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6th July 2026

**Hillingdon, Berkshire and Surrey Festival of Friends 2026-2027**

Dear Headteacher

We are delighted to invite your school to join a successful collaborative peer-supported project entitled *'Festival of Friends'* designed to strengthen support for children from Armed Forces families (sometimes known as Service children) which will also contribute to school improvement.

The project is a partnership led by **Brunel University of London** and funded by the charity **Armed Forces Education Trust** (Home - Armed Forces Education Trust).

An overview of the project is outlined overleaf, including details of the commitments which participating schools will make. It is important to note that the project is open to **any** school including those with a small number of children from Armed Forces families on roll, including those with just one child.

If you would like your school to take part, please complete the separate Word document (*Acceptance Form)* and return by email to the Project Lead, Matt Blyton: mattblytoneducation@outlook.com.

**Want to find out more?**
The Project Lead, Matt Blyton, will be running a choice of 2 short webinars on Tuesday 14th July to provide more information about the project and answer questions – please join one of these if you would like to find out more:
13:15-13:45 Click here to join the meeting, Meeting ID: 935 854 900 932 7 / Passcode: je9f6W
16:15-16:45 Click here to join the meeting, Meeting ID: 939 228 560 829 2 / Passcode: bM7Dt2

If you are unable to attend then please email your questions to Matt. Otherwise, we look forward to receiving your acceptance form.

Yours sincerely

**AFET HBS Project Steering Group**
Led by Matt Blyton, Anne Chappell and Ellen McHugh

# Festival of Friends

## What is the Hillingdon, Berkshire and Surrey Festival of Friends project?

It is a model of collaborative, peer-supported activity aimed at supporting children from Armed Forces families and the teachers that work with them, run in partnership with Brunel University of London and local authorities. It aims to develop and share good practice, enhance staff professional learning, and will encourage children from Armed Forces families to consider the benefits that Higher Education can offer post-18. The project is aimed at any school that has children from Armed Forces families on its roll but will be particularly beneficial to the many schools that educate small numbers of Armed Forces children and where there may not have been much focus given to this potentially vulnerable group in the past. However, schools with large cohorts of Service children are also encouraged to take part to trial resources, run improvement projects and share their considerable expertise.

The year-long project will culminate in a final Festival event to be held in June/July 2027 - a memorable celebration and awards ceremony and aimed at participating school staff, local authority and Armed Forces welfare staff, VIPs and, **most importantly**, the children themselves. It will showcase participating schools' improvement in their provision for Armed Forces families during the year and give the attending children a very special experience.

In 2025-2026, other regional projects have run very successfully with over 40 schools, both primary and secondary, across Wiltshire, as well with over 30 schools across East Anglia. Prior to that, it was held in Hampshire, North Yorkshire, Oxfordshire, Lincolnshire, and Portsmouth and Gosport.

## How does the project work?

We have recruited five local leaders from schools and Local Authorities (LA) to support the implementation of the project across the three geographical areas involved (the 'Hubs'). Matt Blyton (Project Leader) will provide 4 professional learning and support sessions across the year for these Hub Leaders. In turn, the Hub Leaders will then coordinate and run four 2-hour hub meetings across the year, providing professional learning and support to a nominated Champion from each participating project school (the 'spoke' schools).

## Who are the project leads?

- Matt Blyton is an independent educational adviser with 30 years' experience of working with children from Armed Forces families - as a primary school leader; an MOD school teaching and learning consultant; and a Local Authority School Improvement Adviser. He is the longest-standing member of the *Service Children in State Schools'* National Executive, a voluntary group acting as the voice of schools with children from Armed Forces families on their rolls, and a member of the *Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance's* management group.
- Dr Anne Chappell (Joint Principal Investigator): https://www.brunel.ac.uk/people/anne-chappell
- Dr Ellen McHugh (Joint Principal Investigator): https://www.brunel.ac.uk/people/ellen-mchugh

## Who are the members of the project steering group?

- Matt Blyton - Independent Educational Advisor mattblytoneducation@outlook.com
- Bernard Boyle - Stronger Schools Officer for Service Children, Hillingdon Council BBoyle@hillingdon.gov.uk
- Anne Chappell - Head of the Department of Education, Brunel University of London Anne.Chappell@brunel.ac.uk
- Hannah Dent - Stronger Schools Officer for Service Children, Hillingdon Council HDent@hillingdon.gov.uk
- Chris Dexter – Higher Education Outreach Network (HEON) Manager c.dexter@surrey.ac.uk
- Emma Kennedy - Service Pupil Support Champion, Corvus Learning Trust Emma.Kennedy@corvuslearningtrust.co.uk
- Mariam Khokar – Headteacher, Alexander First School, Windsor M.Khokar@alexanderfirst.co.uk
- Ellen McHugh - Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education, Brunel University of London Ellen.Mchugh@brunel.ac.uk
- Neil Slack - Surrey Education Services Team Manager & Deputy Service Manager Neil.Slack@surreycc.gov.uk
- Julie Beckett - Service Manager, Specialist Teachers for Inclusive Practice, Surrey Council julie.beckett@surreycc.gov.uk

## What will participating schools' commitment be?

Each participating school will be expected to identify a member of staff to act as the Champion for the project. The Champion will attend the four network meetings as outlined above. The role can be undertaken by a senior or middle leader, a teacher, or a member of support staff, depending on the school's context and staff interests. The most important consideration is that they are willing and enabled to:

- Attend the four network sessions;
- Disseminate key messages and professional learning to school colleagues;
- With support, lead on the school's use of the SCiP Alliance's self-evaluation *Thriving Lives Toolkit* with support from their Hub Leader, to review the provision for children from Armed Forces families;
- Oversee the school-based improvement project to work on during the year, and to provide a short written case study this at the end of the project (a concise template form will be provided);
- Bring a group of children to a university-based Pupil Voice conference (mid-year);
- Attend the end of project Festival celebration event.

## What should the focus be of school-based improvement projects?

Whilst it is anticipated that all staff across the project schools will benefit from a raised awareness of the unique challenges and needs of Armed Forces families, due to the sharing of evidence-based professional learning from each school's Champion, we are also keen to ensure that all participating schools improve an aspect of their provision in a sustainable way.

We will be using the SCiP Alliance's *Thriving Lives Toolkit* to support self-evaluation in each school, which you may already be aware of, using this to identify an element of education and welfare provision which could be strengthened. These may be small improvements, and guidance will be given to Champions by Hub Leaders and the Project Lead. There will be flexibility in each school's choice of focus for the improvement project. The school's improvement project will also be celebrated at the Festival.

## Will there be an evaluation report

An end-of-project report will be produced, and a case study booklet published and disseminated widely.

## What to do next?

- Join one of the webinars to find out more about the project, hear about the successes of previous Festival of Friends initiatives, and ask any questions you may have;
- Complete the accompanying sign-up form and email it to: mattblytoneducation@outlook.com;
- Identify a school-based Champion;
- Share your involvement with colleagues, pupils, parents and the school community. Please use the AFET and Brunel University of London logos in any related communications;
- Please look out for meetings dates, which will be shared early next term.

*'I just wanted to thank you and all the team for putting on such a fantastic celebration day at Portsmouth University for the Festival of Friends project. It has been a pleasure being part of this amazing project. Thank you.'*

Cathy Mew, Service Families Co-ordinator