

# army families federation

## families concerns - January–June 2009

### introduction

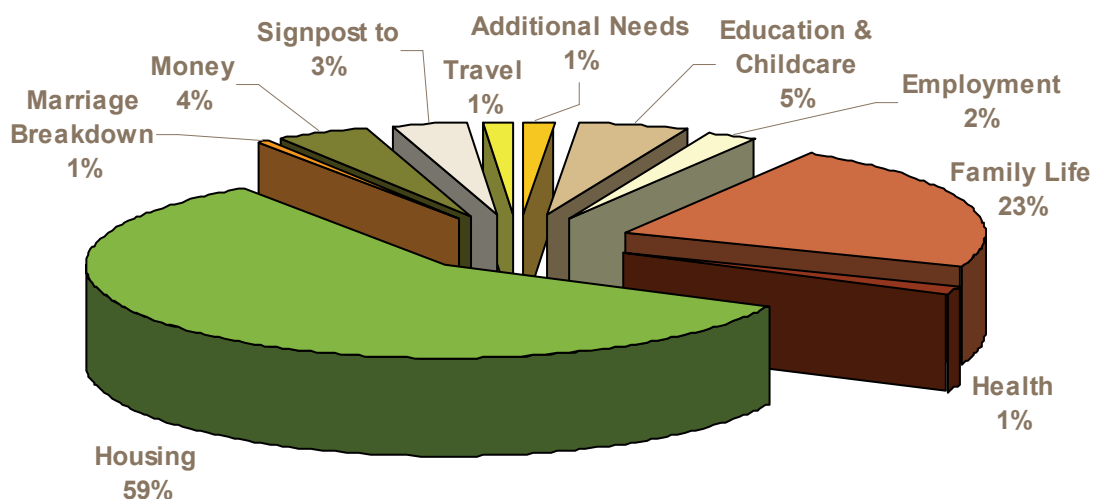
AFF Families' Concerns is produced quarterly<sup>1</sup> to illustrate the issues and concerns that bring Army families to the Army Families Federation. Enquiries are gathered from Army families worldwide, and thus provide an accurate reflection of matters affecting the community. Some families contact AFF to find resolution to problems, some to talk to people who understand their issues and can raise them up the chain of command on their behalf; to log them and try and find resolution for the next generation of Army families. All issues included in this report have been raised with the appropriate agency or member of the chain of command for resolution.

This report is distributed to all those who have an interest in developing and delivering policy and assistance to families - who can help AFF secure a fair deal for all Army families.

### methodology

This is a qualitative report. Families contact AFF staff around the world with their issues which are anonymously logged. This information is then entered onto a central database and used to provide the evidence for this report.

### aff worldwide activity chart



1. Due to staff changes this families concerns covers a six month period.

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### worldwide activity

Between January and June 2009 there was an **increase of 46% in enquiries** (up to 4742 from 3253) to AFF staff over the previous six months.

During this time the AFF have held a number of large events worldwide – families forums and roadshows around Northern Ireland, events associated with National Families Week during May and the inception of the Big Tea Party and the bi-annual Germany Families Conference held in June in Herford.

The AFF have also undertaken a rebranding exercise to bring their logo and public identity up to date. This along with redesigns of the website ([www.aff.org.uk](http://www.aff.org.uk)) and the Families Journal have, we believe, made the organisation more accessible to a wider audience within the Army community.

*“I really enjoy reading the Journal. It is full of information that helps me understand more about life as an Army wife.”*

All but three subject areas experienced an increase in their number of enquiries. Most significantly within **Family Life**, which itself had a **70% increase** in enquiries (from 683 to 1158), the **Foreign and Commonwealth** category saw a **175% increase** (from 100 to 275) in enquiries. In numerical terms this was an increase from 100 enquiries in the last six months of 2008 to 275 enquiries in the first six months of 2009.

