

**Briefing for the Labour Party International Policy Commission  
Britain's Defence and Security Priorities, June 2016.**

This briefing paper from Child Soldiers International summarises the case for raising the British armed forces' minimum enlistment age from 16 to 18 years, as a policy proposal for a progressive Labour agenda for international defence and security. The briefing relates to two areas of the consultation:

1. Capabilities, spending and choices; and
2. Britain's place in the world.

**1. Capabilities, Spending and Choices: ensuring our Armed Forces are fit to meet the challenges we will face**

Enlisting minors is an unnecessarily expensive policy which diverts scarce resources from other recruitment and training priorities, whilst simultaneously failing to provide recruits with a minimum standard of education comparable to that available in civilian life. Raising the minimum enlistment age to 18 would save approximately **£50 million per year** – more than enough to fund the modest increase in adult recruitment needed.<sup>1</sup> It currently costs **£16,853** to put an adult through Phase 1 infantry training, but training a 16 year old to the same standard costs **£68,751** – **four times** as much.<sup>2</sup> If the career length of younger recruits were four times as long as that of adult recruits then their return of service would balance the high costs of training, but in fact they stay in the army **only one-third** longer on average.<sup>3</sup>

Since most comparable states' armed forces recruit only adults, there is no demographic reason why the UK could not do the same. The navy and RAF now rely almost entirely on adult recruits.<sup>4</sup> The army's requirement for enlisted soldiers has **reduced by a fifth** in the last decade,<sup>5</sup> while the proportion of its intake aged under 18 has steadily fallen to an all-time low;<sup>6</sup> about **85 per cent** of soldiers now graduating to the army's 'trained strength' enlisted as adults.<sup>7</sup> In these circumstances, the army could transition to an all-adult force based on a small increase in adult intake comprised largely of those who now enlist as minors but would still enlist at 18 if the policy changed.<sup>8</sup>

As the nature of modern warfare changes and becomes more complex, technical training is ever more important. Armed forces personnel require increasingly sophisticated training and skills, necessitating higher pre-existing standards of education among recruits. Recruiting young people before they have completed their full secondary level education to age 18, including GCSE English and maths re-sits where necessary, automatically entails lower basic entrance requirements. In March 2015, **three-quarters** of Junior Entrants had a reading age of **11 or less** (and **seven per cent** had a reading age as **low as five**).<sup>9</sup> This means significant resources must be diverted away from specialist military training and dedicated instead to providing basic remedial education to young recruits. It also means that recruits are being enlisted with insufficient literacy skills to read and fully comprehend their own enlistment papers. As a comparison it should be noted that the US army requires all enlisted recruits to have a High School Diploma at minimum – broadly equivalent to completion of a full range of GCSEs.<sup>10</sup>

Minimum national standards of education provision currently do not apply to minors in the armed forces, since they are exempt from the core provisions of the Education and Skills Act (2008) regulating the 'duty to participate' in education, which now applies to all other 16 and 17 year olds. The DfE's recommended minimum standard of education for the entire 16-19 age group is the achievement of good passes in core GCSEs,<sup>11</sup> which are not available to armed forces trainees. Enlisting early does not

give young people who are underachieving at school a fresh start in education – instead, it entrenches academic underachievement in policy.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) conducted a longitudinal study of basic skills among junior armed forces personnel between 2008 and 2011. The study noted the new minimum standards for 16-18 education set by the Government following the Wolf Review of Vocational Education, and noted that this would present a “significant challenge” to the armed forces. However, commenting on the need identified by the Strategic Defence and Security Review for personnel to have the “training and education necessary to ... operate effectively in an increasingly complex environment”<sup>12</sup> the BIS study suggested that “the Wolf Report’s recommendations might serve to encourage the Armed Forces ... to review qualification thresholds.”<sup>13</sup> To date, there has been no change in the qualification thresholds required by the MoD either prior to enlistment or in-service. Consequently, educational prospects for the youngest recruits remains stagnated at sub-standard levels and do not reflect the changing skills needed by armed forces personnel in the 21st century.

Enlisting minors is a policy choice, not a necessity. It offers poor value for money for the armed forces and substandard education for recruits. In contrast, raising the enlistment age to 18 would allow the armed forces to benefit from enlisting recruits who have higher pre-existing skills levels, are more mature, less likely to leave during training, fully deployable, and do not need the special duty of care arrangements required for minors. Long term trends of falling recruitment levels among minors and increasing participation in education post-16 indicate that the evolution to an all-adult armed forces is now inevitable. Research has shown that this change need not leave the armed forces short of recruits if it is implemented as part of a planned transition.

