

The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP
Secretary of State for Defence
Ministry of Defence
Whitehall
London SW1A 2HB

22 June 2021

Dear Secretary of State

We write to call for an end to the military enlistment of children aged under 18.

Whereas most states worldwide now allow only adults to be recruited into their armed forces,ⁱ the British army still recruits more soldiers at 16 than any other age,ⁱⁱ particularly for basic infantry roles.ⁱⁱⁱ

The army argues that it provides underprivileged teenagers with a route out of unemployment,^{iv} but since four-fifths of disadvantaged teenagers now continue in school or college from age 16,^v their enlistment typically brings their full-time education to an early end.

Those who do enlist at 16 undergo the intense and prolonged stress of military training, which has drawn complaints of ill-treatment from recruits and their parents.^{vi} During this time, nearly one in three underage recruits leaves the army or is dismissed.^{vii} This means that every year, several hundred young people, having left education early to join up, find themselves immediately out of a job and out of education.^{viii}

Those who remain in the army are legally obligated from the day they turn 18 to serve for four further years, as part of the binding commitment they made when they were legally children.^{ix} This extended minimum service period is up to two years longer than that required of adult recruits,^x and is just one of several sweeping obligations of enlistment that could not lawfully be imposed on a civilian worker of any age.^{xi}

We appreciate that many young people are attracted to military life, but the evidence now clearly shows that recruiting from age 16 draws them into the armed forces prematurely. The risks and legal obligations involved are unambiguously incompatible with their rights and welfare.^{xii} By age 18, young people have had the fullest opportunity to enhance their academic or vocational qualifications before beginning an armed forces career should they choose one.

Calls are now widespread for the enlistment age to rise to 18. Among those advocating the change are the UK's four Children's Commissioners and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as health professionals and trades unions.^{xiii} Three-quarters of the public agree; only a fifth think the army should be recruiting 16-year-olds.^{xiv}

It can be done; just a small increase in adult recruitment would facilitate transition to all-adult armed forces.^{xv} This simple step forward would set the same standard in the UK that it has asked of armed forces and groups around the world,^{xvi} and help to bring a global ban on the military use of children into view.

We ask you to review the strong evidence that favours this change and use the passage of this year's Armed Forces Bill to write it into law.

Yours sincerely,

Sacha Deshmukh, interim Director, **Amnesty International UK**

Veronica Yates, Director, **Child Rights International Network (CRIN)**

Kathy Evans, CEO, **Children England**

Bruce Adamson, **Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland**

Ellen Finlay, Policy Officer, **Children in Northern Ireland**

Amy Woodhouse, Joint Interim Chief Executive, **Children in Scotland**

Owen Evans, CEO, **Children in Wales**

Sally Holland, **Children's Commissioner for Wales**

Paddy Kelly, Director, **Children's Law Centre**

Louise King, Director, **Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE), part of Just for Kids Law**

Mark Russell, CEO, **The Children's Society**

Jo Becker, Children's Rights Advocacy Director, **Human Rights Watch**

Sam Grant, Head of Policy and Campaigns, **Liberty**

Sophie Neuburg, Executive Director, **Medact**

Dr Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretaries, **National Education Union**

Koulla Yiasouma, **Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People**

Tricia Young, CEO, **Terre des hommes UK**

Juliet Harris, Director, **Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)**

Sean O'Neill, Chair (acting), **Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group**

