

Written evidence submitted by ForcesWatch to the Education Committee's Alternative Provision Inquiry

13 November 2017

Alternative Provision with a military ethos

1. ForcesWatch critically scrutinises concerns relating to recruitment into the armed forces, focusing particularly on the youngest and most disadvantaged groups, and advocates changes to Government policy. See <http://forceswatch.net>
2. We believe that the education system must equip students with the ability to think critically and that the input of outside interests must be carefully monitored and regulated to ensure balance and to ensure that the education environment operates in the best interests of its students.
3. The involvement of the military in the education system is growing across the UK. There are a number of aspects to this, including the promotion of 'military ethos' in schools through schemes such as the cadet expansion programme, military sponsorship of education institutions and armed forces visits to schools to promote military careers.¹
4. 'Alternative provision with a military ethos' has been promoted by the Department for Education since 2012.² This alternative provision is generally provided in-school, targeting students at risk of failing but also providing whole-class and whole-school activities. A small proportion is targeted towards young people in AP units.³ 'Military ethos' activities in schools are generally focused at schools in disadvantaged areas.
5. Since 2012, nearly £12 million of grant funding has been awarded to a number of external providers of 'alternative provision with a military ethos', such as Commando Joes and Challenger Troop which employ former armed forces personnel.⁴ Further funding was provided for character-building projects with a military ethos. It is our understanding that these grants from central government are no longer available.
6. *A Review of Military Ethos Alternative Provision Projects* in 2014 found that, while there were perceived benefits from the activities, 'the majority of teachers interviewed....tended not to view Military Ethos AP as a way of improving attainment. Rather, it was considered a means to support resilience, self-confidence and inter-personal skills, which were thought to influence attainment.'⁵ The report went on to say that, 'the research team identified a range of issues which, together, undermine the potential for impacts to be attributed to the Military Ethos programme in a form which would stand up to external scrutiny.'
7. Furthermore, the review stated that fun and engaging content and new activities contributed to the success of the activities but that, 'Military Ethos AP was not necessarily a quick-fix; neither was it successful for all pupils.'

¹ For a summary of military involvement in schools see Peace education and the promotion of the armed forces in UK schools: an alternative report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Occasion of the UK's fifth periodic review report, ForcesWatch, 2015 <https://www.forceswatch.net/resources/peace-education-and-promotion-armed-forces-uk-schools>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ex-military-personnel-to-drive-up-standards-among-disengaged-pupils>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/military-ethos-alternative-provision-projects-review>

⁴ <https://www.forceswatch.net/news/government-funding-military-ethos-schools>

⁵ See 2.

Concerns

The influence of the armed forces within education raises a number of concerns. These include: the impact on critical thinking as military approaches are promoted while education about the peace field, disarmament and conflict resolution are not; armed forces careers are presented to students in a sanitised fashion that obscures the reality of the risks and obligations involved; the armed forces are given far more access to school students than other employers or organisations with alternative perspectives; and, parents are not adequately consulted about the involvement of their children in military-themed activities. Some armed forces activities are run in conjunction with arms companies, and can obscure the moral questions surrounding them.

While military-themed activities may be particularly engaging to some young people they are not necessarily appropriate for the education system. Interest in them is unlikely to be universal. Their use should be carefully balanced with other providers and activities that do not utilise a military framework and branding.

Relative effectiveness

The values promoted by 'military ethos' organisations are not unique to the military and it is not helpful or correct to suggest that they are by singling them out from other public services. Teamwork, leadership and other positive attributes associated with 'military ethos' flourish in many other parts of society. The National Youth Agency has expressed concern that military activities in schools are favoured over other youth work which could yield similar benefits.⁶

Alternative education providers need more than 'military ethos' to have a sustained positive impact on students' outcomes particularly as military solutions are unlikely to be effective or appropriate within education. This begs the question of whether the military branding is necessary for the provision at all or is serving a wider purpose of promoting the military to school students.

The evaluation review suggests that, while there are perceived benefits, it was unclear whether they could be attributed to the 'military ethos' projects. It also stated that they were not the solution for every pupil. The review suggested further research was necessary.

Targeting disadvantage

The military ethos programme is explicitly aimed at schools in disadvantaged areas and, within each school, those students more at risk of failing. We question whether it is acceptable that students in some areas, perhaps where there are less alternatives available to them, are more likely to receive education provision which is military-themed instead of provision with more universal appeal.

Whilst it is not the stated aim of the military ethos programme to promote a career in the armed forces, it does create greater exposure of young people to the possibility of a forces career. This raises additional concerns which are aggregated by disadvantage.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have expressed concerns that armed forces recruitment activities do not specifically target children of low-income families.⁷ Research indicates that not only are the youngest recruits at the highest risk during their training and careers, this particularly affects those from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁸ Furthermore, the high drop-out rate suggests that many young people sign up without sufficient awareness of armed forces life. Once they have dropped out, they find they are no longer in the education or training system and are without a job.

In general, information about military careers provided by the armed forces does not provide a realistic assessment of the opportunities and risks involved, yet the unique risks and realities of an armed forces career should demand that young people sign up with a significant level of awareness of what they will

⁶ <http://www.nya.org.uk/2015/01/blog-military-ethos-wheres-evidence/>

⁷ Page24, <http://www.crae.org.uk/media/93148/UK-concluding-observations-2016.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/the-british-armed-forces-why-raising-the-recruitment-age-would-benefit-everyone>

encounter. This has been recognised by the Welsh Government in accepting recommendations to provide guidance to schools on how to approach armed forces visits to schools, and the Scottish Parliament are currently evaluating the issue.⁹

Lack of consultation

Parents have expressed their concern to us about military-themed activities in their school or that there is a representative from a 'military ethos' organisation taking part in wider aspects of school life such as behaviour management. They are uncomfortable with the military presence. We have not heard of a school consulting about the use of 'military ethos' organisations or asking parents if they have any objections. Schools do not seem to recognise that a military presence is potentially divisive and alienating for certain parts of the community.

Lack of scrutiny

There has been very little public discussion and consultation about the increasing involvement of the military in education, with the exception of recent debate in Wales and Scotland.¹⁰ The 'military ethos' programmes were implemented by the DfE on the basis of scant research and have received no parliamentary oversight. More widely, the growing involvement of outside interests within education, as profit-making organisations or as organisations with a set of interests to promote, requires considerable monitoring and regulation.

⁹ <https://www.forceswatch.net/news/forceswatch-welcomes-welsh-government-stance-over-military-visits-schools>, <http://www.parliament.scot/GettingInvolved/Petitions/armedforcesvisitschools>

¹⁰ See 7.