

Written evidence submitted by Child Rights International Network (CRIN)

Executive summary

1. Girls under the age of 18 in Army training, and particularly at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate (AFC Harrogate), continue to face disproportionately high risks of sexual and physical harm. The systems that should make them visible and safe remain ineffective.
2. This submission, updated since our last submission to the Women in the Armed Forces Subcommittee in February 2025, shows that convictions, police investigations and self-harm incidents have continued; oversight bodies have repeatedly given reassurances that are inconsistent with the available evidence; and parliamentary scrutiny is frustrated by repeated refusals of information.
3. We continue to be concerned by a lack of clarity from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) on their precise policy to ensure better outcomes for under-18-year-olds, including girls, in military training.
4. We are concerned that the MoD appears not to be considering the needs of under-18s as service users when designing new programmes, such as the newly announced free legal advice to be provided to victims of sexual offences perpetrated by military personnel, which specifically excludes under-18s from accessing the service.
5. We therefore repeat our request that the Subcommittee call for **an urgent, independent, multidisciplinary review of child protection both in the Armed Forces and at AFC Harrogate in particular**. In this submission, we set out updated, targeted recommendations and suggested questions for witnesses.

About CRIN

6. The Child Rights International Network (CRIN) campaigns for a genuine shift in how governments and societies view and treat children. Among our concerns is the worldwide impact of military enlistment and conditioning on adolescent children.
7. We have provided evidence to the Defence Committee several times on the difficulties faced by female personnel under the age of 18 and are grateful for the sub-committee's continuing attention to the issue.

Background

8. In a typical year, approximately 250 female British armed forces personnel are still under age 18 (hereafter 'girls'). Around three-quarters are in the army, mostly in training.¹

¹ MoD, [UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics](#), 2025.

9. Girls under 18 experience **compound vulnerability**: they are at risk of gender-based violence in a masculine institutional culture, and that gendered risk is multiplied by their status as children who are dependent on adult staff, who are away from home and who are constrained in their ability to leave military service.
10. Having the status of children, all personnel under age 18 hold additional rights in law. The UK is bound by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, under which children have the right to have their best interests made a '*primary consideration*' in all actions that concern them, including the policy on the age at which the armed forces may enlist.²
11. The Convention also confers on governments a specific legal duty '*to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse*'.³
12. Evidence from AFC Harrogate shows both staff-perpetrated sexual exploitation of female junior soldiers and peer-to-peer sexual offences affecting girls; therefore, harms recorded at AFC Harrogate are squarely within the Subcommittee's interest in violence against women and girls in the Armed Forces.

Recap

13. Our initial evidence to the Women in the Armed Forces Subcommittee, and three subsequent follow-ups, highlighted the **disproportionate risks of harm faced by girls in the armed forces**, particularly those training at AFC Harrogate.
14. On the risks of sexual abuse, we reported that:
 - a. Girls were facing a **tenfold risk** of sexual abuse compared to adult female personnel, according to MoD records of police investigations.⁴ More than **one in ten** girls in the armed forces had been victims of sexual offences in the previous year.⁵
 - b. In 2021 at the AFC, **22** recruits were victims of sexual offences.⁶ More than half were girls.⁷ **Three** suspects were members of staff,⁸ one of whom has since been convicted of multiple such offences, which reportedly took place over nine months.⁹
 - c. The AFC's recruit survey in 2020 found that **48%** of girls had experienced bullying, harassment, or discrimination while training, and that only **30%** said

² Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 3.

³ Ibid., art. 19.

⁴ In 2021, 37 girls were victims in sexual offence cases opened by the Service Police, out of a total population of 290 girls serving in the armed forces; a rate of 12.8%. In the same year, 202 adult female personnel were victims of sexual offence cases, out of a population of 16,180; a rate of 1.2%. MoD, Ministerial answer to [Parliamentary Question no. 154396](#), 26 April 2022; MoD, [Sexual Offences in the Service Justice System 2021 Annual Statistics](#) [Worksheet 3], 31 March 2022; MoD, [UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2021](#) [Tables 1 and 3], 10 June 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ MoD, Ministerial answer to [Parliamentary Question no. 154397](#), 26 April 2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ MoD, Ministerial answer to [Parliamentary Question no. 2317](#), 19 May 2022.

