t remember being talked about to about service children in that capacity” (Interviewee B)

Where the FE context differs from school

Interviewees noted ways in which the context for schools differed from that of further education.

In contrast to schools, the organisation of learning in FE meant that turbulence amongst student numbers was less of an issue. Starting level 3 provision mid-year was generally not possible because:

“students are not starting courses past sort of November, October time because the catch up work and the demands on that and the study time in the tuition that they've missed out on” (Interviewee A)

Nevertheless, one interviewee noted that changes to the structure of some provision might enable some accommodation of in-year starters, though this was not unproblematic:

“We do get some. And they are really difficult to accommodate because of the way the courses work, but less now we've got linear A levels we can kind of patch things in, but it is quite difficult if they've, you know, really, it's a September start or not for us” (Interviewee B).

Another key difference relates to the responsibility of providers to retain and place students, for example when learners are disengaged:

“one of your biggest difference in coming to college is that if you're not working, if you're not doing stuff. If you're not behaving, you don't have to stay. And I don't have to find you somewhere else to go” (Interviewee C)

This reflects a general sense of FE as a transitional space between school and the adult world, or a “halfway house between school and uni” (Interviewee C). This, then, is reflected in the dynamic of the relationship between provider and students. Students are expected to take greater ownership of that relation, which diminishes the significance of parental contact compared with schools:

“I think even at 16 there's a bit more of an expectation of students to be a bit more proactive. A lot of the information we send we send to the student rather than to your parent for you” (Interviewee C)

In some cases engagement with families might still be necessary, for example in understanding a student's family situation. However, compared with schools, this may be

used as a second-order approach. As a result, the establishment of the relation between provider and student is critical. A particular example of this is that it is the choice of students as to whether to disclose their Service child status. In some cases this can manifest itself in a reluctance to self-identify:

“I know there are some who are very clear that they don't want people to know which is fine and I get that” (Interviewee C)

This reinforces the importance of building trust in order to establish openness as a prerequisite to promoting disclosure:

“Are you one of me or you know that kind of thing, so perhaps I'm not going to disclose everything to you, man in the office who I've met for the first time today” (Interviewee A)

The key point here is that Service children in further education are not children, hence the need to understand the nuances of adolescence and young adulthood and how this impacts on the provision of support:

“You know, like this in their minds, they're already an adult when they're in year 11. So it's just kind of gearing the things around you know and appreciating that it's the 16 to 18 is more akin to adult mental health than it is to... child mental health and things like this” (Interviewee A)

Practices of identification and support

Interviewees highlighted a range of practices that they use to identify and support students from Service families.

Some providers will have established formal processes for identifying Service children, for example through application or enrolment documentation. This can be backed up with further opportunities for students to self-identify in order to provide “a second chance of being able to pick it up” (Interviewee C). Nevertheless, even formal mechanisms may not lead to self-identification, and therefore other, more incidental or serendipitous means may be used. One interviewee gave the example of students first declaring their Service status when preparing their UCAS applications:

Certainly when we when we know students are certainly on the second year, students are doing the UCAS applications and we will find things come through” (Interviewee C)

Other opportunities to identify Service children also arise through established pastoral, tutorial and support mechanisms, albeit not dedicated specifically to supporting Service children:

“I also have a team out in curriculum areas that are based out in staff rooms to do that kind of frontline pastoral care and support and they run the tutorial programs as well. And they come through that essentially” (Interviewee A)

“I think we've got a really strong tutorial system here I've seen with the one to ones with personal tutors, so, and obviously we've got lots of referral systems within the college as well that they can be supported with us - wellbeing support, financial support, academic support. So I think there is a really robust structure that would capture them, but not necessarily just because they are Service children” (Interviewee B)

Such approaches rely on identification on a case-by-case basis, hence do not necessarily generate an accurate picture of the Service child population in the student body:

“It was like, ‘how many of you have got? You know, I've got one in my group. I've got one in there. I've got one in there’, and that's - I mean is it's no more accurate than that” (Interviewee A)

Nor does such ad-hoc identification necessarily lead to systematic monitoring:

“So it's quite likely that in that conversation that will come to light, but we won't have flagged it in any way” (Interviewee B).