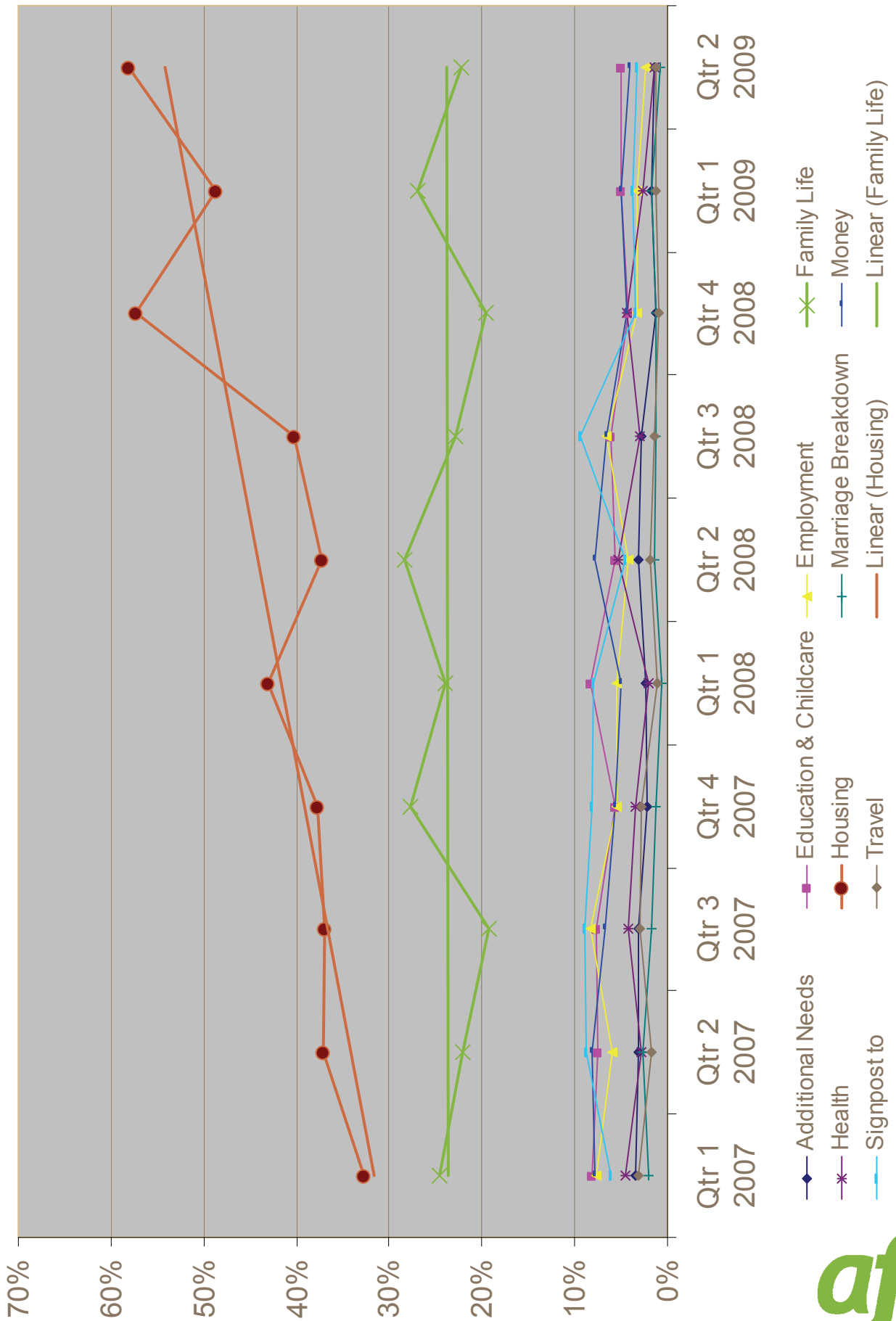
The **Health** category had a **21% decrease** (from 121 to 95) in enquiries compared to the previous six months. Work being conducted as part of the Service Personnel Command Paper may now be being felt by families on the ground. In particular better communication between local authorities, PCTs and the Regional Forces chain of command will have a significant impact. During the summer months AFF staff across the UK will be testing the NHS Choices mobile service which finds NHS dentists in the local area in response to a text sent from a mobile phone. Results will be published with the next edition of Families Concerns.