⁹ Dan Sabbagh, ['Nine rapes at Harrogate military college reported to civilian police in 13 months'](#), *Guardian*, 5 October 2023.

they would report such behaviour to their chain of command.¹⁰ (As noted in the *Women in the Armed Forces* report, the Army Sexual Harassment Survey excludes personnel under age 18.¹¹)

- d. Since November 2021, **six members of staff** at AFC and one recruit¹² have been **convicted of physical or sexual abuse, including rape**. Five of these cases have occurred since the introduction of the Zero Tolerance Policy at AFC in March 2022.¹³
- e. The finding of the service inquiry into the suicide of Gunner Jaysley Beck, published in June 2023, that in her final two-and-a-half months at AFC, in 2015, Sgt George Higgins, a trainer at the college who was eight years Gunner Beck's senior, started a sexual relationship with her. Sgt Higgins stated during Gunner Beck's inquest that their relationship started after Beck's one-year course was complete and she left for Larkhill Camp as a 17-year-old. It is a criminal offence for a person over the age of 18 to have sexual contact with a person under the age of 18 over whom they are in a position of trust.¹⁴ At Gunner Beck's inquest, Sgt Higgins refused to say when he first had sexual contact with Beck and whether he did so with other recruits at Harrogate. Sgt Higgins has now left the Army; while he was in service, he was not sanctioned for his relationship with Gunner Beck.
- f. Between January and May 2024, **two further unknown members of staff** at AFC were **convicted for unknown sexual offences other than rape**¹⁵.
- g. In January 2023, instructor **Cpl Bartram** was **convicted of six sexual offences** involving female recruits under the age of 18, which took place unchallenged over ten months from July 2021.¹⁶
- h. Cpl Kerry-Ann Knight's witness statement to her employment tribunal in August 2024 contained substantial evidence of failure of child protection and child abuse.¹⁷
- i. Between July 2022 and August 2023, **13 sexual offences** at the AFC were referred to the North Yorkshire police: **nine cases of rape, two of sexual**

¹⁰ An anonymous survey of girls at the Army Foundation College in 2020 found that half (48%) had experienced bullying, harassment or discrimination while training there and 30% said they would report it. Army Foundation College Harrogate, [Project Athena: A pilot training to optimise basic training for female junior soldiers](#), 2022, p. 5.

¹¹ HC Defence Committee, [Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life](#), 2021, para. 65.

¹² Cpl Hey, convicted for routinely punching recruits - B Quinn, ['Parents call for British army college to be shut down after abuse claims'](#), Guardian, 18 November 2021. Cpl Bartram, convicted for the serial sexual exploitation of six female under-18 recruits - D Sabbagh, ['Nine rapes at Harrogate military college reported to civilian police in 13 months'](#), Guardian, 5 October 2023; R v Bartram 2023. Cpl Irwin convicted for abusing his position of trust by starting a sexual relationship with a 16-year-old recruit - M Howe, ['British Army corporal, 31, had sex with teen recruit, 16, after urging bosses to let him take charge of female trainees is jailed'](#), Daily Mail, 17 April 2024. Two unknown members of AFC staff convicted for sexual offences other than rape - S Atherton, ['Army Foundation College: Sexual Offences'](#), UK Parliament: Written question, 2 May 2024, HC 24728. Cpl Conway convicted for rape of adult colleague - S Carr, ['Army corporal who raped female colleague then told her 'You're fine, I was wearing a condom' is jailed for more than seven years'](#), Daily Mail, 8 June 2023. JS Private McGregor-Freeburn convicted for two counts sexual assault with penetration of an under-18 year old - R v McGregor-Freeburn 2024

¹³ MoD, [Defence publishes its Zero Tolerance approach to sexual offences](#), 30 March 2022

¹⁴ Sexual Offences Act 2003, Section 16.

¹⁵ Sarah Atherton, ['Army Foundation College: Sexual Offences'](#), UK Parliament: Written question, 2 May 2024, HC 24728.