Systematic identification of Service children was held to be important in monitoring attendance, retention and progression, and also for informing proactive support:

“I can get on the jump 'cause we do our internal our own internal surveys to identify vulnerabilities that might not be declared on application form so we can look at those” (Interviewee A)

'There are occasions where I would know that I have students who are from certain service families who, when we have a one to one, I will directly say 'so, how's things going in college or at home?' ...we will have a bit of a conversation about that and ... trying just to see if there's any other support we can offer" (Interviewee C)

However, the importance of building understanding of students' particular contexts was also highlighted, both for understanding their trajectories and for informing support. Thus there was the recognition of the distinctiveness of individual circumstances, and hence the heterogeneity of Service children:

"we make sure that every student has a personal tutor who teaches them so they get to know that in person really well, and I think that's obviously quite important as well, because understanding the context of how those results came about for us is quite important there" (Interviewee B)

But that understanding is key with anything. I think if you if you're not able to empathize, you know, you're not really able to, you know, 'here's a counselling leaflet' just doesn't really cut it" (Interviewee A)

Barriers to providing support

Interviewees highlighted a number of factors that they perceived as barriers to identifying and supporting Service children. Compared with other groups of students, there can be a general lack of access to robust data or evidence of the impact of Service life or the needs of Service students:

If it's if the children is from a care situation you've got, 'OK, well, I need to put financial support in place, I need to put the bursary in place, and I need to do this and this.' So we know we don't know the whole picture but we know a chunk of it so that helps us get on the, you know, off on the good foot with putting mechanisms in place for those students, but there's really nothing out there [for Service children] that I've seen" (Interviewee A)

A lack of longitudinal understanding of the impact of Service life is a particular barrier:

“How did it impact on your schooling and may still be impacting, but again, not the students, not necessarily knowing or identifying that” (Interviewee C)

The Covid-19 pandemic was identified as a particular barrier to understanding the impact of Service life:

“I think it's going to be difficult to kind of look at that and confirm how much of an impact all of it has. There's always gonna be a little bit of provisionality in these times at the moment” (Interviewee C)

Students' prior schools can be important sources of information. However, this can depend on the relations that FE providers have established with schools. Even where good relations are established, information may be sought on a reactive – rather than proactive - basis:

“Usually the relationships are good enough that if we've got any concern, we can pick up the phone and ask. That generally works, but obviously by then we've identified the problem rather than being on the front foot with it” (Interviewee B)

Part of the challenge may lie in that schools do not necessarily see it as their responsibility to pass on information specific to Service children:

“We don't really have anything for this 'cause it's not part of the school files responsibility to send this over. They've got send us the safeguarding files, they don't have to really send us anything else” (Interviewee A)

Information declared by students may also not be entirely reliable owing to difference in the interpretation of certain concepts. This can lead to providers having to “second guess” or dig deeper into students' situations, for example in the case of caring responsibilities:

“Well taking your little sister to school is not really a caring responsibility, but it all goes down on the form at that point... so we've got a bit of cleansing to do” (Interviewee A)

Hence self-declaration may not be sufficient to generate a good sense of a student's circumstances or needs. However, for some providers the effort needed to understand the experiences of their Service children may be a barrier in itself:

“I think some colleges look at it and go, ‘well, that's more work for someone to do because we haven't done it so far’” (Interviewee C)

Compared with schools and universities, post-16 providers have not necessarily experienced a policy impetus to address the Service child agenda. This may be due to a priority focus on those groups deemed to be vulnerable in some form:

“And there hasn't been a label on it from the government, as is a vulnerable category in terms of 16 to 18's for us” (Interviewee A)

A lack of commercial or financial incentive to do so may also be a barrier. Schools in England, for example, are able to claim additional funding in the form of the Service Pupil Premium. Such mechanisms are not available to post-16 providers:

