

## RAISE MILITARY ENLISTMENT AGE TO 18, UN TELLS UK

The UN has called on the UK government to raise the minimum age of military recruitment from 16 to 18 and to address numerous complaints of the sexual assault, rape and abuse of young recruits.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup> released its [concluding observations on the state of children's rights in the UK](#) on 2 June.

The Committee cited multiple concerns over children's rights and welfare in the British armed forces. Having received [evidence](#) that, in 2021 alone, investigations were opened into the sexual abuse of 22 child recruits at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate, the Committee called on the government to 'promptly investigate any reports of sexual abuse, sexual harassment and other forms of violence against children... and ensure that perpetrators are prosecuted and sanctioned'. (In March 2023, an instructor at the college was [convicted of multiple sexual offences](#) over a nine-month period between 2020 and 2021.)

The Committee also called on the UK to stop the practice of enlisting children with the consent of only one parent, as is routine when recruiting from separated families.

The UK is the only country in Europe to recruit children from age 16 into the armed forces; more soldiers are recruited at 16 than any other age.<sup>2</sup>

The latest recruitment figures show that in the year 2021-22, one in every five new recruits to the armed forces was a child; one in four in the army( 2,800 under-18s were enlisted into the armed forces; 2,030 of them joined the army).<sup>3</sup>

New figures from the Ministry of Defence also show that, between 2015 and 2021, girls under the age of 18 in the armed forces have made 41 complaints of sexual assault and rape to the military police, equivalent to five per year, or one for every 40 girls.<sup>4</sup> Known under-reporting of sexual offences means the true prevalence is likely to be substantially higher.<sup>5</sup>

Between 2015 and 2020, girls in the armed forces were twice as likely as their civilian peers

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by its State parties. It also monitors implementation of the Convention's Optional Protocols. Further information at [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org).

<sup>2</sup> 16-year-olds have outnumbered any other age in the army's intake into the ranks in five of the last six financial years. Ministry of Defence, *Biannual Diversity Statistics*, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Biannual Diversity Statistics*, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Defence, Letter from Johnny Mercer MP to Carol Monaghan MP, 29 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> [According to Rape Crisis](#), 'only around 15% of those who experience sexual violence report to the police'.

to report a rape or sexual assault to the police.<sup>6</sup>

Most recruits under the age of 18 train at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate. Under-18 recruits at the College, and their parents, made 60 complaints of violent behaviour by staff between 2014 and 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Jim Patrick Wyke, Campaigns Coordinator at Child Rights International Network (CRIN) said:

“The UK government's continued recruitment of under-18s into the military is unnecessary, harmful and puts the UK well outside international norms. The government must heed the UN's warning and end the recruitment of children into the armed forces immediately.”

**ENDS**

#### Notes to Editors

- Child Rights International Network (CRIN) campaigns for a global minimum military enlistment age of 18, including in the UK.
- CRIN is a creative human rights organisation focused on children's rights. We press for rights – not charity – and campaign for a genuine shift in how governments and societies view and treat under-18s. Using research, policy, art and advocacy to communicate our vision for the future, we encourage people to think critically about the world.
- The UK ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991. When a state ratifies the UNCRC, a State agrees to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child – an independent body of child rights experts – to regularly review its progress on whether it is fulfilling its obligations under the Convention every four to six years.
- The UK's examination of the combined sixth and seventh periodic report of the UK took place at the 93rd session of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on 18 and 19 May 2023. The UK was last examined by the Committee in 2016 and its previous Concluding Observations are available [here](#).
- CRIN submitted evidence to the Committee which played an important role in

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<sup>6</sup> Based on comparison with data from the Office for National Statistics on reports to the police of rape and sexual assault by civilian girls in the same age group. Calculations available on request.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Defence, Response to Parliamentary Question 109376, 2020.

shaping the UN's recommendations. This evidence can be found [here](#).