### trends

Trends over the past two years illustrate the fluctuations in the number of contacts to AFF for most issues. Housing enquiries continue to plot a steady increase in their number whilst Family Life issues, which were thought to be on the increase show a stable number of issues being reported. On the decrease are the number of issues which AFF staff signpost to other agencies. We believe that this is because families come to the AFF when they have already approached a number of other agencies and have either been unable to achieve a resolution or require an AFF staff member to act as a liaison or mediator in an issue.

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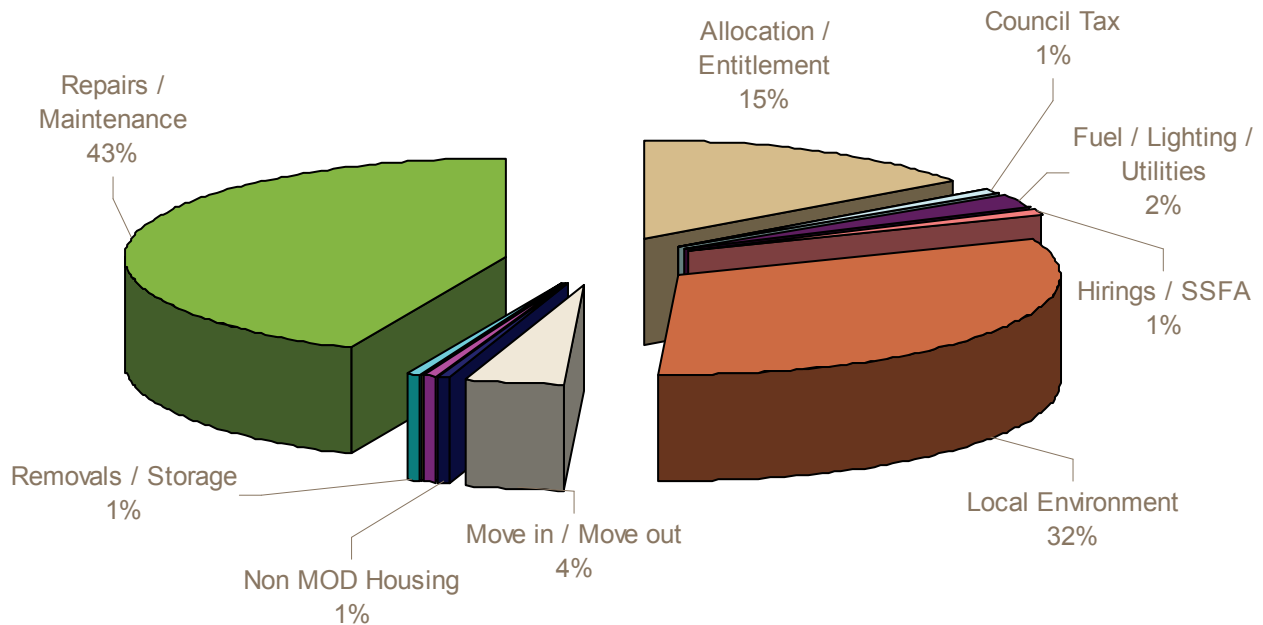


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### housing

(59% of all worldwide enquiries; 67% of GB enquiries January to June 2009)



Housing enquiries rose again in the first six months of 2009. Compared to the previous six months there was an **increase of 57%** (from 1618 to 2544) in the number of enquiries received.

Repairs and maintenance continued to cause problems for many occupants in particular where a job required either multiple trades or visits to complete the work. Introduction of a PDA to sub-contractors is expected to solve these problems and ensure that subsequent visits are automatically booked. Personal experience of the AFF Chief Executive shows that this does not happen in every instance.

Repairs and maintenance accounted for 43% of all housing enquiries (1101):

*“I have been waiting for a dripping tap outside to be fixed for over 3 months the water is now freezing and is dangerous.”*

*“My garden has a broken fence and my children keep getting out, MHS say this is not an emergency and will send someone out to assess the fence. I live on a main road and I feel this is putting the children in danger and I can't let them out to play.”*

*“I have damp in my SFA, MHS have just painted over it, I keep washing it off but it keeps coming back.”*

**aff**

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During the winter months in early 2009 many households experienced particular difficulties with heating and hot water. There was also a frustration amongst families that many empty properties flooded as they had not been prepared properly for bad weather. Dealing with burst pipes and flooding is thought to have cost DE in excess of £1million this winter. AFF will do all that it can during winter 2009-10 to help DE to brief families as to appropriate preventative measures against flooding in cold spells.

