

Winter 2021

Newsletter

The Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum



FANDF

Giving a voice to Forces
families with additional
needs and disabilities

Facilitated by

ssafa | the
Armed Forces
charity

ssafa.org.uk/fandf

Chair's Welcome

Dear FANDF Member,



It was great seeing so many people in London at the start of October for our delayed biennial conference. Feedback, included in greater detail later in this newsletter, was very positive. In particular, people said how much they valued being able to meet face-to-face. Having the conference in London on a week day meant that it was possible to get contributions from some very senior speakers, but I know from speaking to some of you that the location and timing made it impossible for as many people to attend as would have liked. All of the speakers were very good, and I am particularly grateful to General Swift, Chief of Defence People, for joining us. However, the things that most people said they liked most were the networking opportunities and hearing about the lived experience of the FANDF Committee and other members.

I am deeply indebted to the FANDF Committee and SSAFA for organising this conference. Fortunately, the committee all found the conference just as useful and enjoyable as everyone else did, and we don't want to wait for another two (or even three!) years before we have a large gathering again. To that end, and particularly noting how much people valued the networking that conference offered, we have decided that, between now and our next London-based biennial conference in spring 2023 we want to get out to see people face-to-face around the country.

We are hoping to visit the north and south of the UK and spring and autumn and hope to see many of you there. If you have any comments or suggestions for our events, then please do not hesitate to contact us via SSAFA's Additional Needs and Disability Advisor on anda@ssafa.org.uk or alternatively you can contact us directly via our Facebook page on @ForcesANDF

We will, of course, continue with our regular committee meetings and meetings with subject matter experts from the various MOD agencies who provide support for personnel and families affected by disability or additional needs. I know how much the MOD value the feedback that they get from FANDF members via the committee; please keep your questions and concerns coming in by email or through our Facebook page so that the committee can make sure that we are raising the right questions to the right people.

2021 is finally almost over. It has been another pretty miserable year for many, but things really do feel like they are returning to a bit of normality as we head into 2022.

Alan Bowie
FANDF Chair

FANDF Biennial Conference 2021 Report

As Covid-19 restrictions started to ease in summer 2021 it finally looked as though FANDF could go ahead with our delayed 30th anniversary biennial conference. A programme was put together, venues identified for the conference (Ministry of Defence (MoD) Main Building) and accommodation (the Union Jack Club), speakers and stall holders were invited and everything was coming along nicely.

When summer came around and it became clear that the pandemic was still stubbornly hanging on, our plans had to change. The Main Building had to keep strict limits in place on how many people could gather at once, and the committee had to review our options. In broad terms, the choices were to hold a completely digital event, to hold a dramatically scaled down conference, to postpone once again or to relocate.

Our digital event in January 2021 was okay, but by summer 2021 after a year of online meetings everyone was feeling 'zoomed out'. The sort of numbers that could be accommodated in MoD Main Building meant that, rather than a conference, the event was going to look more like a slightly larger than normal committee meeting. Having already rescheduled twice, the committee really wanted to go ahead with some form of conference. Relocation was the logical choice. The Union Jack Club have always been very helpful and have provided accommodation and the pre-conference social event for a few years now; while their conference facilities were not going to be as large as those in Main Building, they had fewer restrictions and provided an option that allowed a proper conference to go ahead.



Feedback after the event was largely positive about the location, but confirms that, while the Union Jack Club (UJC) is a great place for accommodation and socialising, the conference room was on the small side, particularly when lunch or coffee came around. Future conference plans are likely to see us go back to the previous model of accommodation at the UJC but the conference proper in MoD Main Building.

The pre-conference evening reception (and the post-reception chats in the UJC bar) were a great opportunity to meet families from FANDF and from partner groups such as CanDiD. While the main purpose of FANDF is to provide a voice for Forces personnel and families, signposting to helpful resources rather than providing direct support, this interaction and cross-pollination, with different people sharing experiences and advice, is an extremely valuable activity and one that everyone found useful.