¹⁶ R v Bartram 2023.

¹⁷ Witness statement of the Claimant, Kerry-Ann Knight v. Ministry of Defence [2023] Case No. 1800456/2023, Leeds Employment Tribunal.

assault, and two of voyeurism.¹⁸ The Independent Advisory Panel (IAP), responsible for monitoring recruits' wellbeing and welfare at AFC stated in its March 2023 report that these investigations concerned 'one incident from 2021'.¹⁹

- j. In addition to sexual offences addressed within the civilian justice system, investigations were opened into the cases of **34** victims under the age of 18 within the service justice system in 2022.²⁰ This accounts for **17%** of all girls in the armed forces at the time (200 as of October 2022).²¹ In reply to questions from Dave Doogan MP asking how many of the victims and perpetrators of these offences were at AFC, the minister has withheld the information saying that it would risk identity disclosure.²²

15. We also highlighted significant risks of harm to physical and mental health:

- a. In 2021, girls at the AFC were **twice** as likely as male recruits to present with a musculoskeletal injury requiring medical care; **a third** of female recruits had been injured in this way over three years.²³
- b. In 2022, the *Project Athena* study at AFC reported that the prolonged stressors of initial training left female recruits with reduced psychological resilience, reduced self-efficacy, impaired emotional regulation in distress. A similar, though less marked, effect was found in male recruits.²⁴
- c. In November 2023, a recruit attempted to kill themselves by firing two blank shots into their mouth whilst on exercise²⁵.

16. For more details, please see our [initial submission](#) and our [first](#), [second](#) and [third](#) submission at follow-up.²⁶

New evidence

17. We wish to add the following new evidence for the committee's consideration:

- a. There were **122 investigations into sexual offences against under-18-year-olds** in uniform by the Service Police between 2021 and 2024.²⁷ This includes four investigations into alleged rape offences and 80 investigations into sexual assault.

¹⁸ North Yorkshire Police, [Freedom of Information request ref. 494.2023-24](#), 14 September 2023.

¹⁹ British Army, [Independent Advisory Panel Report](#), March 2024

²⁰ MoD, [Murder, manslaughter, sexual offences and domestic abuse in the Service Justice System: 2022 \[data tables\]](#), Tab 3, Table 11, 30 March 2023.

²¹ MoD, [UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics](#), 2023, Table 3.

²² MoD, [Letter from Andrew Murrison MP to Dave Doogan MP](#), 15 May 2023; Andrew Murrison MP, [Written question no. 199692](#), 14 September 2023.

²³ Army Foundation College Harrogate, [Project Athena: A pilot training to optimise basic training for female junior soldiers](#), 2022, p. 58.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁵ L Brown, 'Bullied army recruit 'tried to kill himself on exercise'' The Times, 15 November 2024

²⁶ CRIN, [Women in the Armed Forces inquiry: Submission of evidence](#) (re. WAF 0077), [Submission of evidence at follow-up](#) (ref. WIF 0037), and [additional submission at follow-up](#) (WIF 0047).

²⁷ Emma Lewell MP, ['Armed Forces: Offences against Children'](#), HC 86208, 29 October 2025

