

UK: The military case for transition to all-adult armed forces

[Read time: 5 min.]

Context

- 1.1. The UK is one of sixteen states worldwide that formally allow enlistment from age 16.¹ Whereas the British air force and navy recruit under-18s in small numbers, a quarter of the army's enlisted intake is in this age group; more army recruits are aged 16 than any other age.² The army's high reliance on the age group is unique among professional militaries worldwide.³
- 1.2. The army's rationale for enlisting under-18s is to cover shortfalls in the adult intake,⁴ particularly in the infantry and other combat roles,⁵ for later deployment from age 18. Recruits in the age group tend to be drawn from socio-economically deprived backgrounds.⁶
- 1.3. Among the charges made against the policy are its mental health impact, poor socio-economic outcomes, high cost, and the example it sets to other armed forces and groups in the context of concerted global efforts to end child recruitment.⁷ The army has claimed a positive effect of early enlistment on the socioeconomic outcomes of young people, based on the basic skills education offered to its youngest recruits.⁸ We discuss these arguments elsewhere.⁹
- 1.4. The army maintains that it could not recruit sufficient recruits from adults alone;¹⁰ that adolescent children from age 16 are easier than adults to recruit;¹¹ and if they do not drop out of training their career tends to be approximately one-third longer.¹² This briefing makes the contrary case that transition to an all-adult army is both achievable and advantageous.

Operational benefits of all-adult armed forces

- 1.5. An all-adult army would have at least seven significant advantages over the current model:
 - 1.5.1. Lower attrition. Adult recruits are substantially less likely to leave the army during training and, after ten years, are still less likely to have left service. Between 2013–14 and 2015–16, 23 per cent of soldiers who enlisted as adults dropped out of training, versus 32 per cent of those who enlisted aged under 18.¹³ In the period between 2017 and 2019, 25 per cent of soldiers who enlisted as adults ten years earlier were still in service, versus 22 per cent of enlisted under-18s.¹⁴
 - 1.5.2. Faster promotion. Data from the same three-year period show that, after ten years, adult recruits were twice as likely as those enlisted under age 18 to have reached the rank of Sergeant or above.¹⁵
 - 1.5.3. Lower cost. Adult recruits are substantially less costly to train. It costs £53,000 to train an adult for the infantry, but £103,500 to train a soldier from age 16 for the same role to the same standard.¹⁶
 - 1.5.4. Greater maturity. Adult recruits are psychologically and physically more robust than younger recruits, and more mature.
 - 1.5.5. Immediate deployability. All-adult armed forces are deployable immediately after training and are not burdened with the additional duty of care arrangements required by law for children.
 - 1.5.6. Sustainability. Although enlistment in the younger age group is currently buoyant, its availability to the army continues to decrease as more young people extend their full-time education to age 18.
 - 1.5.7. Social acceptability. The army's enlistment age has been challenged by the UN, parliamentary committees, children's organisations, health professionals, human rights experts, and trades unions.¹⁷ Polling of the British public in 2018 found that 72 per cent of

respondents who expressed a view said the enlistment age should be 18 or above; 19 per cent thought it should be 16.¹⁸