“So I think maybe colleges from purely financial point of view might go ‘there's no benefit for us to do this’” (Interviewee C)

Commercial considerations – for example stemming from competition in recruiting students – may present barriers to sharing information, for example:

“people know that we're not doing as well for that group then they might not come here. They might go over there and then we're losing students” (Interviewee C)

Furthermore, some providers may experience difficult financial circumstances which might necessitate a closer focus on groups deemed to be higher priority. Providers may have particular mechanisms for identifying priority groups (for example on the basis of vulnerability), and certain groups may take priority owing to the circumstances of the times – the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent focus on young people's mental health being particular examples:

“I've mentioned a few - looked after children, students with EHCPs. These have all become really, really at the forefront since obviously the pandemic” (Interviewee A)

“so maybe at the moment considering students' mental health is considered a key focus because there might be more students who that is an issue for than service children” (Interviewee C)

For some institutions, more robust evidence of the scale of the Service child agenda in their particular contexts may be crucial in driving activity, although variable student numbers can be an obstacle in this regard:

“You know, if I've got this many staff, there's only so much that that many staff are able to do so, but if we see upward trends and things like that in the amount of numbers that we're getting, certainly that then may become more of a priority in terms of where we put our time” (Interviewee A)

Access to relevant support and training was identified as a particular barrier. This was due to a general lack of clarity about how to access such support, and the frustration that arises when training sessions are tailored more towards supporting children in schools than 16-18 year olds:

“You know, it's just when the local authority put on training and you go to it and it's like mental health for children and in schools and colleges... 80% of that will be school, school, school... that's a bit of a bugbear for us 'cause I've sat on countless training sessions where you've got that situation. There's a need to speak your language and speak to your situation for you and your students” (Interviewee A)

Opportunities for promoting better support

It was recognised that some providers might be further ahead in their capacity to identify and support Service children, hence the importance of fostering the sharing of knowledge and experience between providers:

“I hope that we've not - the FE sector as a whole - I hope that we've not missed a trick on this. But at the same time I imagine there'll be plenty of colleges identifying students that will have these support mechanisms in place so the college network inside of things I think is really, really important as well” (Interviewee A)

Consistency of approach, particularly in terms of recording and data generation, was also seen as a particular need, for example in preventing a piecemeal approach:

“I think the ability to have all institutions record Service children on application I think is massive because when I've looked into doing other things and try to see if we can do

some comparison with other colleges, they've kind of said 'how do you record this?' And it's like, well, one application form and they get in there because we don't use the generic application form" (Interviewee C)

Coupled with greater understanding of the local context (e.g. robust information about the profile of the Service presence in the locality) such an approach would help providers to better assess their own situations. This includes identifying gaps in provision and engagement, as well as building a stronger picture of the needs of the local cohort:

"there's two questions out there really. Are their Service children that aren't accessing currently? Are their Service children at [redacted] that we don't know are Service children?" (Interviewee B)

"So I want to know what's going on in my local area. So I want to know what forces bases you know and, like, what presence there are in the area. How many of those students are in schools. So then I can see then, so what are we likely to get in terms of our next intake and then you know what the common issues are?" (Interviewee A)

"So the more informed we are, the more we can intervene quickly. So it's really about ease of intervention" (Interviewee C)

A particular challenge exists in terms of how to engage and motivate providers with small numbers of Service children. Offering a moral imperative may be a helpful starting point:

"so it's relevant to you 'cause you want to support this child to be the best they can. I suspect in the same way you have that kind of issue at school, saying I have one service child, you know, so... essentially it's starting at the ground floor" (Interviewee C)

As noted earlier, better access to training and information that speaks specifically to the circumstances of post-16 providers was also identified as a priority.

3. Recommendations for further work in supporting post-16 providers

This research has identified a number of factors to consider when planning support for, and further research with, the post-16 education and training sector. For many of these recommendations, responsibility is shared within the SCiP Alliance community and those who see their role in engaging with and supporting post-16 providers. However, some specific roles for schools, the HE sector and the Service community might also be identified.