*Boiler broken down in 2 bed property. Family have had no heating since 31st Dec and no hot water for 48hrs although this was now working. Given 1 electric heater for whole house. 4 year old daughter very cold. (reported 6 January)*

*“When ringing MHS to report a major flood in an empty SFA they responded with ‘it will have to wait until 8am tomorrow’.”*

We should also point out that we did have some positive comments about MHS

*Lady singing praises of MHS - polite workmen, nice attitude*

Repairs and maintenance are not just a GB issue:

*Client had previously requested AFF assistance with numerous concerns in SFA (particularly damp). Client had been given assurances by housing that action would be taken but to date no action had been taken. – NI*

*Client has been reporting damp and mould in SFA to DE since taking over SFA in September 08. Client has three children under five and they cannot sleep in bedrooms because damp and mould is so bad. DE have painted over damp and have told client that they could not do anything else. – NI*

*Client has a leak in the porch which has been reported many times but never fixed.— NI*

Since holding the Families Forums in Northern Ireland, DE and the maintenance contracts have engaged with families and the chain of command to improve communication and repair waiting times. Some improvements are being seen on the ground but families are still expressing concerns about performance.

*Client's radiator burst over Christmas and has left a big stain in the kitchen ceiling. Workmen said they would come last week to paint but didn't turn up.— Germany*

*“I am unable to use my shed as it does not have any asphalt on the roof. I reported it when I took over the property. While it was not a problem initially because of the fine weather; now it is an issue as there has been a lot of rain recently” – Cyprus (although sheds are not an entitlement, where they are provided they should be maintained)*

The logo for the Army Families Federation (AFF) is displayed in a stylized, lowercase, green font.

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Move in/move out was another area of major concern for families with 4% of housing enquiries (109). There are a number of projects being launched which AFF hope will make a significant difference to families experience of move in/move out.

The pre-paid cleaning scheme has been piloted to great success in Aldershot and there is a plan to launch nationwide in England and Wales over the coming year. Also the handover of quarters between MHS and DE 48 hours before families arrive to move in is a real step forward. This ensures that the DE Housing Officer can inspect the quarter before the family arrive and if necessary refuse it and ask MHS to carry out further works. Should the works be major the family's move can then be delayed. This handover of the property relies on the DE Housing Officer being robust and thorough in their inspection of the quarter and requires DE to provide appropriate staffing levels and training to ensure success.

*“I have just moved into a SFA in Bulford which is covered in fleas, MHS have taken 2 weeks to come and clean the carpets and we are all coved in bites!”*

*“My house was in an unsatisfactory state when I moved in but I had no other option.” – Germany*

Enquiries and concerns relating to the Local Environment around SFA estates continue to increase having now risen to 810 or 32% of housing enquiries. DE and MHS have recently launched an initiative to give ownership of a specified patch to a DE Housing Officer and an MHS Technical Officer. It is envisaged that these officers will know their patches and will be responsible for liaison with families and for solving local issues and complaints. Like the handover this initiative requires the Housing Officers to be robust and to have the time to spend in getting to know their patch, their families and the local issues.

*“The house next door to me is empty and the grass is really long and there is also rubbish in the garden, who should be cleaning this up?”*