Feasibility

- 1.6. In an article in the *RUSI Journal* in 2016, we used data from a typical year, 2015–16, to show that a transition to an all-adult army could be achieved with a modest uplift in adult recruitment.¹⁹ In outline:
- 1.6.1. Context: a smaller army. The army's trained strength requirement has reduced by one-fifth since 2012, which has reduced its recruitment requirement accordingly.²⁰
 - 1.6.2. Uplift in adult intake. In 2015–16, the army enlisted 8,020 recruits, of whom 6,230 were aged 18 or over. Our article showed that an all-adult army would have had to enlist 1,578 additional adults in that year to achieve the equivalent inflow to the trained strength.
 - 1.6.3. Deferred enlistment. The estimated required uplift in adult recruitment is substantially reduced by soldiers who now enlist at age 16 or 17 but would defer joining up until age 18. Our article proposed three scenarios in which 25, 50, and 75 percent of younger enlistees would still join as adults. Recent research by the army, which found that 56 per cent of junior soldiers in training had 'always wanted to join',²¹ suggests that the middle scenario (50 percent) may be the most appropriate. In that case, allowing for the lower trainee attrition rate among adult recruits, an all-adult army in 2015–16 would have had to enlist an additional 683 adults. This is equivalent to *an 11 percent increase in adult enlistment* – see Appendix, Chart 2.
 - 1.6.4. Financial savings/subsidy. We have calculated elsewhere that ceasing the recruitment of minors would liberate approximately £50 million *per annum*, equivalent to five times the cost of a major army marketing campaign. The saving could be used to fund the uplift in adult recruitment and/or offer personnel substantial retention incentives.²²
 - 1.6.5. Historical comparison. The army has recruited adults in larger numbers in the past. Our estimate of the all-adult recruitment requirement for 2015–16, once deferred enlistment is included as a factor, is still lower than the number of adults normally enlisted annually between the turn of the millennium and 2012–13.²³
 - 1.6.6. International comparison. Three-quarters of states worldwide allow their armed forces to enlist only adults from age 18, including most NATO members.²⁴

Risk-free

- 1.7. The Ministry of Defence has various options to reduce and eliminate any manning risks associated with transition to all-adult armed forces. For example, it could:
- 1.7.1. Phase the process by increasing the enlistment age incrementally (e.g. to 16½, 17, 17½, and then 18).
 - 1.7.2. Reverse the process in the short-term if it proves impossible to recruit and retain older recruits in sufficient numbers, before updating the binding declaration to the OPAC treaty to specify 18 as the minimum enlistment age. We argue elsewhere, however, that the best interests of young people, which must be the primary consideration, clearly lie in raising the age definitely and irreversibly to 18.

Conclusion

- 1.8. On the evidence summarised here, we argue that a transition to an all-adult army would be a progressive, modernising step, with multiple operational advantages. The change is practically, operationally, and financially feasible, with minimal risk.

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Appendix

Charts 1 and 2: British infantry training costs; army ten-year retention rates (Source: MoD)

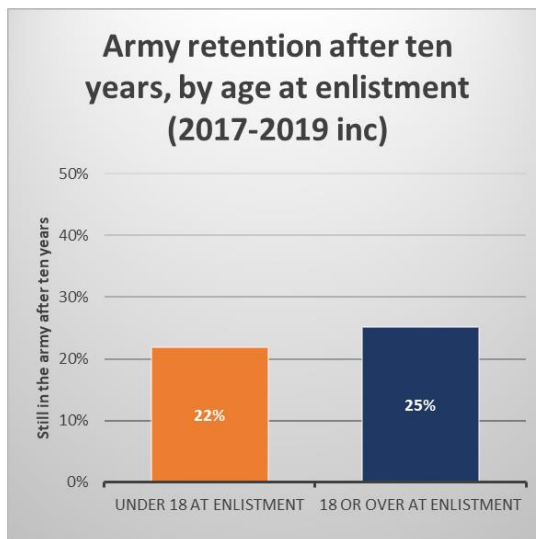
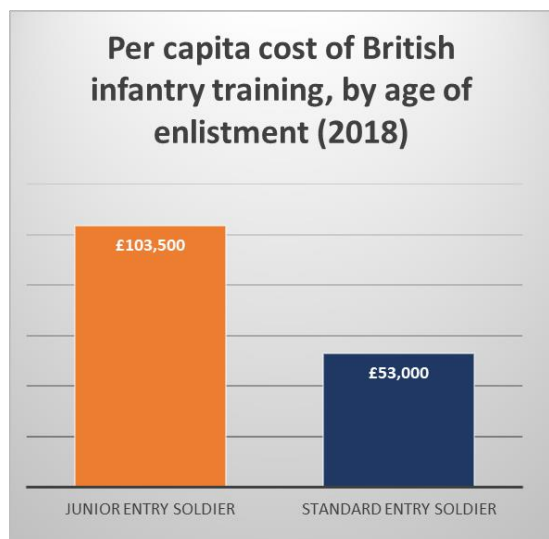


Chart 2. A: Actual enlisted intake, 2015–16; and B: Composition of projected intake recruiting adults only (Sources: MoD; Gee & Taylor, 2016, op cit.)



