

army families federation

families' concerns - July - September 2010

introduction

AFF Families' Concerns is produced quarterly 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 an organisation that understands 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.

AFF works at a local level to resolve individual problems and at a strategic level to highlight issues which need further attention and policy revision.

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

Between July and September 2010 AFF handled a comparable number of queries as the same period in the previous year (slightly up from 1551 to 1557). This was despite a drop in coverage, having lost several AFF staff due to postings.

However, several areas saw significant increases in the number of enquires received; Education & Childcare by 46%, Employment by 55%, Foreign & Commonwealth by an enormous 338% and Marriage Breakdown by 28%.

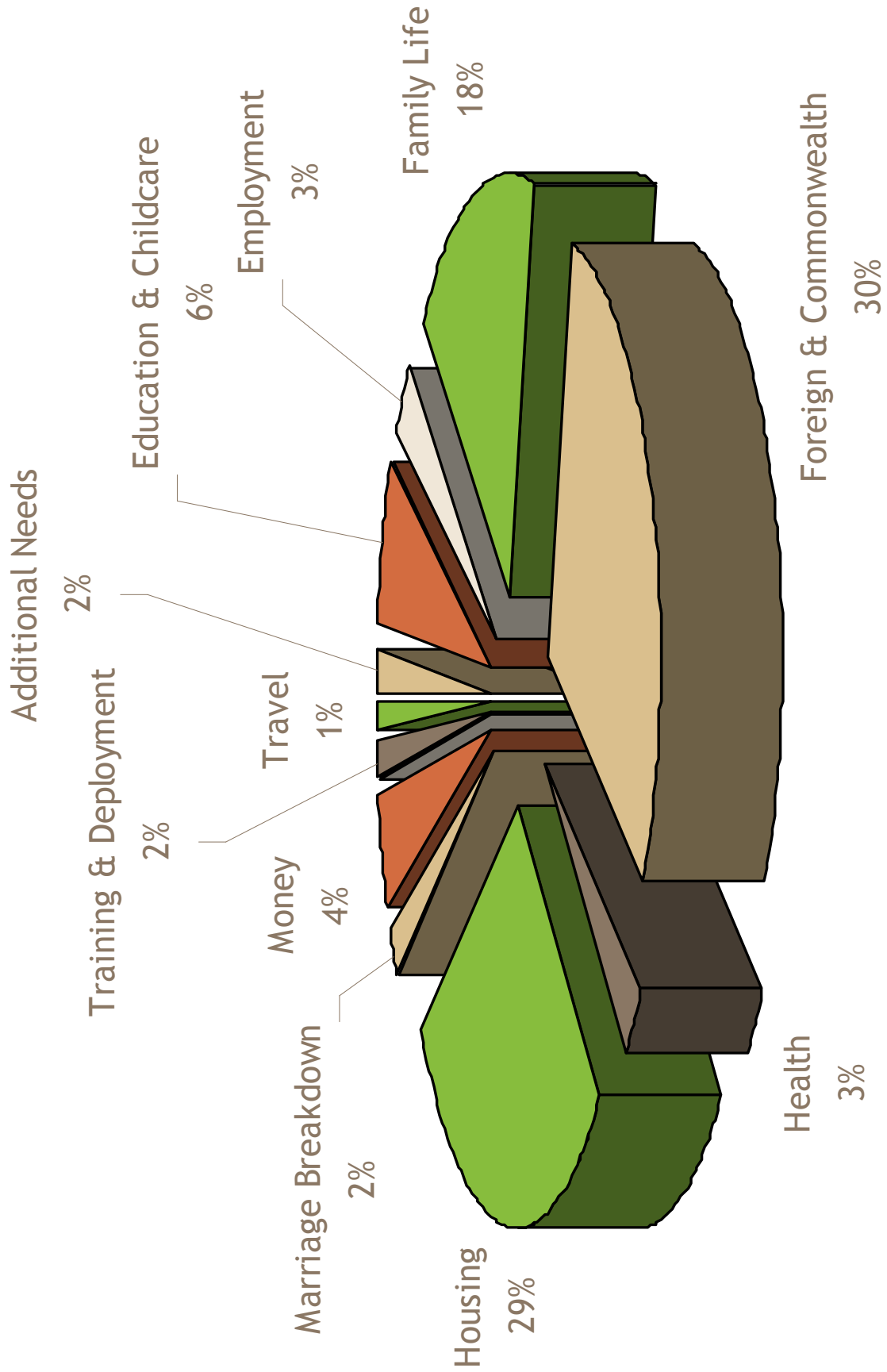
trends

Trends since January 2007 illustrate the fluctuations in the number of contacts to AFF for the types of issue being raised.