The conference saw a good mix of presenters and I hope that people found the mix of information and shared experiences helpful. It has been three years since the last conference, and there have been a number of changes since then. That includes the 'Families Fighting On' report compiled and researched by our own Michelle Claridge and the 'In Our Shoes' report commissioned by Andrew Selous MP. While it was good hearing about those reports, and the way that the information is starting to drive change in the form of the revised Families Strategy, comments from attendees to the MoD representatives showed that many of us are concerned that warm words and high-level policy initiatives need to be matched by visible improvements at local and individual level.



I am grateful to all of the speakers who came, in particular to the subject matter experts who briefed us and answered questions. I expressed my frustration on the day, and have seen the same comment from some attendees, that it was disappointing that nobody from the Housing Executive attended. General Swift also commented on their absence and this is something that is being taken forward. It can't be easy for the Housing team to come to conferences; many of us experience difficulties with our Service accommodation and I know that feelings can run high. However, as one of the reasons for our frustration is poor communication from the Housing team, non-engagement at events just compounds those feelings.

Finally, the conference gave us all a chance to formally recognise the efforts of the previous Chair and Vice Chair, Iza Gill and Michelle Claridge. Their continuing contributions to FANDF and to the wider Forces Additional Needs community make life significantly better for all of us.



Our presenters

We had a range of guest presenters throughout the day, from open to close. These included:



A welcome from **Alan Bowie**, FANDF Chair and Master of Ceremonies



Michelle Earnshaw, FANDF committee member, gave an update on the FANDF Families Fighting On report



David Adams, MoD, presenting on the UK Armed Forces Strategy



John Shivas, MoD, updating on the Armed Forces Bill



Ed Harris, MoD and Chair of MoD Local Authority Partnership (MODLAP), presented on supporting Service children with SEND



Nick Sheppard, Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS), gave an update on the support CEAS can offer



Claire Scott, MoD Schools, updated on supporting SEND in MoD schools



Michael Shann, Carers UK, gave a virtual presentation on the support that Carers UK can provide



Beth Colliety, The Royal British Legion, gave an update on the recently published report on 'unpaid carers in the Armed Forces community'



Richard Swarbrick, NHS England, provided delegates with an update on the work that NHS England and NHS Improvement have been doing on improving health and wellbeing support for Armed Forces families



Q&A session with all presenters



A message from **Lt Gen James Swift**



Closing message from **Sir Andrew Gregory**, SSAFA Controller.

Lived Experience

Two members of the FANDF committee also spoke about their lived experience at this year's conference, and we would like to reshare their stories with you.

Jo Gordon

Being one of the newest FANDF committee members I was asked to give a lived experience talk at this year's conference. On the day of the conference, we had just short of 21 years of experience as our son Harry was soon to have his 21st birthday, which in itself is a huge achievement. Harry was born with unique De Novo chromosome abnormalities resulting in many issues such as global developmental delay, epilepsy, growth disorders, mobility issues, non-verbal and full lack of capacity. This, combined with Military life can bring many a challenge!

There are many things to consider to make our situation work as well as possible. I told of our life with adaptations to our quarters, retainment on postings which would have been difficult for Harry, interactions with local authorities and how all of this comes with both negative and positive outcomes. I shared how all of this over the years has led me to roles such as volunteering with the AFF, FANDF and my current employment with Carers Support Wiltshire as a Military Carer Support Worker. I enjoy giving back to those agencies that have given our family help and especially want to make sure that the voices of families like ours are heard. It was a wonderful day and a privilege to meet and hear the stories of other families attending.



Stephanie Quintrell

By being part of the FANDF committee, at this year's conference I talked about the success I have had in improving the accessibility on the camp I live on, for me as well as for anyone in the future for whom this would benefit. I am married to a Soldier and we live in the East Midlands with our very energetic and absolutely beautiful son Dylan who is 4 years old.

