

Amanda Spielman  
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector  
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18 November 2021

Dear Amanda Spielman

We wrote on 26 November last year to draw your attention to multiple allegations of abuse at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate. Specifically, the army's Joint Personnel Administration system had recorded 60 formal alleged incidents of violence against recruits aged under 18 by members of college staff against since 2014, including assault and battery.<sup>1</sup> Ten of the allegations were made since Ofsted's inspection in 2017, which had graded the college 'Outstanding' for welfare and duty of care.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, we alerted you to a very high rate of attrition: 30 percent of army recruits aged under 18 drop out before they complete their training, which leaves them out of education and out of work.<sup>3</sup> We pointed out that recruits have no legal right to leave during the first six weeks, which corresponds with the most stressful period of training, and thereafter may only leave subject a notice period of between two weeks and three months.<sup>4</sup> We also mentioned the daily use of physical and psychological stressors, such as the interruption of sleep and privacy and the use of humiliation to induce obedience.<sup>5</sup>

We were assured in the reply from Ofsted's Regional Director for the North East that our letter would be shared with inspectors in advance of the 2021 inspection. In the event, the 2021 inspection report, which again grades the college 'Outstanding' for welfare and duty of care, is silent on all the points we raised.<sup>6</sup>

The 'Outstanding' grade leads potential recruits and their parents to assume that the college offers the highest standard of care. With this open letter, we wish to repeat our concern that the college is unsafe, as evidenced by multiple formal complaints of abuse by staff, the routine use of stressors in training, and the imposition on recruits of legal obligations that deny them the right to leave at will. We believe that a civilian college with a similar record would be closed.

In addition to the evidence we sent you last year, newly available data show that, since 2015, girls aged under 18 in the armed forces have made 41 formal complaints of rape or other sexual assault to the service police.<sup>7</sup> This is equivalent to a rate of 2.5 percent, or one in every 40 girls enlisted,<sup>8</sup> which is twice the rate of reported sexual abuse of girls in the same age group in civilian life.<sup>9</sup> We are still working to discover where these alleged incidents took place and whether training staff were involved. Most girls in the age group undergo initial training at the Army Foundation College.

The latest inspection report for the college notes: 'Recruits... report that there is no bullying at the college.' We have no doubt that this is what inspectors were told but assume that they interviewed only a selection of recruits. We recognise the challenge of relying on short, infrequent inspections to obtain an accurate picture of young people's experiences of an institution. For balance, we wish to share with you what parents of recruits have told us about the treatment of young people at the college when Ofsted inspectors have gone home.

Kevin is a father of a recruit who joined the College in 2015. He has told us the following:

'[My son] had been bullied... he and the other recruits were talked down to, called [the c-word and the f-word] constantly, which seems at odds with AFC's good Ofsted rating for health and well-being... In our conversations [to have our son released], we had to constantly remind officers that he was only sixteen, and in our care, even though he had sworn an oath to the British Army. The Major conceded in the end, but then another officer indicated that our son would be charged with AWOL, and said that he would never get a job or go to another college or university... As I waited for him to sign the release papers, I was able to see first hand how the young soldiers were marched and drilled, brought into line. I saw lads who were limping, some with crutches, also being drilled and marched, trying in vain to keep up with the rest of the platoon. My son said that some keeled over and fainted as they marched and stood to attention.'

Charlotte Poad, a mother of a recruit who joined the college in 2016, relates similar problems:

'My son... came home for a week or two, and it was during this time that I realised all was not well at Harrogate. I overheard several conversations with his fellow recruits discussing "bathroom beatings" and "things going too far". [He] also let slip he had been in several pubs, bars and clubs in Leeds, and was actively encouraged to attend strip clubs by the staff members in charge of his group. [My son] struggles to talk about what happened...but we know that staff bullied and abused the young recruits, as well as encouraging fighting amongst peers... He is a completely different person since his time at Harrogate. He has attempted suicide and his mental health is permanently damaged. He also sustained injuries while in army training which may turn out to be life-changing.'

