



Ministry of Defence

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MSU/4/4/2/5

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Thank you for your letter dated 20 July 2020 in which you ask for an update on historical recommendations made by the House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC) in relation to the recruitment of personnel aged under 18 (U18) into the United Kingdom's Armed Forces (AF).

It is important that I make clear from the outset that the Ministry of Defence maintains that there is no issue in law with the recruitment of U18s in to the UKAF. Furthermore, we have particular provisions in place to support the employment of young people into our Armed Forces who continue to seek engaging and worthwhile careers in a huge range of roles. Over the years, we have, of course, listened to the views of those who take a different view to us on this issue, but we have not been persuaded by their arguments that our policies for the recruitment of personnel under the age of 18 should change.

Recruiting levels for personnel under the age of 18 are managed at a single Service level and reflect the needs of each Service. The recruitment of under-18s is of particular importance to the RN. We know that a recruit joining at 16 is much more likely to serve for longer than somebody joining at 24 and this is a key factor when we consider the resources expended on training personnel, particularly for specialist trades. Conversely, whilst Royal Marines may join below the age of 18, the preference is to advise them to delay until older to ensure the best chance of success during commando training.

The position of the Army, who proportionally recruit most of the under-18s who join the Armed Forces, is that recruitment of this cohort provides a significant range of opportunities. The Army Foundation College Harrogate (AFCH), which accounts for the vast majority of under 18 recruiting in the Army, delivers the most comprehensive and best resourced soldier Basic Training course in the world. No other Army invests as much in their soldier training as the British Army does through AFCH. The College delivers a transformational experience with over 80% of the trainees successfully graduating to the next stage of training. On average, junior soldiers stay in the Army longer and go further than their standard entry peers.

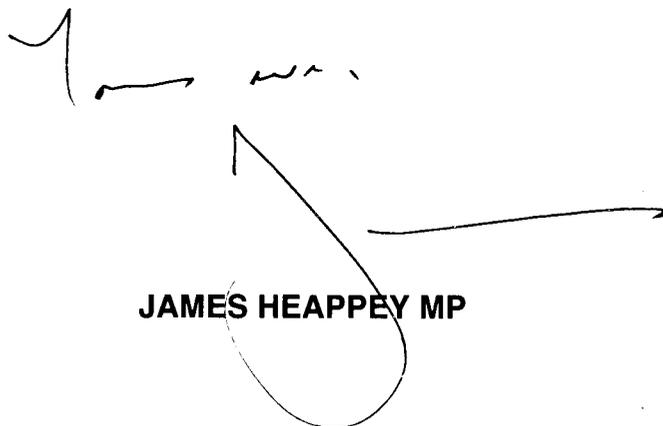
The Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood MP
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Equally, the AFCH was assessed as OFSTED 'Outstanding' during the last inspection in October 2017 in all three categories (Outcomes for recruits and trainees, Quality of Welfare & Duty of Care, and the Effectiveness of Leadership & Management). It meets all the requirements of the Education and Skills Act 2008, offering a first-class education programme that results in many young people gaining qualifications that they would not have obtained otherwise.

It is important to note that whilst some 28% of new entrants to the Army are under 18, of these, around 97% are over 17³/₄ and some 99% are at least 17¹/₂ by the time they complete Phase 2. By the time personnel are inducted to their unit, most are 18.

Turning to the Royal Air Force (RAF), those under the age of 18 are not eligible for Officer roles in any branch of the Service. In terms of Other Ranks recruitment, approximately 90% of each yearly intake is made up of those aged 18 or over. Therefore, due to the relatively low number of U18s recruited into the RAF each year, there are currently no plans or anticipated requirement to conduct a review of the potential impact of raising the recruitment age to 18.

In your letter you talk of a 'dependency' of recruiting personnel under the age of 18. I think this is very much a matter of perspective. We of course need to maintain strong fighting forces capable of carrying out a range of tasks and operational deployments, and our younger cohorts have a role to play in that. At the same time, we are uniquely positioned to offer them outstanding training and career opportunities which in many cases are transferable to roles outside of the Services. I can assure you that the welfare of these young people is paramount; we are externally audited by organisations such as OFSTED, and as you will see, have achieved outstanding results.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Heappey', is written above the printed name. A large, stylized flourish extends from the bottom of the signature, looping back towards the left and then pointing right with a horizontal arrowhead.

JAMES HEAPPEY MP



Defence Committee

Chair, Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood MP

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20 July 2020

Recent discussions with third sector stakeholders have reminded me that over the years the Defence Committee has made a number of recommendations on the issue of under-18 recruitment, and I would be grateful if you could provide an update on developments in this area, taking account of the following points:

- The Committee's Third Report of Session 2004-05, *Duty of Care*, HC 63, included a recommendation that "MoD examine the potential impact of raising the recruitment age for all three Services to 18" (para 62).

The Department's response, Cm 6620, did not address the recommendation, instead setting out a number of reasons why the MoD found under-18 recruitment useful. There has been no review of the potential impact of raising the recruitment age. The only relevant recent review of the policy—the Army's 2019 'Junior Entry Review'—did not examine the feasibility of a transition to all-adult armed forces, and did not engage with non-governmental stakeholders.

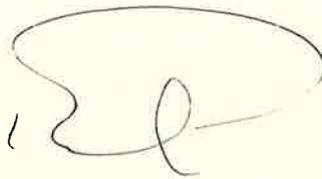
- The Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2013-14, *The Armed Forces Covenant in Action? Part 4: Education of Service Personnel*, HC 185, welcomed the Armed Forces' provision of challenging and constructive education and employment opportunities for young people, but asked why the Army was so dependent on recruiting personnel aged under 18 compared to the other two Services and whether steps were being taken to reduce this dependency (para 13). The Committee also recommended that the MoD "should carry out a thorough cost-benefit analysis of the policy of recruiting Armed Forces personnel under the age of 18 years old" (para 24).

The Department's response, HC 759, promised to carry out the cost-benefit analysis, which was published in 2014. The then Chair referred the analysis to the NAO, which found that it contained major flaws and did not support the MoD's assertions about the cost-effectiveness of the policy; assertions which the Department subsequently withdrew.

- The Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2013-14, *Future Army 2020*, HC 576, called on the Government "to respond in detail to the argument that the Army could phase out the recruitment of minors without detriment to the Army 2020 plans" (para 130).

The Department's response, HC 387 of Session 2014-15, contained a letter from the Defence Secretary arguing for continuation of under-18 recruitment on cost-benefit grounds (later shown to be unfounded, as noted above) and because Junior Entrants provided around 15% of Army recruits each year and were therefore a "critical capability". The Army has not reduced its dependency on the age group; in the financial year 2018/19, under-18s comprised 28.8% of recruitment into the ranks; the highest proportion since 2010/11. More soldiers are recruited at 16 than any other age.

Vrs.



Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood MP
Chair of the Defence Committee