Life changed very dramatically for our family in July 2019 when I suddenly became unwell and was diagnosed with a neurological condition. This has put me into a wheelchair full time and given me many other debilitating symptoms. It made life far more challenging for us as a family. Adjusting to living with a disability has certainly been difficult, I had to give up work, am unable to drive and everyday tasks became nearly impossible. The biggest impact for me was trying to continue to be an active, capable mum despite my sudden change in abilities. Living in our fully adapted SFA has been life changing for us. I can be independent again, fully parent our son and feel useful around the house. We are so grateful to have a lovely property to live in that fully meets our needs.

When we moved onto the camp 22 months ago, the first issue I noticed was the lack of drop curbs on the camp and lack of wheelchair access to the various buildings. Seeing how I had independence to get in and out of our accessible house, this created a massive barrier for me getting out to enjoy the local area. I completely understand why access has never been improved on camp before now, because why would it be considered if no one has needed to flag it up prior to me living here. Of course, as a physically disabled person it is frustrating when I cannot access a building or knock on my friend's front door because I cannot get on the pavement, but I just saw this as a reason to push for change. I have a voice, and I feel it's my duty to speak up for myself as well as others who may not have the confidence and ability to speak up as I do.

The difficulty I found was not knowing who to approach to discuss the issues I was facing, so working that bit out was the most time-consuming part to getting the dropped curbs installed. With help from a friend on the committee- I was able to get my thoughts, concerns and requests to the right people. Around 3 months

later, the first 8 dropped curbs were installed onto camp. I really felt I had achieved something good and have been enjoying using these ever since. With the assistance of the new station commandant, we then had 4 more dropped curbs installed at the remaining zebra crossings. Planning is in process to refurbish the shop entrance, put an accessible toilet in the community centre and install an accessible toilet in the mess. The feeling of knowing that the camp will be a much more accessible and inclusive area for everyone living, working and visiting the camp is beyond incredible.

I feel as though my efforts, along with those who supported me, were totally worth it. The fact I get to enjoy the camp more now and knowing it is safer for me and Dylan to navigate is just wonderful. I really believe this process has been easier and less problematic because it is a military site with DIO funding. Of course, I am not saying it has been all plain sailing. I have felt frustrated at times, when I couldn't speak to the people I needed to, when I didn't know who I even needed to speak to or when I felt I was making no progress. But these moments are far outweighed by the success we have had in making positive changes to the camp.