- b. Since our last evidence submission, a parent of a recruit at AFC Harrogate has contacted CRIN to complain that their child was bullied and sexually harassed by both fellow recruits and instructors. In addition, the parent told us that their child had been sexually assaulted during their time at AFC Harrogate. CRIN has referred the case to a solicitor, and the legal case is ongoing.
- c. During their last evidence submission to the Subcommittee, the Centre for Military Justice disclosed that they are currently representing a former female trainee at AFC who '*reported extremely serious sexual offences and other inappropriate behaviours at AFC* (albeit not alleged to involve an instructor)'.²⁸ CMJ stated that due to various ongoing legal processes, they cannot provide more details, but that '*this case as well as the incidents described above do not give us [CMJ] confidence that young women/children are safe there [at the Army Foundation College].*'
- d. North Yorkshire Local Authority Designated Safeguarding Office (LADO) have received **89 notifications** from the British Army concerning the Army Foundation College.²⁹ A notification is defined as a situation where the LADO is informed by an agency that they have reason to believe the threshold has been met for an allegation process against an individual working in a position of trust with children. The relevant threshold, as set out in the government statutory guidance "Working Together to Safeguard Children," includes the following criteria:
 - i. Behaving in a way that has harmed, or may harm, a child;
 - ii. Possibly committing a criminal offence against, or related to, a child;
 - iii. Behaving towards a child or children in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children;
 - iv. Behaving or possibly behaving in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children.
- e. After the last Women in the Armed Forces Subcommittee meeting in March of 2025, then Minister Al Carns wrote to the committee stating that from January 1st 2024, to March 31st 2025, no under-18-year-old recruits raised Service Complaints at AFC.³⁰
- f. In the same letter, the Minister also stated that between 21st March 2023 and 21st March 2025, there have been **37 allegations of sexually inappropriate misconduct** (including Rape, Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, Indecent Images of Children, Unacceptable Sexual Behaviour etc) and **34 allegations of bullying** at the AFC.³¹ The Minister further stated that fewer than five members of staff were accused of sexually inappropriate misconduct by recruits during this time frame, and less than 10 members of staff were accused by recruits of bullying.³²

²⁸ Centre for Military Justice, Written evidence submitted by the Centre for Military Justice to the Women in the Armed Forces Subcommittee Evidence Refresh, 12 March 2025

²⁹ North Yorkshire Council, Freedom of Information request ref. CN24715, 7 January 2026.

³⁰ Ministry of Defence, Letter from Minister Al Carns to Chair of Defence Committee Tan Dhesi, 5 June 2025, Pg. 1

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

- g. OpenDemocracy revealed that between 1 January 2018 and 30 November 2024, **36 complaints** were made by recruits at AFC or their parents of **violent behaviour** (including assault, battery and ill-treatment) **by staff towards recruits**. In the same time period, there were **396 allegations of violent behaviour** by recruits or their parents committed **by fellow recruits**.³³ The same article reveals that between 1 January 2019 and 17 June 2024, **20 instructors** at AFC were **subject to Summary Hearings**. Summary Hearings can concern matters ranging from absence without leave (AWOL), insubordination, or ill-treating subordinates.³⁴
- h. The Stray Ferret, a local newspaper based in Harrogate, reports that between 1 January 2023 and 7 July 2025, North Yorkshire Police investigated **11 sexual offences** and **19 cases of Violence against the Person** at AFC Harrogate.³⁵ These are further broken down by year and include:
- i. Five investigations into sexual offences and five investigations into Violence Against the Person at AFC in 2024;
 - ii. And five investigations into sexual offences and 13 investigations into violence against the person between 1 January 2025 and 7 July 2025.
- i. This is roughly an investigation into a violent or sexual crime every 10.4 days on average for 2025 up until July. A further Fol asked by CRIN on 14 August 2025 revealed that the ten sexual crimes investigated by North Yorkshire Police at AFC between 1 January 2024 and 7 July 2025 can be broken down into the following categories:
- i. Rape Of A Male Aged 16 And Over;
 - ii. Sexual Assault On A Female Aged 13 And Over;
 - iii. Sexual Assault On A Male Aged 13 And Over.³⁶
- j. [REDACTED] a former instructor at AFC, was found not guilty of sexually assaulting a colleague in her room at AFC on 6 November 2024.³⁷
- k. There have been **86 ambulance call-outs** to AFC between 1 January 2020 and 7 August 2025.³⁸ This included 11 Category One (Life-threatening), 50 Category Two (Emergency), 18 Category Three (Urgent) and five Category Four (Non-urgent).³⁹ Of the 74 available Patient Care Records, 57 indicate that patients were transported to the hospital, and 18 indicate the patient was female. Of the 86 call-outs, **57 were for under-18s**.⁴⁰ As a comparison in the same response North Yorkshire Ambulance Service reveals that three equivalent further

³³ Freedom of Information request, ref.2024/25057

³⁴ Sian Norris, [Inside British Army's child training college where violent abuse is the norm](#), OpenDemocracy, 14 November 2025