## 2. Britain’s place in the world: Values, Principles and Objectives.

**Two-thirds** of states worldwide now have a legal minimum enlistment age of 18 years for their armed forces,<sup>14</sup> which is becoming the global norm. **Fewer than 20** countries in the world still have an official minimum enlistment age of 16. The UK is the only major military power, the only country in Europe, the only member of NATO, and the only Permanent Member of the UN Security Council to do so.<sup>15</sup>

It is inconsistent with British values promoting the highest standards of human rights (including of children’s rights and child protection in particular) both nationally and internationally to be falling so far behind on this issue. Whilst the UK is a progressive member of the UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and actively supports international efforts to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict elsewhere, its legitimacy is undermined by its continued recruitment of minors. Furthermore, as long as its own armed forces recruit from age 16, the UK creates an unhelpful “grey area” around “acceptable forms” of child recruitment, which lends legitimacy to states and armed groups that use children in hostilities. In view of the growing global consensus to stop recruiting minors for military purposes, and given the UK’s position of military and political significance, raising the enlistment age for the British armed forces would be a highly influential step towards ending child military exploitation worldwide in the longer term. Britain can best contribute to the UN, EU, NATO and other international institutions’ efforts to tackle global human rights issues such as child recruitment by leading through example.

Among those to have challenged the UK’s present policy are the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child,<sup>16</sup> the Commons Defence Committee,<sup>17</sup> the Joint Committee on Human Rights,<sup>18</sup> the Children’s Commissioners for the four jurisdictions of the UK,<sup>19</sup> and the Equality and Human Rights Commission.<sup>20</sup> The major British children’s organisations and human rights groups have called on the armed forces to recruit adults only,<sup>21</sup> as have MPs across the spectrum, many faith groups, and veterans.

A minimum enlistment age of 18 years would be consistent with British principles and foreign policy objectives. It would also better reflect the values of voters across the UK. Answering an open question in a 2014 Ipsos Mori poll about what the recruitment age should be, **77 per cent** of those who

expressed a view said it should be 18 or above, rising to **79 per cent** of respondents who identified as aligned with the Labour party.<sup>22</sup> Only **14 per cent** of respondents (falling to **12 per cent** of Labour supporters) thought it should remain at 16.

This is a summary document. For further information on these and related issues, please contact [rtaylor@child-soldiers.org](mailto:rtaylor@child-soldiers.org), or go to [www.child-soldiers.org](http://www.child-soldiers.org) for further reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Child Soldiers International and ForcesWatch (2014), op. cit. See also Child Soldiers International, *The British army: Estimated recruitment requirement of an all-adult force* (2016), [http://child-soldiers.org/research\\_report\\_reader.php?id=872](http://child-soldiers.org/research_report_reader.php?id=872).

<sup>2</sup> These figures have been rounded. Phase 1 training costs £68,751 for a Junior Entrant and £16,853 for a Standard Entrant (i.e. aged 17.5 and above). The Standard Entrant figure is derived from dividing by two the combined cost of Phase 1 and 2 infantry training at the Infantry Training Centre (Catterick). The higher costs of Junior Entry Phase 1 training are partly due to its longer duration: a year; adult infantry recruits complete Phase 1 and 2 training in 28 weeks. All recruits are trained to the same standard based on the Common Military Syllabus, irrespective of the difference in length of training. Hansard: HC Deb, 2 September 2014, c214W.

<sup>3</sup> Child Soldiers International and ForcesWatch (2014), op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> The navy and RAF together recruited 460 minors between them in 2015-16. MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics, 1 April 2016*, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2016>.

<sup>5</sup> The army's full-time trained strength requirement for enlisted personnel on 1 April 2006 was 88,450; on 1 December 2015 it was 71,710; both figures include Gurkhas. MoD, *UK armed forces quarterly manning report* [Table 1, 2005], 2009, [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140116142443/http://www.dasa.mod.uk/publications/personnel/military/quarterly-personnel-report/2009-04-01/1\\_april\\_2009.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140116142443/http://www.dasa.mod.uk/publications/personnel/military/quarterly-personnel-report/2009-04-01/1_april_2009.pdf); MoD, *UK armed forces monthly service personnel statistics: 2015*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-monthly-service-personnel-statistics-2015>.