Notes:

1. Drop-out rates calculated over the three-year period 2009–10 to 2013–14.
2. 'Deferred enlistments' refers to a proportion of recruits who enlisted aged under 18 in 2015–16 but would still have enlisted at age 18 had that been the minimum age (estimated at 50 per cent); please refer to text for details.

Notes and references

- ¹ See Child Soldiers Initiative, *Child Soldiers World Index*, 2020, <https://childsoldiersworldindex.org>. Other than the UK, states that still formally allow enlistment from age 16 are: Bangladesh, Canada, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, India, Iran, Mauritania, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, United Arab Emirates, and Zambia.
- ² Between 2014–15 and 2018–19, the armed forces recruited an average of 2,330 minors per year, of whom an average of 1,784 (77 per cent) joined the army. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics*, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2018>.
- ³ Certain other Western armed forces, such as those of France, Germany, and the United States, recruit from age 17 albeit for a much smaller proportion of their total intake relative to the UK. For details, see Child Soldiers International, *Why 18 matters: A rights-based analysis of child recruitment*, 2018, <https://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/military-enlistment-resources>.
- ⁴ According to the MoD, Junior Entry recruitment (aged 16-17.5 years) 'presents an opportunity to mitigate Standard Entry (SE) shortfalls, particularly for the Infantry'. 'SE' refers to recruits aged 17.5 years and above. MoD, *Policy on recruiting Under-18s (U18)*, 2013, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/00618, 12 February 2015, p. 2. In addition, recruiters' instructions state that recruits aged between 16 and 16½ must be given jobs in combat roles (or join as drivers in the logistics corps) and that those under 16½ must only be given combat roles. British army (Recruiting Group), *Eligibility Quick Reference Guide*, 2015, p. 8.
- ⁵ Each year between 2012–13 and 2015–16, an average of 768 minors joined the infantry, accounting for 34 per cent of the armed forces' enlisted minors over the period, versus 21 per cent of enlisted adults. Calculated from MoD, *Army: Recruitment - Written question - 56526*, 7 December 2016, <https://bit.ly/2CUZLuj> [shortened link] and MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics*, 2018, op cit.
- ⁶ See, for example, H Agerholm, 'British Army targets recruitment of young working class, military document reveals', *Independent*, 10 July 2017. For a full discussion of the socio-demographic profile of the army's youngest recruits, refer to Child Rights International Network (CRIN), *Conscription by poverty? Deprivation and army recruitment in the UK*, <https://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/military-enlistment-resources>.
- ⁷ For a summary of the evidence showing these impacts, see Child Rights International Network, *Why raising the enlistment age would benefit everyone*, 2020, <https://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/military-enlistment-resources>.
- ⁸ British army, *Junior entry review - final report*, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rq33o8t> [shortened link]
- ⁹ See CRIN, *Why raising the enlistment age would benefit everyone*, op cit.
- ¹⁰ British army, *Junior entry review*, op cit.
- ¹¹ General Sir Nick Carter, evidence to the House of Commons Armed Forces Bill Committee, 2016, Q210, <http://bit.ly/385OCcO> [shortened link].
- ¹² The average army career lengths for soldiers aged a) under 18 and b) over 18 at enlistment in non-technical combat roles are as follows: infantry <18 = 11 years, 0 months; 18+ = 9 years, 4 months (difference = 1 year, 8 months); armoured corps <18 = 11 years, 4 months; 18+ = 9 years, 4 months (difference = 2 years, 0 months); artillery <18 = 13 years, 0 months; 18+ = 9 years, 6 months (difference 3 years, 6 months). Across the three role groups, the career length of soldiers enlisted under the age of 18 ranges from 18 per cent longer than adult recruits in the infantry (the most common role) to 37 per cent longer in the artillery. Hansard: HC Deb, 25 June 2014, c223W.