³⁵ Flora Grafton [New data shows violent crimes increasing at Harrogate's Army Foundation College](#), The Stray Ferret, 28 July 2025

³⁶ Freedom of Information request, Ref: 0497.2025-26, 10 September 2025

³⁷ [REDACTED] Court Martial proceedings watched by CRIN 28/07/25

³⁸ Freedom of Information request, [ref 32061](#) 2 September 2025

³⁹ Freedom of Information Request, Ref: FOI 32635, 8 October 2025 and NuffieldTurst, [Ambulance response times](#) (2025)

⁴⁰ Freedom of Information Request, Ibid

education colleges, also in Harrogate, received a combined 34 call outs over the same time period.⁴¹

- l. Between 1 January 2018 and 30 June 2025, there are **176** records on the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system of sexual allegations reported at AFC, **32** of those **allegations against Permanent Staff** and **144 against Junior Soldiers**.⁴² A subsequent PQ on 30 October 2025 recorded 159 sexual misconduct allegations between 1 January 2018 and 30 November 2024.⁴³ This means that there were 17 sexual misconduct allegations recorded on the JPA at AFC in the seven months between 30 November 2024 and 30 June 2025.
- m. There were **214 allegations of Bullying, Harassment, Ill treatment of Junior Soldiers, Conduct Prejudicial to Good Order and Discipline and Disgraceful Conduct at AFC** between January 2018 and June 2025.⁴⁴

Ofsted grading

18. On this evidence above, AFC has a longstanding culture of recruit abuse, including by staff, yet has held an 'outstanding' Ofsted grade for welfare continuously for a decade. To help account for this, we draw the subcommittee's attention to the following:
 - a. **Limited scope.** Under Ofsted's arrangement with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) the scope of inspections at initial training establishments is limited to safeguarding arrangements alone.⁴⁵ (Despite AFC's name, Ofsted rightly discourages comparison with a civilian college, which would be subject to a substantially more comprehensive inspection regime.⁴⁶)
 - b. **Abuse overlooked.** Despite Ofsted's explicit focus on recruit welfare, despite the evidence of abuse freely available for inspectors to examine on the army's record, and despite our efforts to direct Ofsted to it, maltreatment at AFC has not been mentioned in any inspection report in the last decade.⁴⁷ AFC was most recently inspected in 2021. In that year, AFC's records clearly showed nine investigations into 22 sexual offences against recruits,⁴⁸ in which members of staff were implicated, none of which was mentioned in the inspection report.⁴⁹
 - c. **Ofsted's reasoning.** When we asked Ofsted why they have disregarded verifiable evidence of abuse at AFC, the reply stated simply that 'inspectors found no evidence to substantiate your concerns'.⁵⁰ Ofsted has asked us not to

⁴¹ Freedom of Information Request, Ibid

⁴² Baroness Lister, *Army Foundation College: Sexual Offences*, HL10008, 1 September 2025

⁴³ Will Stone MP, *Army Foundation College: Sexual Offences*, UIN 86789, 30 October 2025

⁴⁴ Freedom of Information request, Army/PolSec/C/B/FOI2025/21290 15 September 2025

⁴⁵ Ministry of Defence, *Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training 2022 to 2023*, 2023.

⁴⁶ Ofsted, *Letter to CRIN*, 16 June 2022.

⁴⁷ MoD, *Welfare and duty of care in Armed Forces initial training*, 2023.

⁴⁸ Leo Docherty MP, *Armed forces: Offences against children*, UIN 15439714 April 2022.

⁴⁹ Leo Docherty MP, *Armed forces: Offences against children*, UIN 2317, 16 May 2022.

⁵⁰ Ofsted, *Letter to CRIN*, 16 June 2022.

provide any further evidence of abuse, because ‘service complaints’ are not relevant to inspections in military training centres.⁵¹

19. A civilian education institution with a comparable record of safeguarding incidents would be unlikely to retain an “Outstanding” rating.