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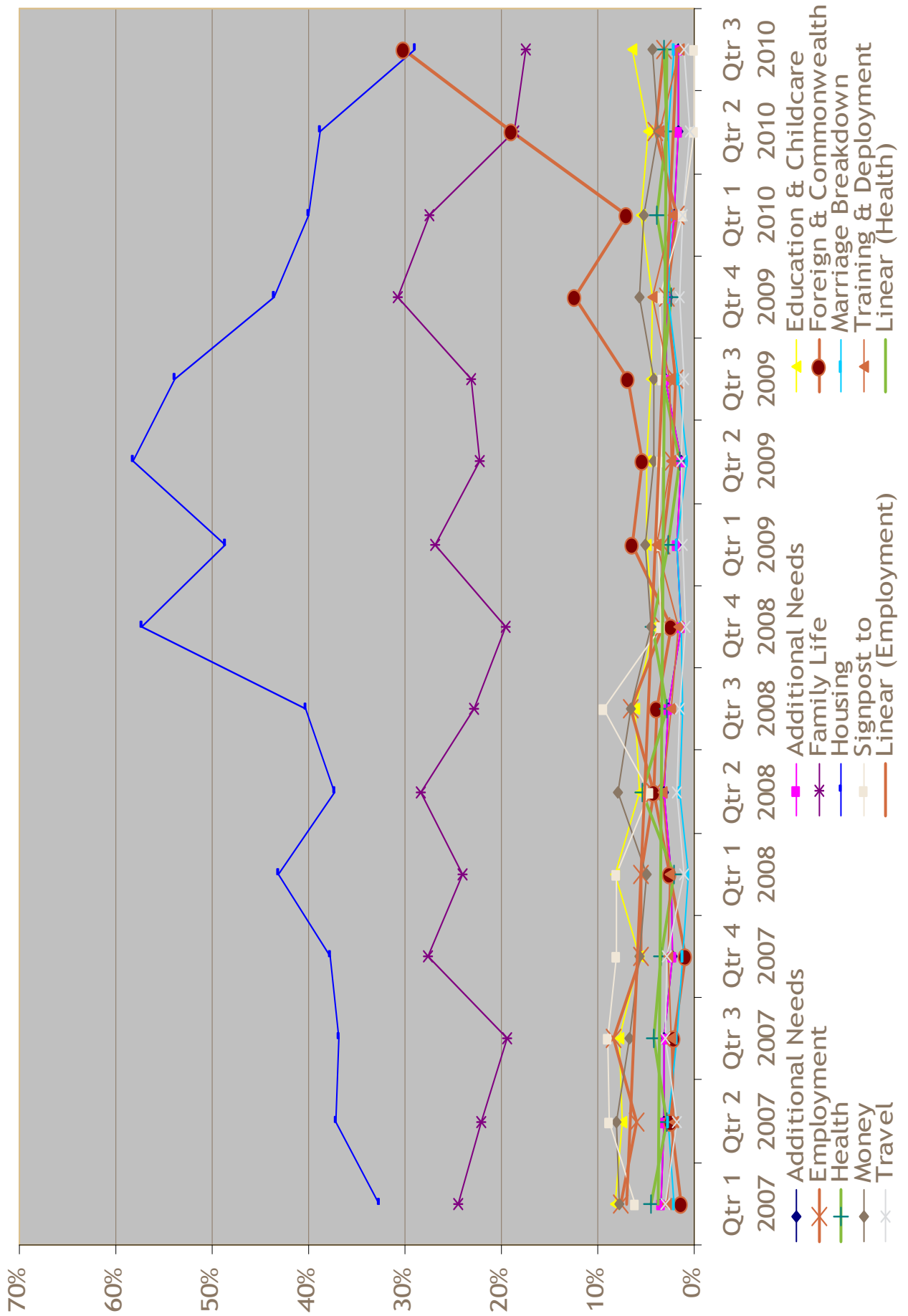
worldwide activity chart



