

# Ensuring greater scrutiny, guidance and consultation on armed forces visits to schools in Scotland

## A summary of concerns behind the petition to the Scottish Parliament and next steps

*ForcesWatch, December 2016*

**Petition PE1603** (submitted by ForcesWatch and Quakers in Scotland) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that:

1. **Guidance** is provided on how visits to schools by the armed forces should be conducted so that information presented to children takes account of the unique nature of armed forces careers, ensures political balance, and offers a realistic representation of the role of the armed forces and what a career in the armed forces involves.
2. **Information** is collected to enable public monitoring of the number and location of visits, the purpose and content of visits, and comparison with the number of visits by other employers.
3. Parents/guardians are **consulted** as to whether they are happy for their child to take part in armed forces activities at school.

### Making a submission

The Public Petitions Committee are seeking further evidence from parents, teachers, schools, child rights organisations, young peoples' organisations, veterans and careers services and will accept submissions from those with these interests. Please read the information below for key points to focus on and what we will be urging the Committee to do. Some sources are provided but get in touch if you would like help with information.

### Child rights and welfare

This is a **child rights and welfare issue** and is recognised as such by the UN and the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland. Without clear oversight and guidance around armed forces visits to schools, the education system can be used to market an armed forces career without fully informing them young people of the risks, restrictions and realities of an armed forces career. In recognition of the UK as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Scottish Government as a leader on children's rights and welfare, a **national strategy providing consistent practice** around armed forces visits to schools should be put in place.

### Next steps

As of the second hearing of the Public Petitions Committee in November 2016, the Committee are seeking **further evidence** from parents, teachers, schools, child rights organisations, young peoples' organisations, veterans and careers services and will accept submissions from those with these interests.

We are encouraging the committee to recommend an **Education Committee inquiry** on armed forces visits to schools and how a national system of oversight could be developed and maintained. This could explore how existing education and careers policy such as the *Developing the Young Workforce Strategy*, and existing data collection, could be harnessed. As part of this strategy, the Scottish Government has produced guidance to schools, local authorities and employers; this could be expanded to develop approaches and include guidance around armed forces visits to schools.

In 2014, the Scottish Government passed the *Children and Young People Act*; this encourages **Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments (CRWIA)** to be used as a tool to look at any proposal, policy or piece of legislation from a children's rights perspective and in terms of its compatibility with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The issue of armed forces activities in schools engages different rights and wellbeing issues (duty of care, right to information and opportunities); the use of CRWIA would help to ensure a balanced approach that takes the range of concerns into consideration.

We will also urge that **young and particularly vulnerable children** - those below Scottish school year S3 and in special schools - do not take part in any armed forces visits. We will also seek that young people, parents, teachers and others are **involved in drawing up guidelines** and that **young people are also involved in**

consultations processes around armed forces activities with their schools, whilst **parental consent** becomes mandatory for younger or more vulnerable children.

## Concerns

### *1. National guidance ensuring balance*

The petition calls for clear national guidance on ensuring a balance of views and a balanced representation of life in the armed forces.

**There is evidence from accounts given by young people and those who have visited schools on behalf of the armed forces that a balance of views and information is very often lacking.** Presentations focus on the benefits of a military career and are unlikely to discuss the risks or legal obligations. Emphasis is put on adventure, fun and a good salary rather than mentioning the realities and ethical considerations involved in military life and combat; this has the effect of sanitising and even glamorising the armed forces. Some activities with schools involve displaying weapons or military vehicles; this is likely to obscure a more nuanced and balanced view of the military that the education system should encourage. Some students have felt uncomfortable with gender-related stereotypes or by not wanting to take part in activities involving the military. Finally, there is evidence that the armed forces sometimes talk about controversial issues, such as recent conflicts or nuclear deterrence, in a way that does not ensure political balance.

**There is also evidence that equal access is not given to other career providers.** The data suggests that no other public service or business employer visits schools to the same extent as the armed forces and a recent study suggests information about apprenticeships is not distributed well in schools in Scotland. As well as providing careers information, the armed forces are involved in a significant number of STEM-based curriculum activities, which could further skew knowledge about available opportunities in their direction.

### *2. Monitoring and transparency*

The petition calls for information to be collected to enable public monitoring of armed forces visits to schools and comparison with the number of visits by other employers.