Restriction on a girl’s ability to leave their military service as a safeguarding risk

20. Safeguarding in England is built on the principle that children must have meaningful, safe and accessible routes to raise concerns, seek help and be protected from ongoing harm.⁵² This means that the ability to leave is an important aspect of a safe environment for recruits.
21. Within the Army Foundation College, 16- and 17-year-old recruits are subject to staged exit restrictions. For the first 28 days they cannot leave unless subject to a medical and/or welfare assessment and deemed ‘*unlikely to achieve the motivation required to become a good soldier*’ by the Commanding Officer (CO) of AFC.⁵³
22. From 28 days to six months, they may leave only by submitting a handwritten notice, in their own words, with ‘*no templated letters...to be used*’, to the CO and then after observing a 14-day ‘cooling off’ period. From six months until they turn 18, that cooling-off period can extend to up to three months at the discretion of the Commanding Officer. After turning 18, recruits lose any special rights to leave voluntarily, as per regulations for all regular personnel.⁵⁴
23. This creates a closed, high-control environment in which children, including girls, who feel unsafe cannot remove themselves from the source of potential harm without permission from within the hierarchy that is simultaneously responsible for their care and for the institution’s reputation.
24. From a child protection perspective, this is structurally high risk. An institution that prevents a child from leaving – or makes leaving contingent on approval by the same command structure that may be implicated in the harm – directly frustrates that core safeguarding duty.
25. The staged cooling-off periods and Commanding Officer discretion criteria also weaken one of the fundamental protections in English safeguarding practice: the ability to remove a child from a harmful placement quickly. In children’s social care, if there is a concern that a placement is unsafe, the expectation is rapid relocation, escalation to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for allegations against staff, and independent scrutiny of both the allegation and the immediate safety plan.⁵⁵ The presumption is that safety action is swift, not procedurally delayed. A system that imposes a two-week- to three-month delay, controlled internally, in effect reverses that presumption.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Department for Education (2023). [Working together to safeguard children: Statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children](#) and Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). (2022). [Accountability and reparations report](#). IICSA.

⁵³ British Army, [AFC SOI-17 Junior Solider Discharges](#), 21 June 2024

⁵⁴ British Army, *Ibid*

⁵⁵ Department for Education. (2023). *Ibid*.

26. In 2024, the standing order governing the discharge of Junior Soldiers was amended to require handwritten letters to be submitted should recruits wish to exercise their right to discharge.⁵⁶ The justification for this change was that *'Junior Soldiers do not have regular access to computers with printers and so a handwritten letter is the simplest means that allows a Junior Soldier to submit their notice to terminate and ensure a record is maintained'*.⁴ The use of template letters was barred on the grounds that recruits should *'give serious consideration to leaving the Army'* and that allowing recruits to use templates for their letters would *'mean Junior Soldiers may not give the process due diligence and so terminate their service'*.⁵⁷
27. These exit restrictions for recruits at AFC are most concerning as a major safeguarding risk and put both female and male under-18 year old recruits at risk.

The MoD New Independent Legal Advocacy scheme

28. On 11 February 2026, the Ministry of Defence announced a new Independent Legal Advocacy scheme to provide free, independent legal advice to victim-survivors of rape and sexual offences committed by Service personnel or a civilian subject to Service Discipline.⁵⁸ The press release for this announcement stated that this service will only be for those aged 18 or over. This was subsequently confirmed by the MoD in answer to a PQ by Calin Bailey MP on the basis that *'The age threshold reflects the scope of the Service Justice System and the types of cases it is likely to handle'*, i.e that under-18s fall outside the scope of the Service Justice System and that such cases rarely appear in front of the military courts.⁵⁹
29. Based on the evidence in this submission alone, it should be clear that under-18-year-olds regularly appear in cases handled by the Service Justice System as both victims and perpetrators. In 2023/24, under-18s made up more than a third of the Army's intake.⁶⁰

Avenues for remedy

30. **Limits of 'zero tolerance'**. Several years of zero tolerance and related policies, while welcome, have not reduced the specific and disproportionate risks faced by girls aged under 18 in the armed forces.
31. **Duty to safeguard**. There have been numerous proven failures of child protection at AFC, which current regulatory oversight of AFC has failed to address. Reassurances provided by the IAP and Ofsted's grading of Outstanding are not consistent with numerous criminal convictions for sexual offences and multiple further reports of sexual misconduct, bullying and harassment. Protection systems for female junior