1. **Begin from the assumption of a diverse sector.** The post-16 landscape is diverse in terms of the types of institutions, their purposes, priorities, funding and governance arrangements. Strategies framed with the FE college sector in mind, for example, may not be effective in engaging private sector providers. Multiple strategies may therefore be needed to address different parts of the sector.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

2. **Local differences matter.** The post-16 sector can be structured differently in different localities. For example, some localities have far less post-16 provision in the state school sector than others. This will have an impact on the range and character of opportunities available to Service children, and hence also an impact on patterns of access and participation in post-16 learning.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

3. **Consider carefully the context and realities for individual post-16 providers.** Support needs to be sensitive to the needs of providers and their learners, for example by taking account of the competing priorities that they may be balancing, competitive tensions in the context of student recruitment etc.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

- 4. Make the case for supporting Service children on business grounds *in addition to moral grounds*.** Moral imperatives to support Service children can be helpful starting points. However, in the absence of statutory instruction, commercial pressures on post-16 providers may be a disincentive to engaging with the Service child agenda at a strategic level. Consider, therefore, how a business case could be made to encourage providers to engage.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

- 5. Consider the local context for the armed forces community.** The impact of Service life on young people can vary according to branch of service and the functions served by particular locations. Cultural factors can also be significant, for example the long association of the Brigade of Gurkhas with north east Hampshire and south west Surrey.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

- 6. Consider possibilities for promoting and strengthening links between providers and the Services.** It may be, for example, that providers have engaged with their local bases in promoting careers in the Services or in providing training for veterans, yet might not have engaged on the question of supporting Service children. In many cases, providers may have few or no links at all.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community and Services.

- 7. Encourage further engagement with institutional leadership.** Senior leaders play an important role in identifying institutional priorities and empowering and supporting their staff to respond. The relative lack of engagement from senior leaders to this research project indicates that further work is needed to raise the Service child agenda to a strategic level within post-16 providers.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

- 8. Consider ways in which understanding can be disseminated throughout providers.** Some institutions with enduring links to the Services may already do this well, with many staff members possessing some understanding of the experiences of Service children. For other providers, there may be a single point of contact with particularly strong understanding. In some providers, understanding may be embedded in pastoral support systems but not in academic support.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

- 9. Remember that post-16 learners are not children, and that colleges are not schools.** Use of language and terminology that is geared towards schools is unlikely to help in engaging post-16 learners or staff. This is particularly important when developing training materials.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

- 10. The relationship between the provider and the student is primary.** Compared with schools, family engagement may be less common. Therefore, considering how to foster that direct relationship between provider and student – for example in building trust and confidence - is important.

Primary responsibility: SCiP Alliance community.

- 11. An absence of consistent data collection is a barrier to understanding.** Policymakers might consider the success of the Service pupil premium in promoting understanding of the Service child population in state schools, and reflect on how proportionate and consistent systems of reporting might be established for the post-16 sector.

Primary responsibility: central government.

- 12. Enhance communication and cooperation between schools and post-16 providers.** Schools can play a role in supporting post-16 providers by ensuring that information about the educational needs of their Service children is communicated to post-16

providers. This would enable providers to prepare and ensure that support systems are set up appropriately. Schools also have a role to play in informing and supporting post-16 colleagues more generally about the educational experiences of Service children.

Primary responsibility: schools, particularly those with significant expertise in supporting Service children.

- 13. Devise and conduct further research into the educational experiences of Service children.** The long-term ambition ought to be to conduct longitudinal investigations into the educational journeys of Service children. While such work can be costly and time-consuming, it can provide a powerful evidence base that can promote a principled engagement with the agenda.

As an interim step, a follow-up study might involve a more in-depth examination of the challenges, strengths and potential support mechanisms relevant to young people in Armed Forces families.

Primary responsibility: HE sector and social research funders.