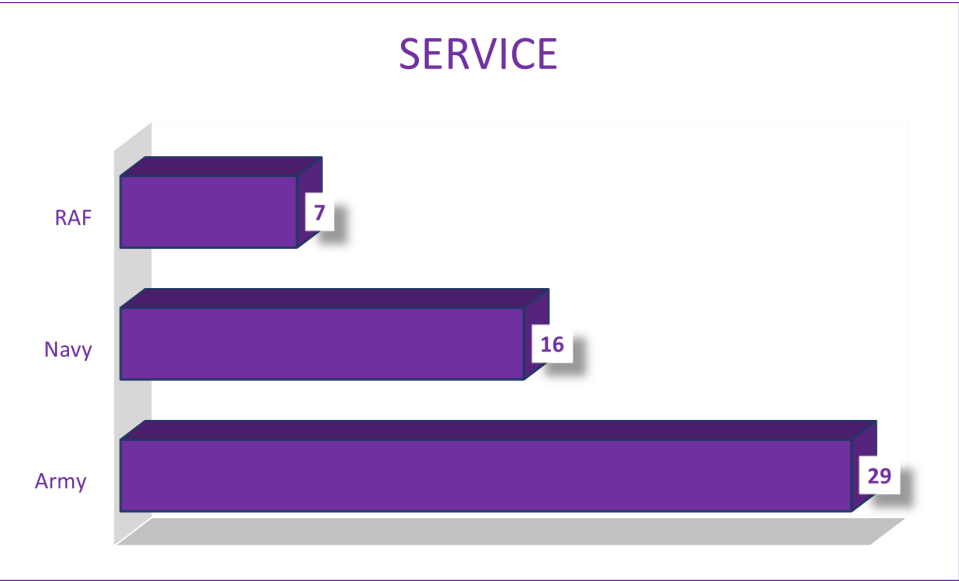


FANDF biennial conference – Pre conference overview and feedback

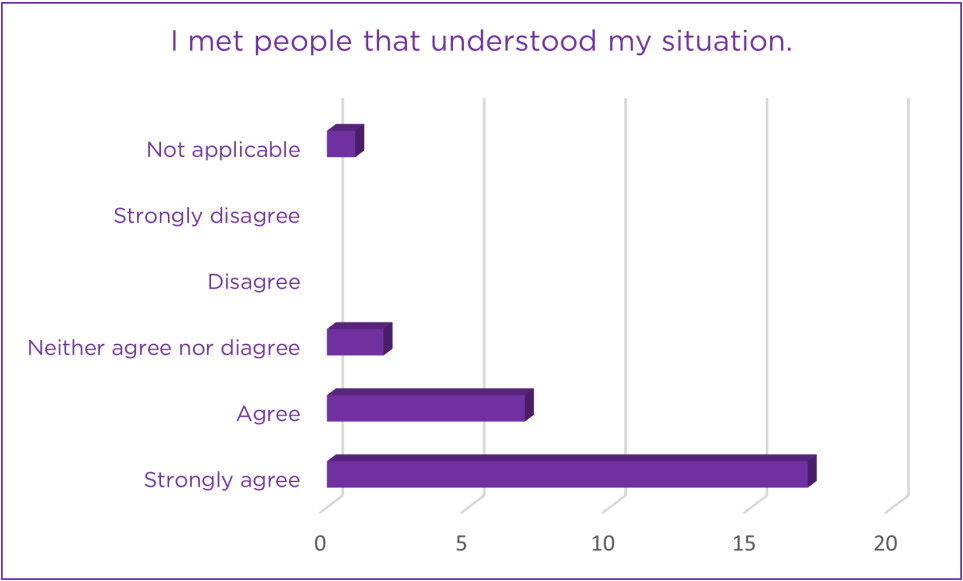
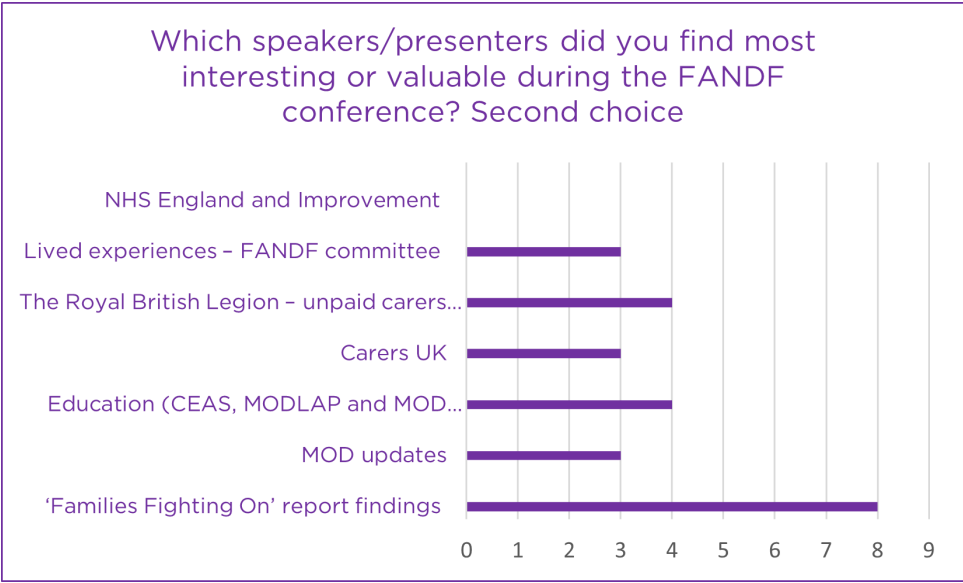
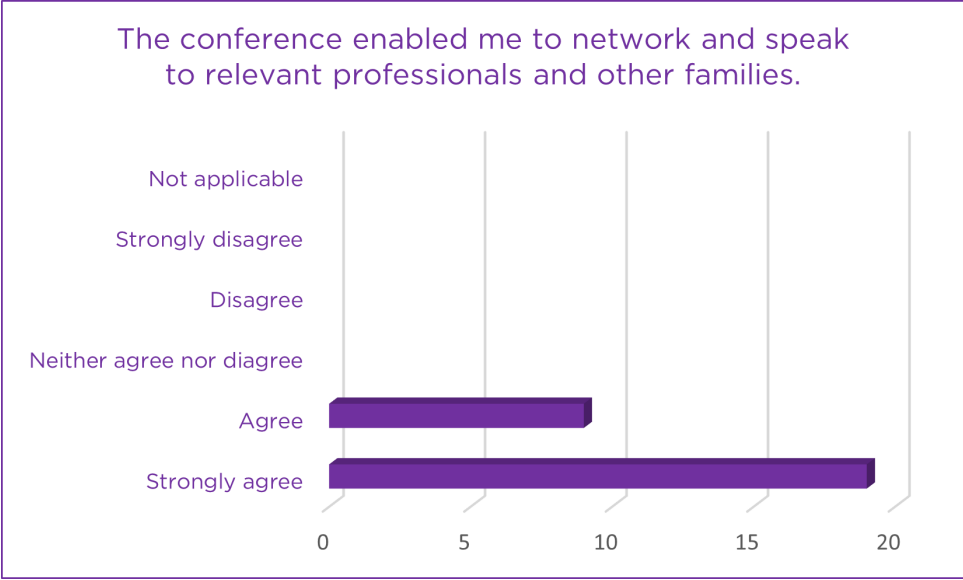
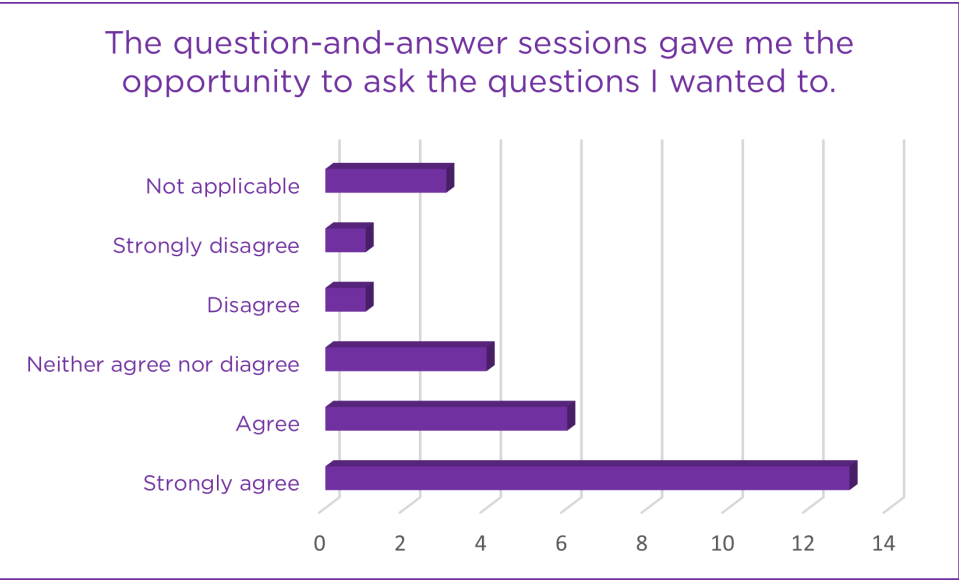
The pre-conference evening invited those who have a child or adult dependent with an additional need/disability to attend a ‘meet and greet’ evening held at the Union Jack Club, London. This was an opportunity for delegates to meet others attending the conference and a chance to meet the FANDF committee.