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trends chart

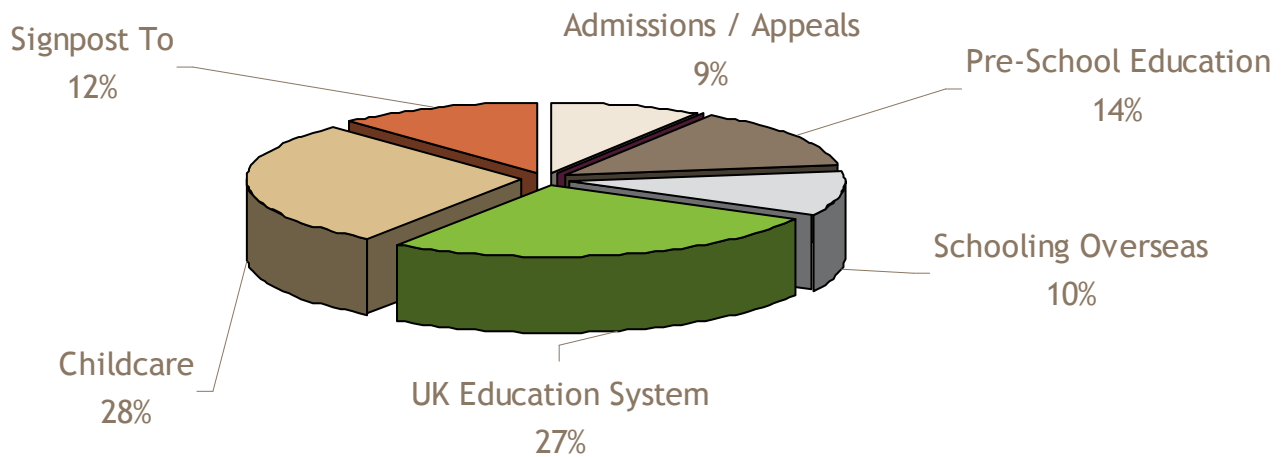


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education & childcare

(6% of all enquiries)



Enquiries relating to education and childcare have increased this quarter compared to both the previous quarter and the same quarter in the previous year (up 12% to 101 from 90 and up 46% from 69 respectively).

Enquiries relating to the UK education system have increased by 29%, and within that category sit queries on continuity of education. In the August 2010 AFF Grab, 75% of respondents said that the ability to claim Continuity of Education Allowance was crucial to them, and even those who did not currently claim saw the ability to claim in the future as important.

"We embody the principles of CEA - we move every posting from one part of the country or world to another. My children have seen their education suffer because of the lack of continuity of education. This allowance is not a perk - it is a very real acknowledgement of the damage that moving around can do to your children and it gives us options. If I had known that this allowance was threatened, we would have made a very different decision eleven years ago, which would have allowed me to establish a career (shot to pieces after seven moves) that would help fund alternative options, but instead if CEA is withdrawn we will find ourselves unable to continue to live in SFA (isn't that what they really want!) and in the poor position of having to negotiate for a mortgage without an established second income."

AFF acknowledges that many families are very worried about the status of CEA and continue to lobby at the highest level for the retention of this important allowance.

The difference between funding for pre-school children in NI compared with England is proving a contentious issue. Families in NI have been told that they will not get the full fifteen hours of free childcare that have recently been made available to all families in England. In some cases, families in NI are actually seeing their hours cut. This is because nurseries behind the wire which had been offering subsidised places can no longer sustain running at a loss.

aff

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education & childcare continued

"Today I received a letter from the Pre-School advising that hours will be cut from 3 hours (2.5 funded, .5 paid) to 2.5. I don't understand why our children get less than their counterparts in England."

AFF supports the CESO (Children's Education Support Officer) in asking the NI Department of Education for additional funding to meet the needs of Service children so they are not disadvantaged by living in NI.

AFF has had a number of complaints from families in Germany who have found that they must get permission from a UWO or other member of the chain of command to take their children out of school.