⁵⁶ British Army, [AFC SOI-17 Junior Soldier Discharges](#), 21 June 2024

⁵⁷ Freedom of Information request, [ref. 2025/03498](#) 28 February 2025

⁵⁸ Ministry of Defence, [Free legal advice to be provided to victims of perpetrators under-18-year-olds sexual offences perpetrated by military personnel for the first time](#), 11 February 2026

⁵⁹ Calvin Bailey MP, [Armed Forces: Legal Opinion](#), UIN 115966, 25 February 2026,

⁶⁰ In 2023–24, 2,350 new armed forces enlistees were under age 18 1,760 of these joined the Army, making up 36% of the enlisted intake; more new Army recruits were 16 than any other age. MoD, [UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics](#), 2024, Table 9a.

soldiers and others with heightened vulnerability are not strong enough and monitoring of these systems is weak. There must be greater clarity about the distinction in AFC's policies and practices between legitimate rigorous military training and child abuse of junior soldiers.

32. **Parliamentary scrutiny is hampered by withheld data.** Multiple FOI refusals and withheld or deleted records have prevented a full public accounting of allegations involving under-18s. A recent refused PQ from Emma Lewell MP (29 Oct) is relevant to this pattern and should be considered by the Committee as an example of the information barriers faced by MPs.
33. **The restriction on the ability of under-18-year-old girls to leave the Armed Forces is a major safeguarding risk.** The Armed Forces should guarantee under-18s, including girls, the unfettered legal right to leave service, as has been recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the International Labour Organization.⁶¹ The Army should further rescind its new amendments to the rules governing JS discharges, requiring notices to leave to be handwritten and not based on a template, as this constitutes an unnecessary impediment to recruits' legal right to leave the army
34. **Under-18-year-olds are directly affected by the operation of the Service Justice System.** We *strongly* recommend that under-18s be included in the scope of the New Independent Legal Advocacy scheme
35. **In light of the evidence, we believe that girls cannot be said to be safe at AFC Harrogate.** We call for the following measures to be taken:
 - a. **Order an urgent, independent, multidisciplinary review of child protection at AFC (since 2014).** The review must be chaired by an independent safeguarding expert with statutory child-protection experience and include policing, health, education, and child-welfare partners.
 - b. **Require immediate publication of anonymised trend data.** The MoD must publish anonymised, audited figures for: allegations reported by under-18s at AFC Harrogate, the nature of the alleged crimes and the number of staff investigated/convicted. The MoD should adopt the MoD national-statistics convention of reporting 'fewer than five' where necessary for anonymity, rather than refusing to publish.
 - c. **Reform inspection and oversight.** Ofsted's contractual relationship and inspection scope for armed-forces initial training must be reviewed so that welfare, safeguarding and educational standards are assessed independently and to civilian standards where children are present. The IAP must be reconstituted with statutory safeguarding authority, independent funding, and external child-protection leadership.
 - d. **Guarantee unfettered, confidential exit routes for under-18 recruits.** Remove barriers that make leaving contingent on commanding-officer discretion;

⁶¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, '[Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom](#)', 2023, para 56e and International Labour Organisation, [Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour](#), Pg 611 (2025)

restore the right to leave without delay and remove procedural impediments (including the 2024 handwritten-letter requirement).

- e. **Mandate independent annual anonymous well-being surveys and publish IAP data.** Commission an independent body to survey all junior soldiers on welfare, bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, and require the IAP to publish anonymised data on suicides and suicide attempts.
- f. **Ensure all suspected offences involving under-18s are referred to the civilian police.** The Subcommittee should press for a protocol that removes discretion from the chain of command for referral to civilian investigators.
- g. **Improve safer recruitment, training and vetting.** DBS checks, enhanced safeguarding training that addresses power dynamics and bystander behaviour, and independent vetting of instructor appointments must be standard and transparent.