<sup>6</sup> In 2005-06, the army recruited 5,130 under-18s in a total of 12,685 (40.4 per cent); in 2015-16, the Army enlisted 1,790 minors, out of a total intake of 8,020 soldiers (22 per cent) – another all-time low. Defence Analytical Services and Advice, *UK Regular Forces Intake And Outflow By Age Financial Year 2005-06*, 2006 [no longer online]; MoD, *Diversity statistics*, 2016, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> MoD, 'Army Junior Entry (JE) Training – Cost Benefit Analysis (ITG/JESG/Trg/11/09)', 2014, [http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/defence/140514-MoD\\_Junior%20Entry\\_CostBenefit\\_Analysis\\_REDACTED.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/defence/140514-MoD_Junior%20Entry_CostBenefit_Analysis_REDACTED.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Child Soldiers International, *The British army: Estimated recruitment requirement of an all-adult force* (2016), [http://child-soldiers.org/research\\_report\\_reader.php?id=872](http://child-soldiers.org/research_report_reader.php?id=872).

<sup>9</sup> 74 per cent of recruits enrolled onto the main training course at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate in March 2015 were assessed to have literacy skills at Entry Level 3 (equivalent to a reading age of a 9-11 year old); 7 per cent were assessed at Entry Level 1 (equivalent to a 5-7 year old). Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/03426, 21 April 2015, [http://child-soldiers.org/research\\_report\\_reader.php?id=822](http://child-soldiers.org/research_report_reader.php?id=822).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.goarmy.com/about/serving-in-the-army/types-of-soldiers/enlisted-soldier.html>. In some previous years, the US army has accepted a limited number of recruits annually who do not hold this Diploma, as long as they have a GED (alternative qualification equivalent to a High School Diploma), score highly on Army entrance tests, and are over the age of 18.

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education, *Wolf Review of Vocational Education: Government response*, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> BIS Research Paper Number 78, *Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study: Part 1*, June 2012, p.35. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32283/12-884-armed-forces-basic-skills-part-1.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32283/12-884-armed-forces-basic-skills-part-1.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.50.

<sup>14</sup> Child Soldiers International, 2012, op. cit., pp. 142-160.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Consideration Of Reports Submitted By States Parties Under Article 8 Of The Optional Protocol To The Convention On The Rights Of The Child On The Involvement Of Children In Armed Conflict: Concluding observations, United Kingdom Of Great Britain And Northern Ireland*, (CRC/C/OPAC/GBR/CO/1), 2008, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC.C.OPAC.GBR.CO.1.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, *Duty of Care (Third Report of Session 2004-5)*, 2005; House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Armed forces Covenant in Action? Part 4: Education of Service Personnel (Fifth Report of Session 2013-14)*, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Children's Rights (Twenty-fifth Report of Session 2008-09)*, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> In January 2015, the outgoing Children's Commissioner for England, Maggie Atkinson, said that 16 was too young to be joining the armed forces and that the minimum age for recruitment should be raised to 18. The current children's Commissioner has confirmed she shares this position. In February 2015, the Children's Commissioners for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland issued a joint statement supporting their counterpart's position. For sources and detail, refer to Child Soldiers International, *Children's Commissioners call for an end to the recruitment of minors into the British armed forces*, [http://child-soldiers.org/news\\_reader.php?id=834](http://child-soldiers.org/news_reader.php?id=834).

<sup>20</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, *UK Government UPR Mid-term Report: Report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission*, 2010, p. 5, [http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/documents/humanrights/hrc13\\_midterm\\_report.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/documents/humanrights/hrc13_midterm_report.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Open letter to the Ministry of Defence, 23 May 2016, [http://www.child-soldiers.org/news\\_reader.php?id=888](http://www.child-soldiers.org/news_reader.php?id=888). Signed by Amnesty UK, British Institute of Human Rights, Child Soldiers International, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, Children England, Children in Scotland, Children in Wales, Children's Commissioner for Wales, Children's Rights Alliance England (CRAE), Just Fair, Liberty, Medact, National Union of Teachers, Northern Ireland Children's Law Centre, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, The Who Cares? Trust, Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights), Unicef UK, Wales Observatory on Human Rights of Children and Young People, Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group.

<sup>22</sup> Ipsos MORI, *Nationwide poll conducted in July 2014 by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd*, [http://forceswatch.net/sites/default/files/IPSOSsurvey2014-Forces\\_age.pdf](http://forceswatch.net/sites/default/files/IPSOSsurvey2014-Forces_age.pdf). Poll question: 'In your opinion, what should be the minimum age to join the British army? Please answer regardless of whatever you believe the minimum age is at the moment.'