- 44 attendees were either interested professionals, stall holders or guest speakers.
- 52 were families and individuals with an additional need/disability or had a dependent with an additional need/disability.
- 64 delegates attended the ‘meet and greet’
- 96 delegates attended the conference

Based on our data, the majority of those who attended the conference were either Serving or the dependent of someone Serving in the Army.



We asked those that attended to rate the following statements, with varying results.



Armed Forces Education Trust



Over the last five years, The Armed Forces Education Trust have awarded grants of over **£600,000 to families of all three services, both serving and retired.** The Trust recognises that while most service children are happy, resilient and successful, and thrive on the opportunities that service life brings, others can be disadvantaged by a lack of stability in mainstream education and by some of the challenges of service life. We understand that for families coping with special needs or additional disabilities, balancing education with service life can be an even greater challenge.

The Trust awards grants to individuals as well as to schools with service children. Where service children's education has been disadvantaged by their parents' service, the Trust is able to assist with education related fees that parents would not otherwise be able to afford and help young people over particular hurdles that are preventing them from achieving their educational potential.

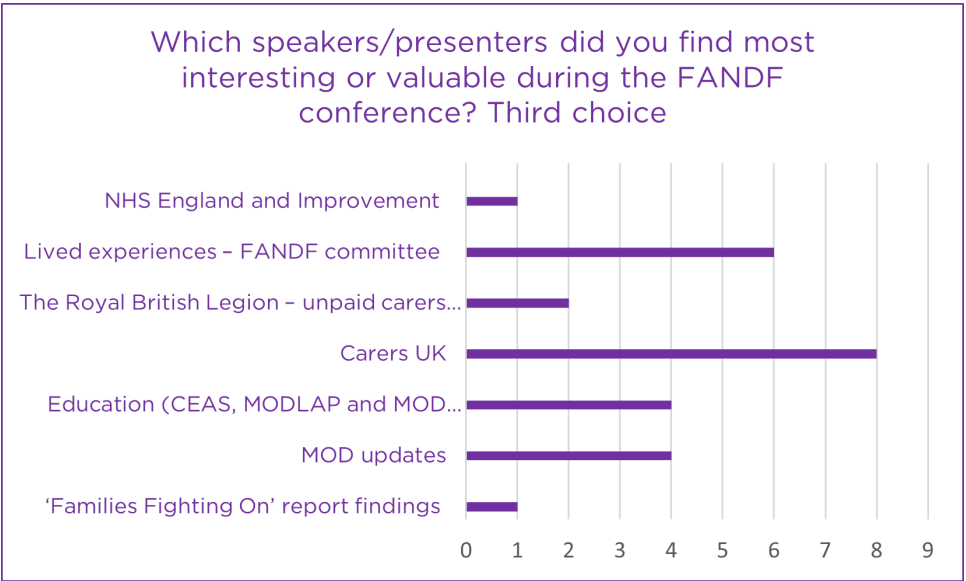
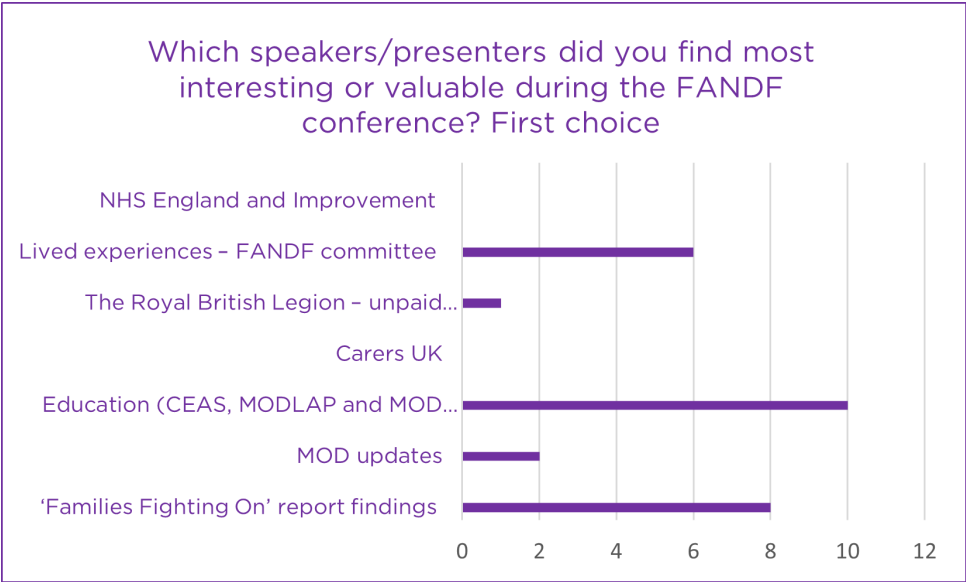
Our experience has shown us that a particular difficulty facing service families is mobility and not being in one place long