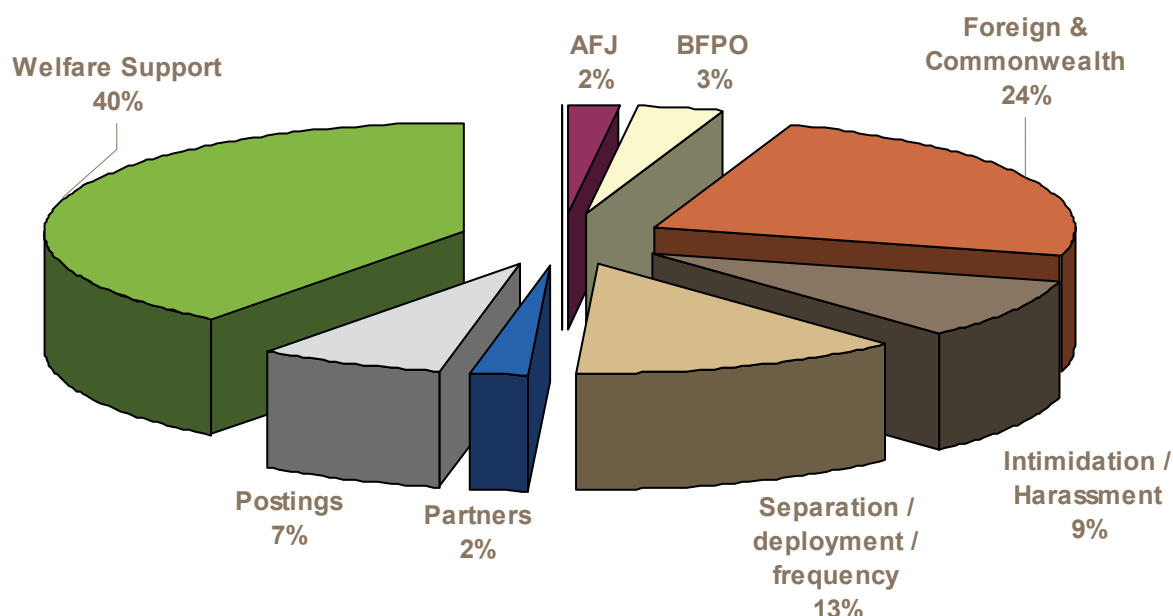
*“Half the communal lights don't work and no one will fix them”*

The beginning of this period saw a fall in the number of enquiries in Allocation and Entitlement but as 'moving season' began again in early summer a steady increase was recorded. Some improvements have been made in the Housing Information Centres but more are needed in order to ensure that Army families moves are made as smooth as possible. Families are repeatedly citing a lack of local knowledge, lack of choice of SFA and distance from unit as issues being experienced.

*“We have been given a private hiring in Amesbury, I feel isolated as I don't drive and can't get to our unit welfare coffee mornings and the children can't see their friends.”*



## family life and the army (23% of all enquiries)



Contacts to the AFF in the family life category have **risen by 2%** as a percentage of total number of enquiries. There was however an **increase of 70% in the actual number of enquiries received** (increased from 683 to 1158) in this category compared to the previous six months and an increase of 42% compared to the same six month in 2008 (813 enquiries in that period).

### foreign and commonwealth

This category has seen a **175% increase** in the number of enquiries to AFF staff and in particular the AFF Foreign and Commonwealth Specialist Katherine Houlston. In numerical terms this meant 100 enquiries in the last six months of 2008 increasing to 275 enquiries during the first six months of 2009.

**lack of information:** there is a lot of information published for families in the Army but the growing number of F&C families perceive that little of it is relevant to them. Many rely on their Unit Welfare Officers for information, the success of this depends upon the UWO in question and their knowledge of what can be complex issues.

**visas:** a large number of F&C families are experiencing visa issues, either for entering the UK or extending visas whilst in the UK or Germany. Whilst there is a certain amount of help once they are in the UK, finding out which visa to complete to get into the UK if you are a dependent of a member of the Armed Forces is difficult and complex. There is little help on the UK Visa website specifically for those coming to join a serving soldier and some families may

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complete the wrong visa by mistake which can then have a damaging impact on the family.

*Email from Canadian lady having problems working out which visa to apply for now that she is posted to Germany. Has been pushed from pillar to post and no one is able to help her.*

**communication:** When the recent UKBA rule change for settlement came into force it took nearly 4 months for the details to be fed down to the Immigration Enquiry Bureau; when a family or even our own specialist phoned the IEB they were told that no such rule existed despite it being detailed on the UKBA website.

**error corrections department at the Borders Agency:** Any mistake with visas (and therefore passports) must be sent to this department for correction, which we believe is badly under resourced. Families are now being told that it could be months before the error is corrected, leaving them not only without a passport but also in many cases with no way of being able to secure employment.

**under 21 rule:** last November, the Government increased the age at which someone might enter the country on a marriage visa, from 18 to 21. This was designed to stop forced marriages. However, the knock on effects for F&C families has been huge. In many cultures it is common to marry at a relatively young age. For example the Royal Gurkha Rifles are moving to the UK from Brunei this summer, and currently 30 families look like they might be separated because the spouses are under 21.