Conclusion

- 36. As the evidence outlined above shows, the risk to girls aged 16 and 17 in the armed forces of sexual harassment and assault is substantial, as is the risk of harm to physical and mental health. No civilian institution with such a record would be regarded as safe for the age group.
- 37. We have documented a decade of abuse at AFC Harrogate, and the evidence we have collected since our last submission shows the risks to girls under 18 remain significant.
- 38. The institutional responses to date have not been sufficient to make the Army safe for children and girls. The Subcommittee's unique remit on violence against women and girls gives it both the responsibility and the authority to insist on independent answers and independent action.
- 39. For the safety of current and future girls in uniform, CRIN asks the Committee to press for an immediate independent review of child protection at AFC Harrogate, full and transparent reporting from the MoD, and reform of inspection and oversight arrangements.

Suggested witness questions

Data transparency and withheld information

- 1. The MoD has previously refused to disclose how many victims and perpetrators of sexual offences were located at the Army Foundation College. Why is the department unable to publish anonymised trend data when other government departments routinely do so?
- 2. Why has the MoD declined to use the standard statistical approach of reporting figures as "fewer than five" in order to protect anonymity rather than withholding the data entirely?

3. How many sexual misconduct allegations recorded on the Joint Personnel Administration system in the last five years involved recruits under the age of 18, and how many members of staff were the subject of those allegations?
4. Of the allegations recorded on JPA in that period, how many resulted in criminal conviction, dismissal, administrative sanction, or no further action?

Safeguarding and child protection failures

5. North Yorkshire's Local Authority Designated Officer has reportedly received **89 child safeguarding notifications** in the past 5 years concerning staff at the Army Foundation College. Why is such a high number of safeguarding alerts being generated from a single training establishment?
6. Does the MoD accept that under-18 recruits, including girls, are legally children and therefore entitled to the same safeguarding protections as children in civilian education or residential settings?

Culture and prevention

7. The Army introduced a Zero Tolerance policy in 2022, yet multiple staff members have been convicted of sexual offences since then. What measurable impact has the policy actually had?

Civilian policing and criminal justice

8. North Yorkshire Police investigated sexual offences and violent crimes at the Army Foundation College at a rate of roughly one investigation every ten days in the first half of 2025. Does the department consider that an acceptable level of criminal investigation for an institution housing children?
9. Under what circumstances does the Army decide to refer allegations involving under-18 recruits to civilian police rather than handling them internally?

Ofsted oversight

10. The Army Foundation College has held an Ofsted rating of Outstanding for welfare for a decade, yet criminal convictions of instructors for abuse of recruits have occurred during that period. How does the MoD explain this discrepancy?
11. Did the Army disclose all relevant safeguarding incidents to Ofsted during inspections? If so then why didn't they appear in Ofsted reports?
12. Does the MoD believe that the current inspection regime is adequate for an institution that houses and trains children?
13. Would the MoD support an inspection framework equivalent to that used for residential schools, such as was conducted at Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College?

Exit restrictions and safeguarding risk

14. Why are 16- and 17-year-old recruits, including girls, required to submit a handwritten letter to request discharge, and why can that request be delayed for up to three months by their chain of command?"
15. What safeguarding rationale supports requiring a child to seek permission from the chain of command in order to leave an environment where they may feel unsafe?
16. Do you accept that an institution which restricts a child's ability to leave quickly may create a safeguarding risk if that child feels unsafe?"

Independent Legal Advocacy scheme

17. The new Independent Legal Advocacy scheme excludes victims under the age of 18. Why are the youngest and potentially most vulnerable victims excluded from this support?
18. If under-18 victims cannot access the new scheme, what equivalent support will be provided to them?
19. Was the exclusion of under-18s assessed for compatibility with the UK's safeguarding obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?

Institutional accountability

20. Given the pattern of safeguarding concerns raised over the past decade, why has the MoD not commissioned an independent review of child protection at the Army Foundation College?
21. Would the MoD accept an independent multidisciplinary review led by a safeguarding expert from outside the Armed Forces?
22. If a civilian college with under-18 students had the record of the Army Foundation College of safeguarding concerns, police investigations and convictions of staff for sexual abuse, would it be allowed to remain open?