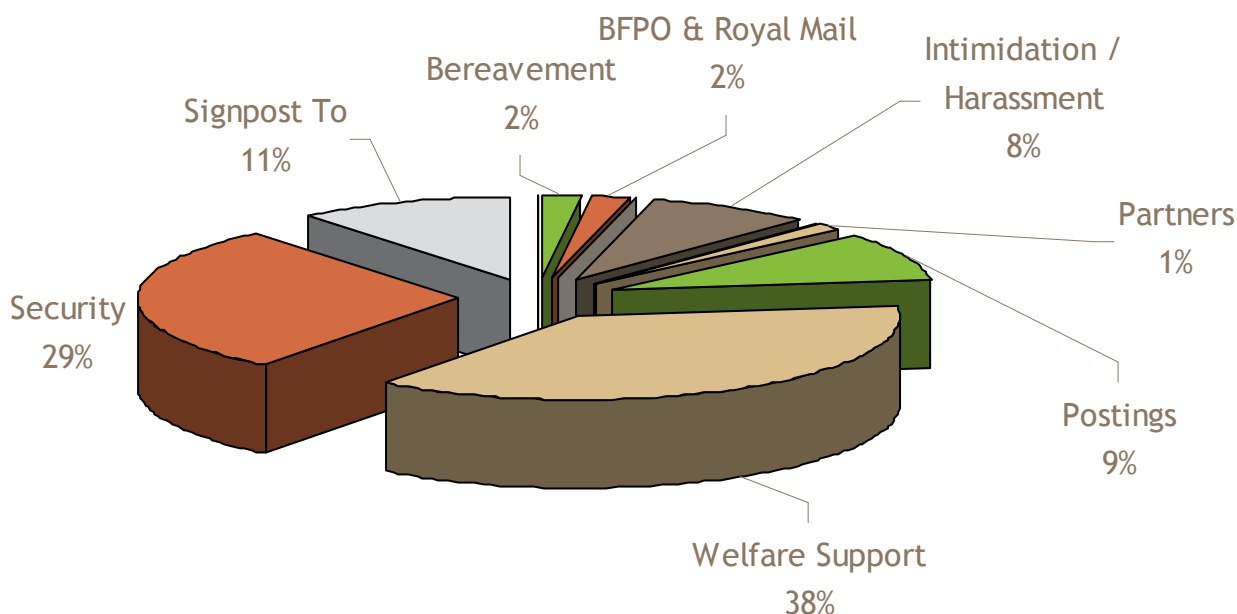
"I have been told that I need permission from the chain of command to take my children out of school. I am very unhappy with this as in the UK I would never have to get my employer involved."

"I feel it is a breach of my human rights and it would not happen if my husband was a civilian. I am refusing to do it."

AFF raised this issue at the Schools Advisory Committee and J1 confirmed that a permission slip only needs to be completed by the UWO on behalf of the chain of command to confirm that the child's carer is on POTL (this then allows access to a discretionary further ten days leave). AFF does not believe that the permission slip clarifies this and is working with J1 and SCE to ensure that both schools and parents understand when a signature is required from the UWO.

family Life

(18% of all enquiries)



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family life continued

Concerns about security are up 37% from the previous quarter. Many of these centre on the security situation in NI with one family deciding to return to England to live with their grandparents until the end of the posting.

"We had a security incident at my child's school - I couldn't find out where my child had been evacuated to. This is the third security incident this week - it is very distressing."

"Current security advice states that families are not being targeted but there have been three security incidents in one week affecting our schools."

"It's only a matter of time before someone gets hurt, how can they expect us to keep sending our children to school?"

"When we moved to NI two years ago we were told to integrate into the community. Now we feel there are more security restrictions being placed on us and are now being advised not to identify ourselves as military."

AFF is concerned with the upsurge of issues from NI and over the next few months will be running a series of questionnaires that will inform the agenda for the AFF NI Families' Conference to be held in May 2011.

The gapping of Army Welfare Service Community Development Workers, especially in the Salisbury Plain area, is being felt keenly by families.

"The gapped post of the Community Development Worker in Larkhill has proven a significant hurdle, in my opinion, in focussing key activities for mothers, children, toddlers and teenagers. Any pressure that the Army Families Federation can bring onto the chain of command to rectify this situation would be most welcome."

"Our area is an isolated area, especially for those with no transport and deployed partners. It is essential that there is a Community Co-ordinator to 'tie the community' together and get children off the streets and into groups. I would be grateful if you could express these concerns on my behalf."

AFF believes that the CDWs fulfil a vital role within the military community and provide an exceptional service where they are appropriately resourced. UWOs are already under huge pressure and should not be expected to pick up the slack which an absent CDW post leaves behind. A well-resourced, well-run community centre allows the UWO to get on with the job of providing specific welfare support to their families.