*Call from a soldier whose wife is 20 and came into the country on a marriage visa before the new rules came in. He has now got citizenship, she has to change her visa but has been told she must leave the country and come back when she is 21.*

*A F&C spouse has recently estranged from her husband due to domestic violence. The HIC are asking for rent as she was supposed to have left the quarter but as she has no recourse to public funds she is struggling.*

*An enquiry from a lady who has been in the country for 6 years but because her husband changed visas after he joined the Army and now has citizenship, she still has to wait before she can apply. "I feel totally discriminated against"*

*Canadian lady enquiring about visitors visas and frequency in reapplying. Having problems completing settlement visa as husband is deployed and she needs certified copies of documents which she cannot access.*

The MOD and in particular the Army has recognised some of the problems that F&C families face. There is a whole dept working in Upavon on policy issues but a lot of their work is reactionary and many problems can take years to sort out.

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### separation and deployment

Given the operational tempo it is not surprising that the number of enquiries in this category has **risen by 130%** (rising from 64 to 147) from the previous six months and 63% (90 enquiries) compared to the same period in 2008.

Families report concerns about the length and frequency of operational tours and the information, or lack thereof, that is forthcoming from units. A particular concern is the support that is available for those families who are not part of a formed unit (an individual augmentee) or are part of a small unit with no established UWO post.

*“My husband has been deployed for 4 months out of 6 so far in a year, he was also deployed last year for 5 months. He seems to be away at least 5 months out of every year we have been married 3 years and I never see him, I feel it is too much.”*

*Client concerned about spouse's forthcoming deployment. Client has not received any information from spouse's unit. – NI*

*Contact's husband is deployed and she has not felt there is enough support for her family because her husband is part of a small HQ unit.*

It was not only 'dependant' families who were contacting us with concerns:

*The mother of a soldier had been informed that her son had been burnt but then had struggled to find out when and where he was being brought back to the UK and had found this distressing.*

And it was not only operations that caused separation:

*“My family still had to endure a lot of separation whilst my husband was working at a training establishment but there was little support or recognition of this”*

The recently released Guide to Deployment from PS4(A) has been very well received and contains many useful points that families need to know. AFF's concern is that it may not be accessible for some spouses or parents with reading difficulties and we would like to see a simpler version produced to compliment the current comprehensive guide. It is understood that PS4(A) along with DM&C Land are looking at this as an option.

The amount of contact between AFF and TA units has steadily risen over the last six months thanks to a mailing campaign by the specialist, Joanna Belgarnie, and increased awareness as to the work of AFF generally within this part of our community. AFF are able to send the Families Journal to TA families only when the serving soldier is on deployment but this has been successful so far. When a TA soldier or Individual Augmentee transits through RTMC Chilwell they are strongly encouraged to complete a form providing details of their family member (spouse, parent or partner) whom they feel would benefit from contact with the AFF.

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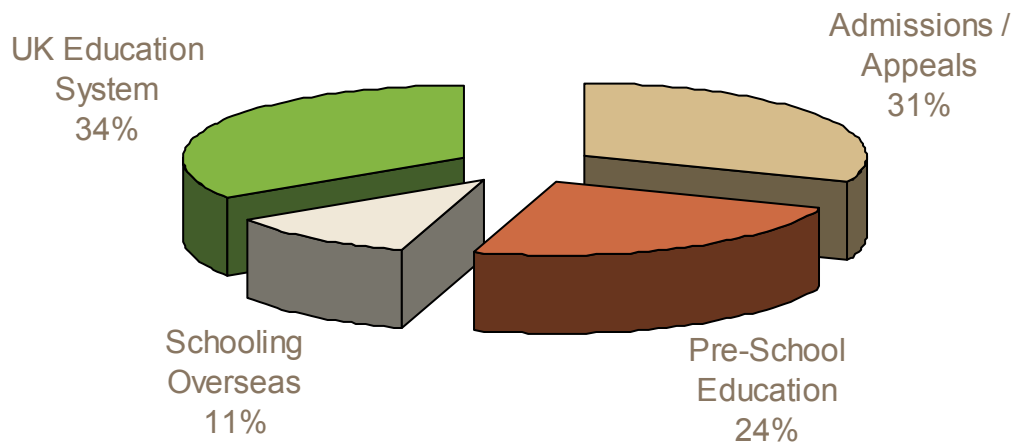
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During a visit by the Chief Executive to the TA Regiment patrolling the Green Line in Cyprus, soldiers expressed their concern as to how a single ROSO could provide support to families distributed from Aberdeen, to Northern Ireland and down to Devon. AFF are becoming increasingly concerned as to how any Unit Welfare Officer can effectively communicate with distributed families in their current guise and with their current level of resources.