Alison Blackwell, a mother of another recruit at the College in 2016, told us this:

'[My son...] told me he was hit, slapped, pushed, kicked and verbally abused by staff. He said he felt humiliated by this treatment and he never expected to be treated this way. He knew the training would be tough but this was abuse and the staff were power crazy... He told me all staff knew what was going on but turned a blind eye. He had family photos on display in this dorm as all the lads did. He got fed up with his corporals making vulgar comments regarding me and my daughter. He said this happened to everyone but what started out as banter became so crude he had no option other than to put the photos away... [My son] started drinking heavily and was very withdrawn... he rang me to tell me he was handing in his letter to leave. He told me his request was ripped up in his face. He was only 17 years old and devastated at not being able to leave... My son died last year while still serving in the army.'

Extracts from these testimonies, which we enclose in full for your information, were read out by Baroness Massey in the House of Lords last week.<sup>10</sup>

Can you please tell us whether inspectors were indeed made aware of the concerns we raised with you last year, and how they dealt with them? Can you also tell us how you plan to respond to these concerns now?

With thanks in advance for your attention to these queries.

Yours sincerely



Veronica Yates  
Director  
Child Rights International Network (CRIN)

## References

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<sup>1</sup> MoD, Parliamentary Question no. 109376, 30 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>

<sup>2</sup> Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2017/07945, 15 September 2017, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/654083/2017-07945.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/654083/2017-07945.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> In the three-year period 2015–16 to 2017–18, the army enlisted 5,280 recruits aged under 18, of whom 1,580 (30.0%) dropped out before completing their Phase 2 training. Phase 1 training of the 16–17½ age group takes place at the Army Foundation College, typically lasting between six months and one year depending on recruit role. MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics*, 1 April 2020 edition, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2020>; Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 103588, 14 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-14/103588>.

<sup>4</sup> Army recruits who enlisted aged under 18 have no right to leave during the first six weeks, after which a 14-day notice-period applies, and after the first six months a three-month notice period applies. The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).

<sup>5</sup> Film footage from the college shows instructors pushing trainees to continue when they are exhausted or in pain, and recruits vomiting and fainting. Channel 5, *Raw Recruits*, Episode 2, aired 14 January 2019, shows two girls vomiting on a timed run in cold and wet conditions. One of them says, 'I was about to throw up and the corporal was like, "Throw up once you pass the finish line."' Episode 4, aired 28 January 2019, shows an instructor shouting expletives at someone falling behind on a loaded march, and one recruit expressing that her chest is tight and that she's having an anxiety attack. This episode also shows instructors telling a recruit with an injured hand to continue with intensive bayonet training despite complaining of pain. Episode 5, aired 4 February 2019, shows similar treatment, and two recruits falling to the ground with exhaustion.

<sup>6</sup> Ofsted, *Welfare and duty of care in Armed Forces initial training 2020 to 2021*, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welfare-and-duty-of-care-in-armed-forces-initial-training/welfare-and-duty-of-care-in-armed-forces-initial-training-2020-to-2021>

<sup>7</sup> Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2021/09403, 21 September 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Between 2015 and 2020 inclusive, the armed forces service police recorded 31 sexual offences against girls aged 16–17, representing an average rate of 2.5% in the age group. In 2020, for example, the service police recorded eight sexual offences against girls in the age group, who numbered 280 at the time (8 / 280 = 2.9%). At the time of writing, the service police had recorded a further 10 sexual offences against girls in the group, bringing the total for 2015 to 2021 to 41. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2021/09403, 21 September 2021; MoD, 'UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 2021', 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2021>.

<sup>9</sup> In 2019–20, police in England and Wales recorded 101,478 sexual offences (assault or rape) committed against women and girls, of which 7.3% (7,408) affected girls aged 16–17, representing a rate of 1.2% (7,408 offences / 618,095 population aged 16–17 in 2019). ONS, 'Dataset: Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales (2019-20)', 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-sexual-offences-2019-20>; ONS, 'Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2020' (Figure 8, 2019, England and Wales only), 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-pop-2019>.

<sup>10</sup> HL Deb (8 Nov 2021), volume 815, columns 443-444, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-11-08/debates/C8DF7A37-DCBF-4025-8C02-9B14B67E6A41/ArmedForcesBill>