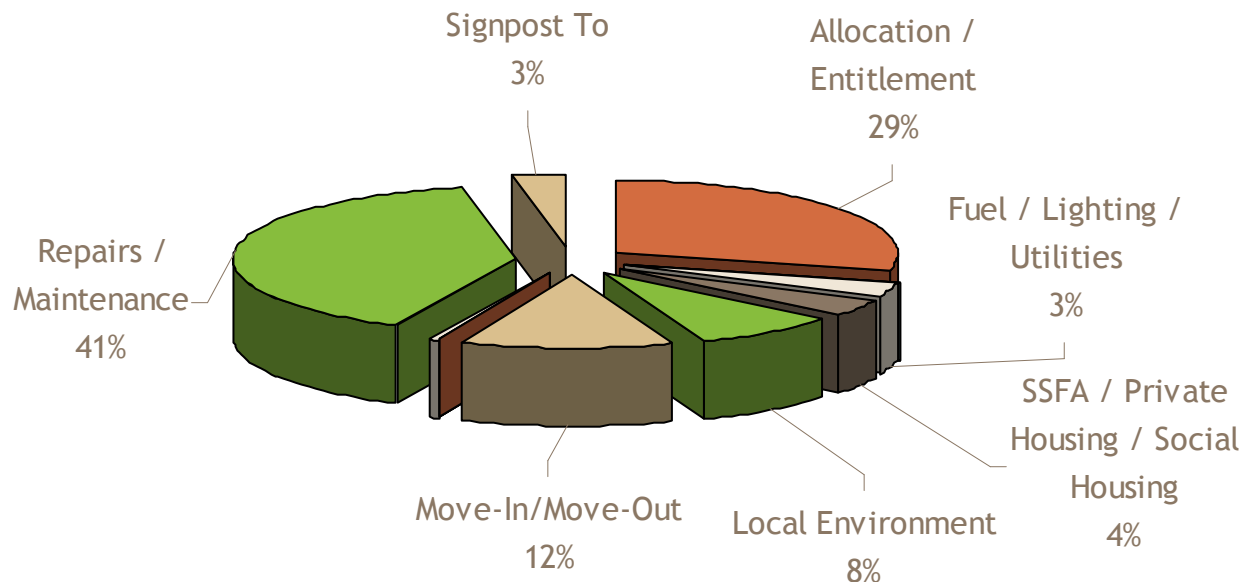
AFF understands that these gaps are due to Civil Service current recruitment policies but we will continue to highlight where the absence of a CDW is having a negative impact on family lives and will push for these posts to be filled as soon as possible.

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housing

(29% of all enquiries)



AFF believes that the current economic conditions combined with the continuing high operational tempo and the uncertainty over SDSR, has contributed to our enquiries being down 46% from the same quarter previous year. Fear of redundancies has distracted families from complaining about the conditions and maintenance of their quarters.

The rise in Move-In/Move-Out enquiries (up 12% from 49 to 55 from the same quarter in the previous year) coincide with the busy summer churn. Families felt that the HIC staff were often unhelpful with a 'computer says no' attitude. There is an expectation that families should be able to have a 'dialogue' with HIC staff regarding their allocation.

“Why is it that when my friend sat outside an empty quarter and he rang the HIC they did not know that the house existed?”

We received complaints about a lack of flexibility of move-in dates during the summer. Families reported move-in dates being given after the start of new school terms due to the 22 day void preparation time required by the MHS/DE Ops Housing contract, as well as a shortage of Housing Officer appointments available to actually carry out the move-in.

In certain parts of the country, move-in standards seemed to slip. AFF suspects this was due to the high volume of moves and the lack of DE staff leading to 48 hour 'take-backs' not happening, and quarters which were poorly prepared by MHS slipping through the system.

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housing continued

“Quarter was filthy, awful carpets, dirty cooker and it was all accepted back from the previous occupant by DE and MHS.”