## education and childcare

(5% of all enquiries)



Whilst a small percentage of the overall enquiries received by AFF are those involving education, and therefore children, are often the most emotive and from the point of view of the family urgently needs resolution. The number of enquiries has **increased by 45%** (rising from 164 enquiries to 237) compared to the previous six months and by 10% compared to the same period in 2008.

*“Once children are of school age moving becomes even more traumatic because of the battle to get them into a decent school.”*

A small mention was made to school admissions in the Service Personnel Command Paper but as can be seen from the comments below any consideration of the impact of mobility by the admissions system have failed to impact on families.

*“Due to a posting we missed application deadlines for coordinated admission schemes and the LA is refusing to treat our case as exceptional. CEAS have not been able to make them change their minds. I do not feel properly represented.”*

*“We have had a primary school application rejected. My older child goes to this school because when we moved into the area it was the only place we were offered. My younger child has now been rejected because we live too far away”*

*“New local authority will not accept unit address in absence of quarter address - I thought they were supposed to do this?”*

Finding school places can be especially difficult when relocating from overseas:

*“Moving from Canada to London - can't get three children into same school. What can we do?”*

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*“Moving from Kenya to Aldershot - authority is refusing to put children on waiting list until we are in the country.”*

*Client has been posted back to the UK, had a place for her youngest within a school chosen by herself, only to be told weeks later she had to give up the place for a local person moving into one of the housing estates near to the school*

It is not just the allocating authorities that have caused problems to families. Recent changes to the Majors posting boards caused much reaction, especially in Germany. AFF will be monitoring the situation closely to September 09 to see the effect of the first May No 5 Board.

*“The May board for Major postings is far too late to have a house allocated and then find a school locally. “*

Families have also been contacting AFF in regard to Continuity of Education Allowance. Not only has coverage of spending cuts in the media sparked concerns that the allowance may be under threat, others have reported that increasingly the rate of allowance does not meet the cost of schools that offer full pastoral care facilities for full boarders. These concerns have been raised with PS10(A).

Changes to the 11+ system in Northern Ireland are causing a number of problems for families posted to the province. In particular the ability for their children to access the Common Entrance Assessment after the closing date. Those families with postings meaning that they arrive after the closing date will not currently be able to access the Grammar School system in that year. AFF Northern Ireland are working with the chain of command in NI to find a solution.

Availability of childcare in Germany Garrisons was fiercely represented at the AFF Germany Families Conference and is reflected in the high number of enquiries to AFF staff across BFG. Families report a lack of consistent, affordable childcare provision. There are concerns about premises (a crèche in Hohne is based within a first floor flat) and particularly for serving parents, a lack of full time or out of hours provision. DCOS UKSC reported at the AFF Germany Conference that a full Childcare Sufficiency Audit would take place shortly in order to assess requirements, but many of the audience questioned the value of the audit as with mobility of the population the requirement will constantly change.

*“I would like to work full time, but childcare full time is limited”*

*Client is a serving soldier who is returning to work from maternity leave. Having problems finding childcare. She presumed that serving soldiers would be given priority, but has been told that there is a waiting list.*

*“I am living here unaccompanied and feel let down by quality/lack of childminders and would like AFF to raise the issue of before and after school clubs in SCE”*