- ¹³ Of the 7,680 minors who enlisted in the army in the four-year period between 2012–13 and 2015–16, 2,470 (32 per cent) dropped out before completing their phase 2 training. The drop-out rate among adult recruits is lower, at 23 per cent. MoD, *Army: Resignations - Written question - 116489*, 29 November 2017, <https://bit.ly/2SDuckC> [shortened link]. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics*, 2018, op cit.
- ¹⁴ Of the 22,750 soldiers who enlisted as adults in the financial years 2006–07 to 2008–09 inclusive, 5,710 (25.1 per cent) were still in the army ten years later; of the 13,690 soldiers who enlisted under the age of 18, 2,990 (21.8 per cent) were still in service. Calculated from information obtained from the MoD under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. ArmySec/FOI2020/00600/04/02/00618, 12 February 2020, <http://bit.ly/3a8zlcC> [shortened link].
- ¹⁵ Of the 5,710 soldiers who enlisted as adults in the financial years 2006–07 to 2008–09 inclusive and were still in the army ten years later, 1,130 (19.8 per cent) were at the ranks of Sergeant or above, versus 290 (9.7 per cent) of those who had enlisted under the age of 18. Ibid.
- ¹⁶ MoD, *Army: Training - Written question - 128438*, 19 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FqT51K> [shortened link].
- ¹⁷ Among those to challenge the UK's enlistment age have been the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Parliament's Defence and Human Rights committees, the Children's Commissioners for all four jurisdictions of the UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the major British children's organisations and human rights groups, parliamentarians across the spectrum, faith groups, health professionals, and veterans. For a full list of sources refer to Child Rights International Network, *The British armed forces: Why raising the recruitment age would benefit everyone*, 2019, <https://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/military-enlistment-resources>.
- ¹⁸ ICM poll conducted in July 2018 on behalf of Child Soldiers International. Poll question: 'Regardless of what you believe the current minimum age to be, what do you think should be the minimum age to join the British Army?' Figures extrapolated from poll data, excluding 5% 'don't know'. See Child Soldiers International, 'Public believe British Army should recruit from 18 - ICM survey', <https://www.child-soldiers.org/news/public-believe-british-army-should-recruit-from-18-icm-survey>.
- ¹⁹ D Gee and R Taylor, 'Is it counterproductive to enlist minors into the army', *RUSI Journal*, 2016, 161:6, pp. 36–48, available at <https://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/military-enlistment-resources>.
- ²⁰ The army's full-time trained strength requirement in 2008 was 101,800; in 2018 it was 82,646, 19 per cent smaller. N Dempsey, 'UK defence personnel statistics', 2018, p. 17, <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7930>.
- ²¹ British army, *Junior entry review - final report*, op cit.
- ²² The calculation is based on figures from 2013–14. ForcesWatch and Child Soldiers International, *Army recruitment: Comparative cost effectiveness of recruiting from age 16 versus age 18*, 2014, <https://www.forceswatch.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/army-recruitment-costs-2014.pdf>
- ²³ Our estimate of the total adult recruitment requirement for 2015–16 is 7,808 (6,230 adults actually recruited in that year + 1,578 additional recruits, allowing for expected trainee attrition). Assuming that half of the younger enlistees who joined in that year would still have joined at age 18, the estimated adult requirement is 6,913 (6,230 adults actually recruited + 683 additional adults); this total was exceeded in every year between 1999–00 and 2012–13 (with the exception of 2004–05).
- ²⁴ Other than the UK, states that still formally allow enlistment from age 16 are: Bangladesh, Canada, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, India, Iran, Mauritania, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, United Arab Emirates, and Zambia. For sources and detail, see Child Soldiers Initiative, *Child Soldiers World Index*, op cit.