



The Service Families Task Force (SFTF) continues to work on your behalf to resolve issues that affect Service families. The task force needs evidence from you to take issues forward. So let your families federations, your local HIVE or your unit office know of your difficulties or contact us through the Service Community area of the MOD website: www.sftf.mod.uk.

The current SFTF top issues, in alphabetical order, are:

- Childcare
- Communication
- Education
- Health
- Housing
- Support for families in Greater London

Childcare

The MOD Childcare Strategy has been drafted to give guidance to the Services and Commands to assist in the development of their childcare policies. We all know childcare is a parental responsibility but the MOD aims to set certain standards for key issues, such as availability.

A key part of the strategy is to introduce a Childcare Voucher Scheme, which is dependent on the introduction of Salary Sacrifice on the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system. Although this will take some time the good news is that the Armed Forces Childcare Voucher Scheme is still on course to be introduced by the end of 2007. A fact sheet is available on the Service Community website which we will continue to update as things progress.

Communication

We are looking at being able to use JPA to send information and advice direct to families in specific cases, including when the serving person is away on detachment. This would enhance the current arrangements which involve Service personnel passing information between the Services and families.

In addition families can speak to unit admin officers and welfare staff, their Families Federation, local HIVE or the

SFTF website (www.sftf.mod.uk) for information or guidance.

Education

The formal Government response to the House of Commons Defence Committee inquiry into the education of Service children is available and can be viewed online at www.parliament.gov.uk under publications and committees. The Defence Select Committee was generally positive about MOD support for education, particularly through Service Children's Education (SCE) schools and the support available from the Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS). Most concerns were about education in UK.

We are working closely with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to address the recommendations made in the report. In particular the new Admissions Code for schools in England now has more support for Service children and DfES has reached agreement to identify Service children in the Annual School Census from January 2008. This could provide better evidence of where Service children are not reaching their full potential, allowing DfES, local authorities and schools to take further targeted action.

CEAS provides advice and support to Service families, particularly if experiencing difficulties with admissions, appeals or Special Educational Needs (SEN) support. The Service Community website has comprehensive advice, including the guide for service families on moving, and CEAS can be contacted on 01980 618244 or view the CEAS website at www.ceas.mod.uk.

It is known that in some more isolated locations the cost of eligible nursery places is not always fully met by the ISODET Nursery Allowance. The current policy is to pay up to the equivalent costs in the UK for the same provision. The ISODET Nursery Allowance is being reviewed and we will report the outcome when available.

Health

Access to NHS dental treatment is a nationwide problem but one which can be exacerbated by Service life. The Department of Health is sure that changes such as the new contract for dentists and delivering NHS dental services through Primary Care Trusts will transform access to NHS dental treatment within 2 years. The SFTF will monitor progress on this.

Families should continue to use NHS Direct in England and Wales (and the equivalent in Scotland and Northern Ireland) to access NHS dental services and any problems, including access to private dental treatment, should be reported to the local HIVE,

the Families Federations or direct to the Service Community website.

We are also investigating problems of access to, or continuity with, orthodontic treatment.

Housing

Work continues on identifying options for schemes similar to the Key Worker Living Programme and Shared Equity Scheme in other regions, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Improvements with repair calls made to MHS are being reported. Defence Estates (DE) and Modern Housing Solutions (MHS) are continuing to work closely to resolve the problems experienced since the roll out. If you have had any problems please report these to your local HIVE or Families Federations.

A study to look at the impact of changing the entitlement to SFA to include partners with children is continuing. An 'Unmarried and Separated Personnel Survey' has been undertaken to review demand if entitlement changes. Further work will take place before any change in policy.

Support for Families in Greater London

Welfare support for families living within the M25 continues to be through single Service Chains of Command. Some families in this area feel isolated and do not believe they are as well supported as when they are in a unit. Options for improving the way in which families are connected with the support they need are being considered. Also, a new JSP on Welfare provision is being written which will capture all support available and how it is accessed.

Other Areas of Interest:

Applying for UK Nationality

Eligible Commonwealth soldiers can now apply for British Citizenship whilst they are still in Service. The MOD and the Home Office are reviewing the options for enabling earlier application by dependants as well. More information can be found on the Army website, www.army.mod.uk, under Welfare & Family – Family Support – General – Commonwealth Soldiers.

Private Fostering

If you make a private arrangement to look after a child for whom you do not have legal guardianship, or leave your child in someone else's care, for 28 days or more this is classed as Private Fostering. If you have a private fostering arrangement, you must inform the local authority (or BFSWS/SSAFA-FH overseas).