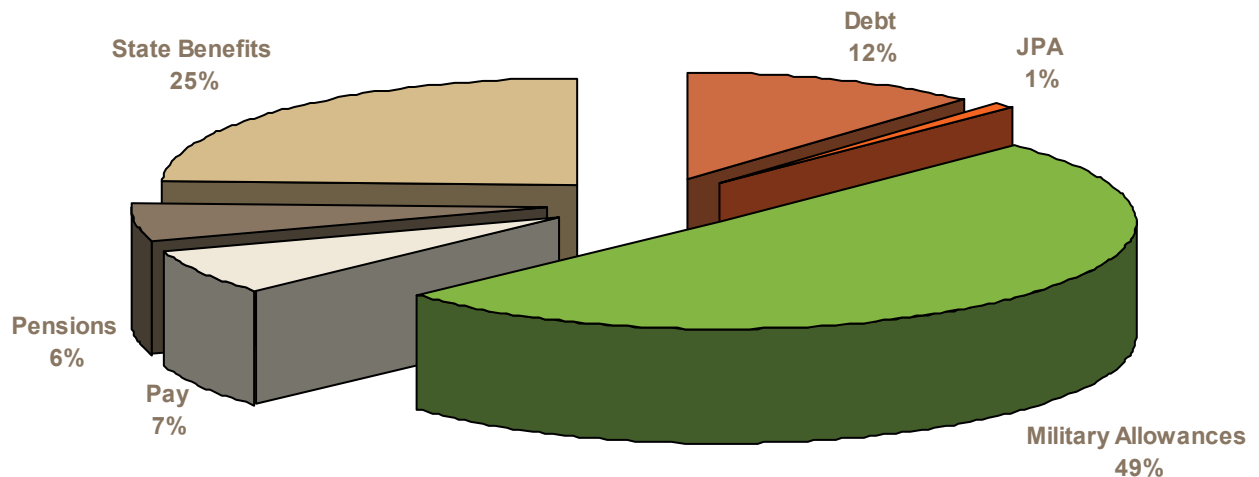
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### money

(5% of all enquiries, 216 enquiries)



*“if a soldier has had a lot of separation and then is asked to go to Sierra Leone for a year, the army can’t make it better by giving them lots of money. The money is nice to cope with but it doesn’t solve the practical problems or not seeing your children”*

The AFF Housing Specialist, Ali Willis, added a moving budget calculator to the AFF website ([www.aff.org.uk](http://www.aff.org.uk)) which prompted a number of comments from families who felt that disturbance allowance did not meet the costs of their frequent moves and the argument that the allowance “equalled out” over the course of a career was completely inappropriate.

*“DA doesn’t cover cost of moving house. Why don’t ferries get paid for when flights do - who wants to fly when travelling hundreds of miles with children, pets and a bootful of stuff removals forgot to take?”*

In particular families cited the cost of cancelling contracts (phone, electricity, gas and internet) as not being fully covered by disturbance allowance; especially when a short notice posting has been received and there has been no time to wind down a contract or provide the requisite notice period. The financial penalties incurred can be very high.

## other concerns

*“ The Army says that it recognises the vital support role that families play but it feels like benefits are constantly being chipped away.”*

### northern ireland–security situation

After the murders of two soldiers in February just as troops from Northern Ireland were deploying to Afghanistan, families were rightly concerned about the security situation in the province. AFF Northern Ireland Director, Claire Braddock had raised the issue of security briefings at the AFF International Conference in June 2008 but although the briefs were policy, their delivery was not being enforced. Security briefs are now being given to all new arrivals in the province and most units are providing regular information bulletins to their families. AFF Northern Ireland will continue to monitor the situation and work with the chain of command to supply families with the information that they need to feel as safe as possible and live a normal life.

### health and additional needs

**Communication Problems:** Units and Agencies are not always getting back to families and letting them know the outcome of decisions especially when it comes to assignment orders and getting adaptations done.

**Registering :** Families still approaching AFF who have not heard of AGAI 108 or the need to register.

**Lack of support:** Families often comment on how isolated they feel when they inform their Unit/Chain of Command of any additional needs.

### territorial army and reserve forces

Our TA & RF Specialist reports the following as the top three concerns for the families that she meets:

**Deployment:** Lack of knowledge and experience of coping with soldier’s mobilisation

**Peer Support:** Limited contact with other families who understand TA specific situation during mobilisation

**Regular Soldiers:** Support and preparation for Regular families posted to TA units needs to be enhanced as the support offered to these families is very different