enough to enable children to receive the diagnosis and funding that they require. We have been able to help many children with one-to-one support in their current school until EHCP funding is successful and at times have been able to help with fast-track specialist educational support.

We are also aware of the difficult decisions that parents may have to make as to whether to stay in one place or follow the serving parent and the implications that this decision may have on siblings, in particular where school fees are paid by CEA for example. In some situations, we have been able to help keep a child at their school to the end of key stage exams while the parent cease being mobile to support a SEND sibling.

These are just a couple of examples of how the Trust may be able to help and we would encourage you to get in touch, via our website www.armedforceseducation.org/individual-grants/ and we will call to discuss your situation in more details and discuss suitability for a grant application.

Charmian Hickman
Chief Executive Officer
Armed Forces Education Trust



As with most events, the committee agreed it would be appropriate to ask for feedback from those who attended the conference. The hope is that the feedback can inform on future conferences and smaller events that we aim to organise. For instance, it is evident from the summary that delegates found the ability to network key and we are keen to ensure that this continues for any future events planned.

We hope to see you at some of our events next year and of course, our conference in 2023.

Some of you fed back what you were able to take away from the conference:

“Better understanding of the support in place to assist families with children with SEN”

“That there are many people that are in the same situation. We are not in this alone and help is there.”

“Contact with others that will continue post conference.”

Short Breaks 2021

This year SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity ran two family breaks during August and October. The breaks are for Serving families who have a child with an additional need and/or disability. They are an opportunity for families to spend quality time together, to enjoy trying adventure activities in a safe environment and to meet other families in similar situations.

During our August break, fifteen families joined us at the Calvert Trust Lake District and enjoyed a week of rock climbing, canoeing, abseiling, high ropes and bush craft. One family commented that this break gave their children “the confidence to

try new things and go beyond their comfort zone. They enjoyed making new friends, being part of a team and understanding about the needs of others before their own.”

During the October break, eight families joined us at the Calvert Trust Exmoor to enjoy activities including horse riding, canoeing, archery, bush craft and then finishing off the week with our Halloween themed disco. Families fed back that, “It’s been an incredible break! My child has had the same opportunity as anyone else which has been amazing. The room and equipment provided was perfect, we will definitely be back!”



Next year we will be running three breaks: a weekend break and mid-week break in the Lake District and a mid-week break in North Devon.

For further information please visit www.ssafa.org.uk/get-help/military-families/short-breaks-and-holidays-for-service-families or email anda@ssafa.org.uk.



WISHING YOU AND YOUR FAMILIES A MERRY

CHRISTMAS!

From the FANDF COMMITTEE



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