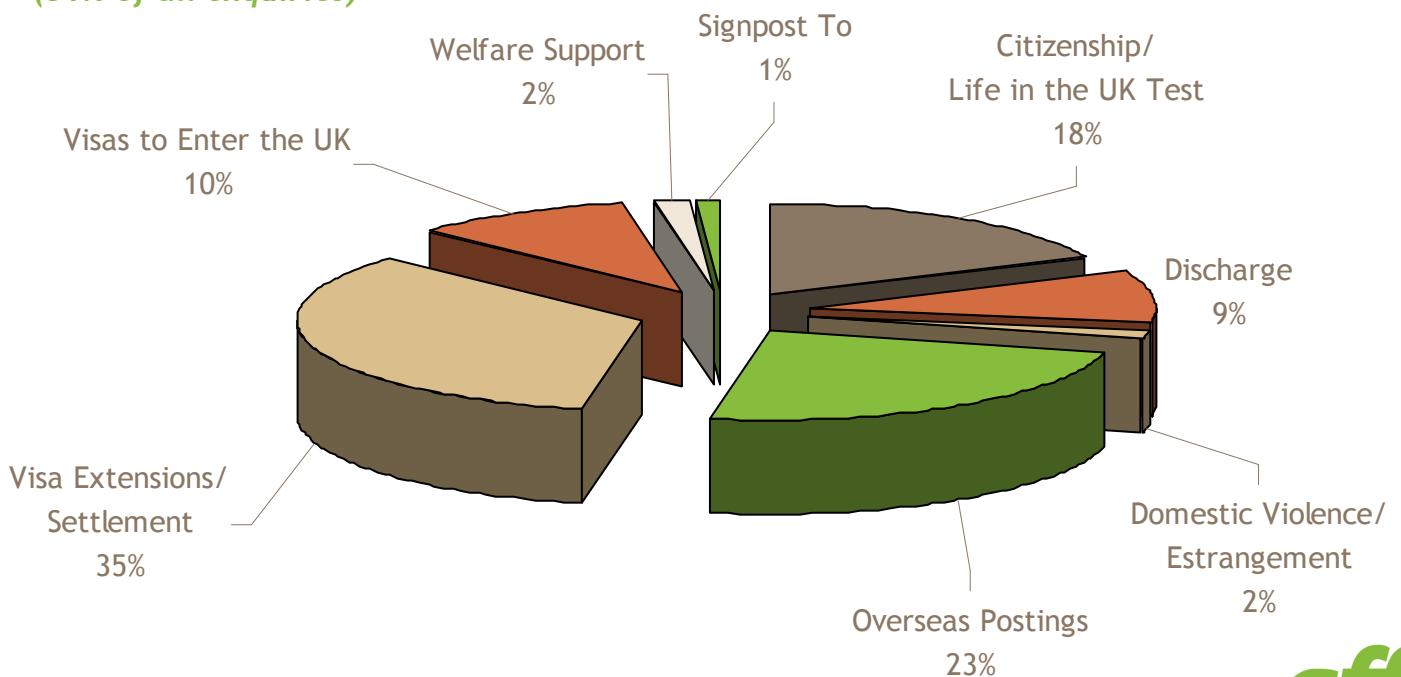
Families are losing confidence in the pre-payment cleaning scheme due to the high prices, standard of the clean and timeliness of the quotes. It must be emphasised that the complaints AFF has received revolve around Ideal Cleaning and that AFF has not received any complaints about the company serving the north. Families have started sending us their quotes as they feel that they are over-priced when compared to other local cleaning companies.

“We were going to use the pre-payment scheme but felt it was much too expensive. They quoted us so late we were unable to book other cleaners so had to do a self-clean.”

“This was the first time we had decided to use a DE-approved cleaning company, thinking it would make the move much easier and problem free - how wrong we were. The level of service we received was simply unacceptable - I have no wish to repeat this experience and never want it to happen to any other family who rely on DE- and MHS-approved services.”

AFF has written to DE and MHS expressing the concerns of families about this scheme. We believe that there is a real appetite amongst families for this scheme and AFF is keen for it to be successful. AFF has passed examples of what we believe are unreasonable quotes to DE and MHS and we will discuss the issue at the DE Housing Forum in November.

foreign & commonwealth (31% of all enquiries)



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foreign & commonwealth continued

For the first time, Housing has been overtaken by Foreign and Commonwealth issues. Since 1 January, enquiries relating to issues affecting Foreign and Commonwealth personnel and their families - which are specifically caused by their immigration status - have been collected under a separate heading. This year alone we have seen our enquiries rise (from 149 in the first quarter to an astounding 469 in the third quarter).

However, unlike Housing AFF believes that if just a few changes were to be made to the immigration process, enquiries to AFF from Foreign and Commonwealth personnel would significantly drop. Many of our enquiries are about the mechanics of applying for citizenship and visas which, if the rules and information available to families had more clarity, would not need to be made.

The issues range from the huge cost of visas to families being unable to access specific help for their unique immigration status queries. Although UWOs are supposed to guide families, feedback suggests that many UWOs believe that this is a purely personal responsibility. Perhaps more importantly, UWOs have no specific training in this area and are at risk of providing incorrect information to families which could have long-term damaging consequences. Families who do access the Immigration Enquiry Bureau are often given wrong advice because the Bureau does not understand the specific immigration rules for Armed Forces families.

“We live in Germany and my wife and daughter had to get a visit visa just to visit our child in school in the UK.”

“I am trying to apply for citizenship but have been told that because Germany no longer offers the Life in UK test I have to apply for a visit visa to go and take the test in the UK.”

AFF is encouraged by the news that the UK Border Agency has kindly ‘reinterpreted’ their rules for spouses serving overseas so that spouses will be allowed to renew their visas and apply for ILR whilst living in Germany. This is a significant step forward for spouses and family members.