Rob Williams, CEO, **War Child**

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- i Approximately three-quarters of states worldwide allow only adults to be recruited into their armed forces; only 16 states allow enlistment from age 16. See Child Soldiers Initiative, *Child Soldiers World Index*, 2021, <https://childsoldiersworldindex.org>.
- ii MoD, Biannual diversity statistics, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2020>.
- iii Each year between 2012–13 and 2015–16, an average of 768 recruits aged under 18 joined the infantry, accounting for 34 percent of the armed forces’ enlistees in the age group, versus 21 percent of enlisted adults. Calculated from MoD, *Army: Recruitment - Written question – 56526*, 7 December 2016, <https://bit.ly/2CUZluj> [shortened link] and MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics*, 2020, op cit.
- iv For example, in 2016, the assistant director of army recruitment, Col Simon Stockley, remarked that recruits are ‘often young people who, for whatever reason, have not succeeded in traditional education, and [by joining up] they have transformed their lives’. Louise Tickle, ‘Who goes there? Campaigners fight to keep military away from UK schools’, *Guardian*, 30 August 2016.
- v ‘Disadvantaged’ is defined by the DfE as school students eligible for free school meals or in care. DfE, ‘National table NA21b: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4 by disadvantage status and gender, state-funded schools (mainstream and special)’, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840011/Destinations_of_KS4_and_16_to_18_students_2018_-_key_stage_4_national_tables.ods.
- vi The army’s Joint Personnel Administration System holds records of 60 formal allegations of violent behaviour against recruits by members of training staff at the Army Foundation College since 2014. Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 109376, 30 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>.
- vii In the three-year period 2015–16 to 2017–18, the army enlisted 5,280 recruits aged under 18, of whom 1,580 (30.0%) dropped out before completing their Phase 2 training. MoD, UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics, 1 April 2020 edition, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2020>; Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 103588, 14 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-14/103588>. (Note: figures from 2018–19 have been excluded since some recruits who enlisted during that year had not completed their training at the time the drop-out statistics were generated.)
- viii In FY2019–20, the army enlisted 2,420 recruits aged under 18, and approximately 30 percent of recruits in the age group leave the army before completing their phase 2 training, equivalent to approximately 700 per year.
- ix The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, as amended.
- x Ibid.
- xi Other legally binding consequences of enlistment are: the loss of the freedom of speech, association, and assembly; the loss of the right to be tried for alleged offences in a juvenile court; the loss of the right to be free from age and disability discrimination; and the loss of several workers’ rights, such as those relating to leaving a job at will, collective bargaining, and redundancy, for example.
- xii For an outline of the evidence, see Child Rights International Network, *Why raising the enlistment age would benefit everyone*, 2020, <https://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/military-enlistment-resources>.
- xiii The UK Children’s Commissioners, *Report of the Children’s Commissioners of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child*, December 2020, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/cco-uncrc-report.pdf>, pp. 17–18; Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United*

Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (CRC/C/GBR/CO/5), 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Qx1zE5>, pp. 23-24; Reem Abu-Hayyeh & Guddi Singh, 'Adverse health effects of recruiting child soldiers', *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 3(1), <https://bmjpaedsopen.bmj.com/content/3/1/e000325>; Trades Union Congress, 'UK Compliance with major ILO Conventions 2019', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rwvayho>; Trades Union Congress and Child Rights International Network, 'Annex 3: Armed Forces Recruitment and Convention 182', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/vry9n2h>.

- ^{xiv} ICM poll conducted in July 2018 on behalf of Child Soldiers International. Poll question: 'Regardless of what you believe the current minimum age to be, what do you think should be the minimum age to join the British Army?' Figures extrapolated from poll data, excluding 5% 'don't know'. See Steven Morris, 'UK army minimum recruitment age should be raised to 18 – survey', *Guardian*, 29 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jul/29/uk-army-minimum-recruitment-age-survey>.
- ^{xv} For details and sources, see Child Rights International Network, *The military case for transition to all-adult armed forces*, 2020, <https://home.crin.org/s/FINAL-Military-case-for-raising-UK-enlistment-age-to-18.pdf>.
- ^{xvi} For example, The UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, of which the UK is a member, routinely calls on armed forces and groups involved in armed conflict not to recruit below the age of 18 and to release any children from their ranks. United Nations Security Council, 'Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict', 2021, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/subsidiary/wgcaac>.