

Serving personnel in the Armed Forces cannot register with civilian GP practices because their healthcare is provided through Defence Medical Services. This restriction prevents them from creating or using NHS App accounts which are needed to have proxy access to their child's account, for booking or cancelling GP appointments, viewing records, and ordering prescriptions.

As more NHS services move online, this restriction creates significant and growing digital disadvantage for serving parents, particularly serving single parents and dual serving couples who have **no civilian parent** in the household.

SCALE OF IMPACT

- **43%** of RN and RM serving personnel financially support children: **c13,827 serving parents** and **24,059 children**.
- Our short, targeted survey attracted 145 responses and comprised: 67 respondents (47%) from a household with no civilian parent (either both parents are serving, or it is a single parent household). 42 (29%) were a serving person with a civilian spouse. A further 35 (24%) were civilian spouses of serving RN or RM personnel. These 3 groups are referred to throughout the report and in the chart Appendix.

KEY THEMES & INSIGHTS

Digital exclusion from children's healthcare: limited access to GP online systems

There is a strong correlation between being a serving parent and not being able to access GP online platforms for their child's healthcare.

- **60%** of civilian spouses with a partner in the RN or RM can access systems, while only **19%** of households without a civilian parent can do so.

As more GP surgeries move to digital-first models, this gap is worsening.

Burden of phone and in person appointment booking

Serving parents who cannot use online systems must rely on 8am phone queues with long waits or visiting surgeries in person. Some reported resorting to A&E or pharmacies because making GP appointments was too difficult. **Of the 25 comments we received regarding this issue, 20 came from households with no civilian parent, showing disproportionate impact.**

Workarounds (staff completing e-consults on parents' behalf) are inconsistent and dependent on staff availability or are creating extra pressure on other areas of healthcare, including A&E.

“I’ve tried every which way to get the children onto an online system but had no joy. It means I dread trying to get them an appointment and I end up chasing round pharmacies and minor injury units to avoid the GP.”

Prescriptions

Families with no civilian parent (47% of respondents) are unable to request repeat prescriptions via the NHS App and have reported the need to make a physical trip to the surgery, or in some instances call during narrow enquiry windows set by GP surgeries. Due to operational commitments, whilst working both ashore and at sea, opportunity to make personal phone calls and take time out of the working day to collect prescriptions are often limited causing further angst and frustration for naval parents.

Lack of awareness in GP surgeries

15 respondents (18% of written responses) reported frontline NHS staff not understanding why serving personnel cannot register with NHS GPs, **and in some instances refusing to register children** unless the serving parent was also registered at the surgery.

A flavour of the written comments we received from survey participants demonstrates the emotional stress and additional administrative burden for naval parents:

“When my son was born I was unable to register him at our local NHS GP surgery without speaking to the manager and citing the Covenant because they wouldn’t register him without registering me. They insisted I register him at his Dad’s practice which resulted in my, 5 days post-partum having to explain to a waiting room of people that my son has no involved father.”

Managing healthcare

Whereas most issues mentioned so far disproportionately impact households with no civilian parent, it is worth highlighting that families with one serving and one civilian parent are still impacted. **It means that all healthcare responsibilities fall on the civilian parent, and the serving parent is unable to participate in their child’s healthcare.** This can create an additional burden on a spouse whose partner might be deployed. In emergencies, serving parents may not even be recognised as having parental responsibility.

“My husband is a civilian but works away, so on a few occasions I had to contact him abroad to book an appointment for our daughter, as the GP practice would not accept my call.”

“It puts yet more responsibility on the non-serving parent, who is already taking the major load due to deployments etc”

Accessing medical records

Access to a child's medical records is extremely limited for serving parents, and workarounds can lead to a time and cost burden on the NHS. Some parents report not knowing how to access records at all.

“Every time I need my daughter's medical records, I have to submit a Subject Access Request which takes a significant amount of time”

SUMMARY OF IMPACT

Serving armed forces families, especially those without a civilian parent, face systemic digital exclusion due to their inability to use the NHS App. This affects every part of their child's healthcare journey from appointment making to accessing records.

These issues collectively create **significant inequality** between serving and civilian families at a time when NHS digitalisation is accelerating.

This report highlights the issue for naval families, based on a short, targeted survey to provide context. **The Naval, Army and RAF Families Federations stand ready to contribute to digital developments including the App to improve the customer experience**, ensure that busy armed forces families are considered and that health care for children is equitable.

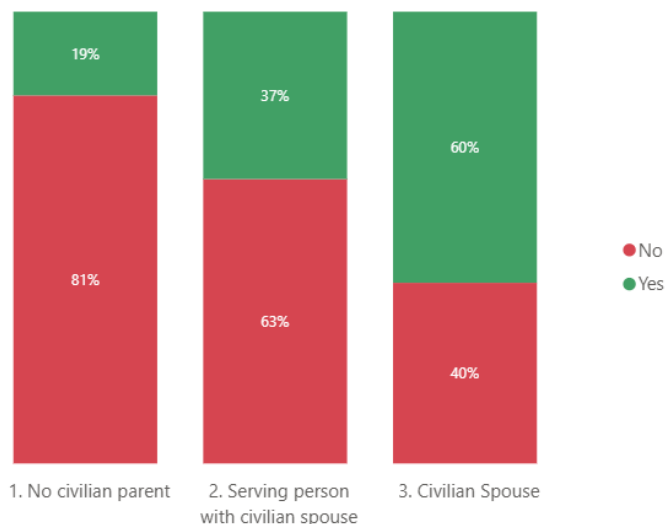
Sarah Clewes
CEO, Naval Families Federation

Appendix: Data charts.

Appendix: Using online systems and related themes.

This short, targeted survey provides context for Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel only; the true impact of this issue would be much broader with added Army and RAF context.

Have you been able to use your GP's online systems on behalf of your child(ren) to book appointments at their GP surgery, or access their digital medical records in the last three years?



Number of comments relating to each theme