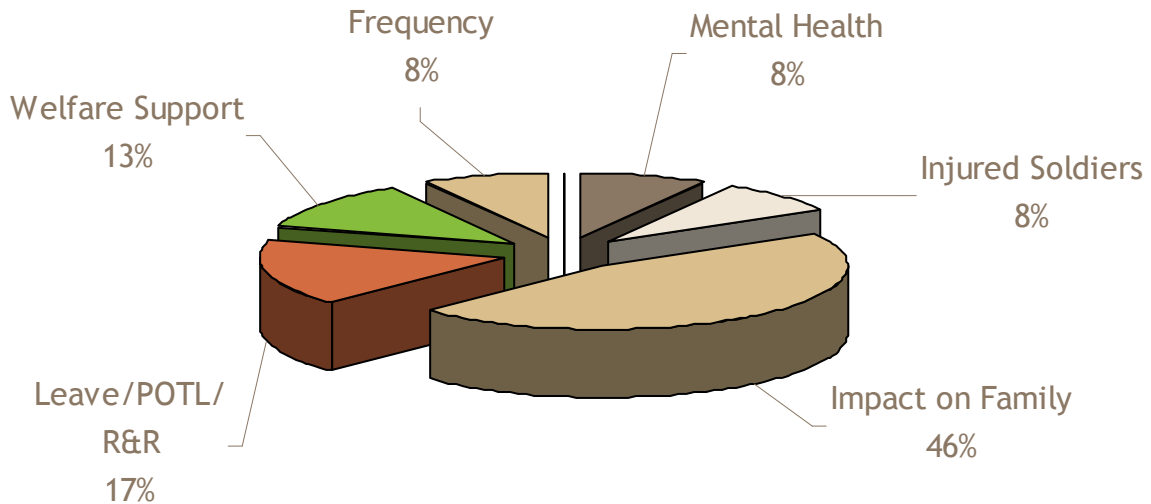
However, AFF believes that the only fair and right thing to do is to introduce an Armed Forces Visa for families that acknowledges the unique situation that families are put in and reflects the military covenant. We will continue to raise this issue with CGS, the MOD and the UKBA.

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training and deployment

(2% of all enquiries)

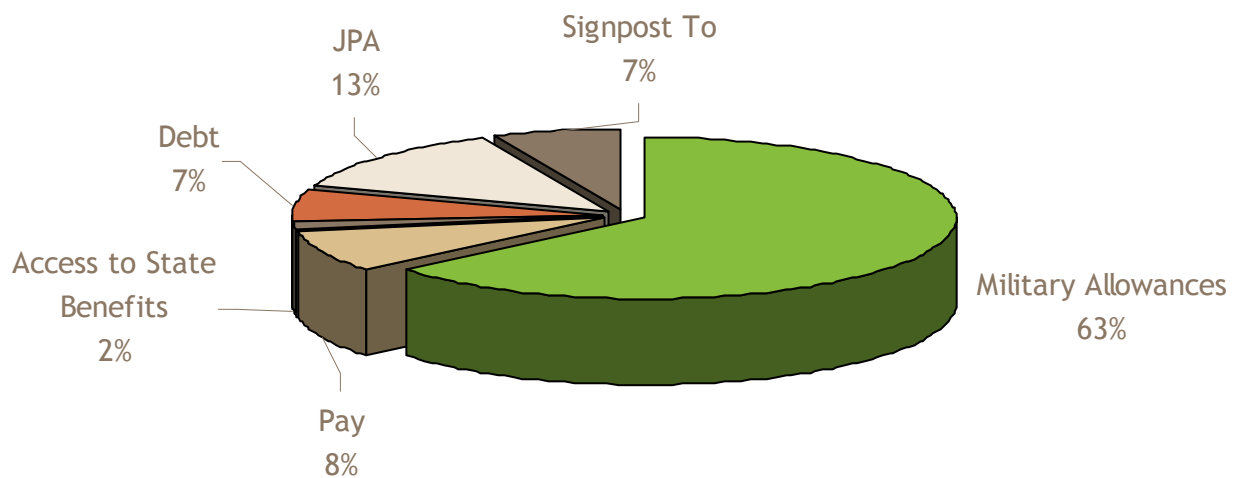


Enquiries are down by 38% from the same quarter in the previous year. However, AFF has been conducting a Deployment Study within 4 Brigade, the results of which will be available from January 2011 and many of the stats have been recorded in this report.