**Data on number of visits is currently only available through freedom of information requests or parliamentary questions and there are inconsistencies in format, quality and across datasets.** The data collected by the armed forces could be made publicly accessible. Existing data sources relating to school and careers provision could also be explored as a way of collecting any additional information necessary.

### *3. Parent/guardian consultation*

The petition calls for parents/guardians to be consulted on their children's participation in armed forces activities at school.

**Local authorities have very different arrangements regarding consultation and not all are agreed that parents and pupils should be able to opt out of armed forces activities.** We believe that pupils and parents must have the same right to object on the grounds of conscience to armed forces activities, as service personnel have.

There should be different levels of parent/guardian and pupil consultation depending on the type of activity and the age of the children involved. Consultation guidelines should be developed with young people, parents and teacher organisations and standardised across Scotland. Managing children taken out of sessions as a result could use similar procedures as for children who don't take part in religious activities.

### *4. Pre-recruitment activities in schools*

**Armed forces visits to schools have a recruitment purpose yet, the MoD state that the armed forces do not recruit in schools.** This is based on a definition of recruitment as the act of signing up or making a legal commitment. However, 'youth engagement' in schools is a key component of fulfilling defence recruitment needs; this is evidenced by MoD planning documents.

A more common understanding of recruitment would be the process of marketing an armed forces career, engaging individuals and conducting assessments and interviews, leading towards the final act of signing the enlistment papers. All but the last of these stages take place within the education system.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends raising the age of recruitment to 18 and that 'military recruiters access to schools be strictly limited.' A recent report from public health charity Medact notes how the vulnerabilities of adolescents are exploited by military marketing techniques. Armed forces activities in schools provide much of the pre-recruitment engagement required to attract young recruits.

### *5. The armed forces are not the same as other employers*

**A career in the military is not like any other and the armed forces should not be considered the same as other employers.** A military career carries unique risks, legal obligations and ethical considerations. This was recognised by the Welsh Government when they accepted similar calls for oversight in 2015.

Furthermore, the risks to health and wellbeing are greater for those recruited as children than those recruited as adults. The recently published Medact report details the disproportionate health risks faced by child recruits. It also examines psychological and psychosocial research showing that teenagers are less likely than adults to have all the faculties that would equip them to be guarded against persuasive and unbalanced information and to make informed and well-processed choices involving long-term personal risk.

### *6. Social mobility and targeting disadvantaged young people*

**These risks and vulnerabilities are not unique to children from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds, although such children can face them disproportionately.** Military marketing strategies are designed to appeal to decision-making biases to which all adolescents are prone, but those from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be prone to these biases and are more likely to feel that their options are limited (see more in the Medact). Although there is not a straightforward link between armed forces visits and deprivation indicators in Scotland (given geographical and historical factors) it is clear that within each school it is the young people facing greater disadvantage who are most susceptible to marketing messages.

**The armed forces does not guarantee social mobility.** While the armed forces offers opportunities to young people, a large proportion of early enlistees decide to drop out of training (one-third). Their options are then either re-joining the education system or finding alternative employment without having acquired basic qualifications. Their early enlistment therefore brought their full-time education to an end only to subject them to a risk of long-term unemployment. Early enlistees who do complete their training are less likely than adult recruits to be promoted through the ranks. When they leave the army they will compete for jobs with their civilian peers who remained in full-time education post-16. Research by the British Legion has found that the unemployment rate among working-age veterans is approximately twice the civilian rate; a lack of transferable, accredited qualifications acquired in service is a common complaint.

Data suggests that the armed forces make visits to special schools (for pupils with learning difficulties or pupil referral units) and primary schools. The army has stated that it only engages with students in academic year 9 (Scottish S3). We consider that all parts of the armed forces should commit to not providing career or curriculum information for pupils in younger year groups and additionally stop visiting schools for children with additional needs who may also be particularly vulnerable to sophisticated marketing messages.

### **More information**

Petition 1603 and submissions: <http://www.parliament.scot/GettingInvolved/Petitions/armedforcesvisitsstoschools>

ForcesWatch petition information: <http://www.forceswatch.net/content/scottish-parliament-petition>

Medact report: <https://www.medact.org/2016/news/recruitment-children-uk-armed-forces-critique-health-professionals/>