“Why suffer the Army lifestyle when you no longer recognise the soldier as the man you married.”

money

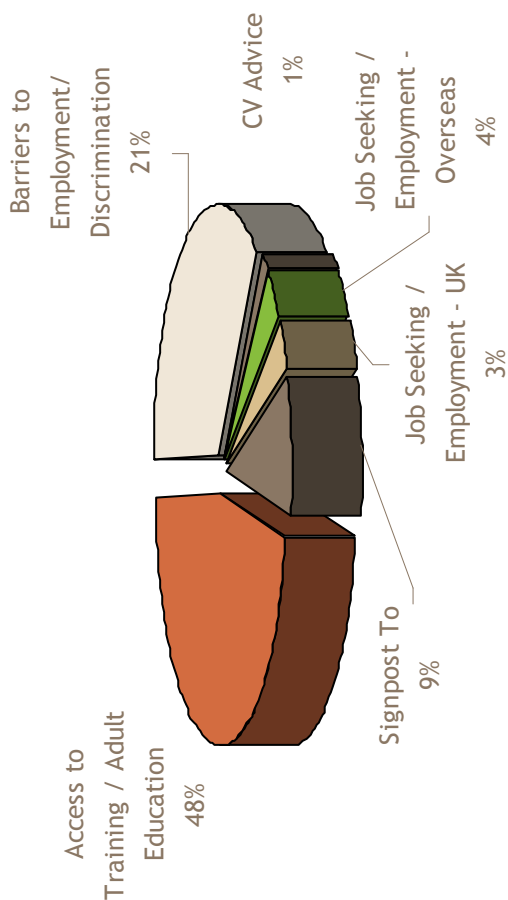
(4% of all enquiries)



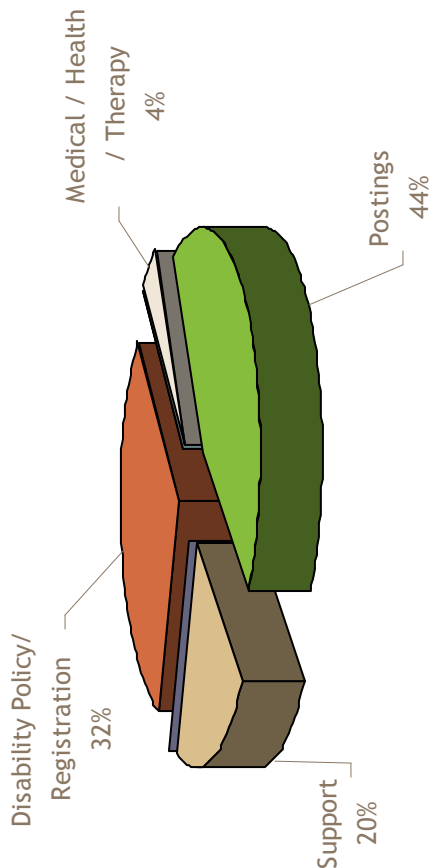
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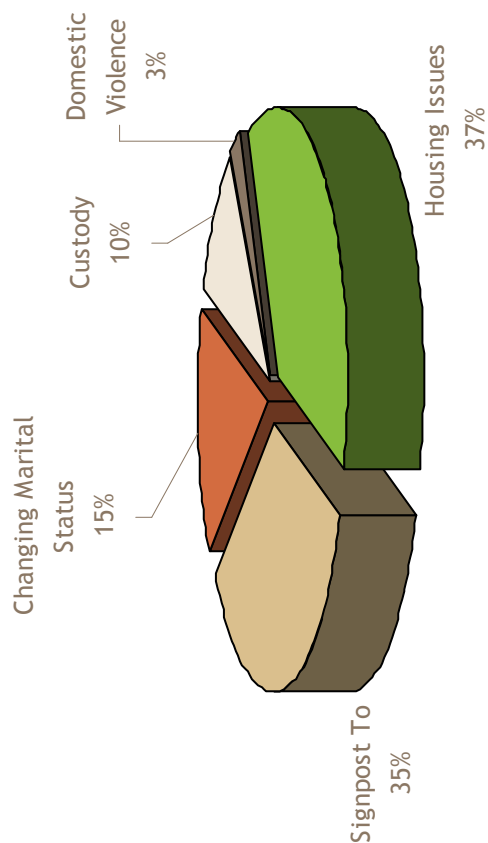
employment (3% of all enquiries)



additional needs (2% of all enquiries)



marriage breakdown (2% of all enquiries)



health (3% of all enquiries)

