

STOP RECRUITING CHILDREN, RIGHTS GROUPS TELL MOD

Human rights organisations call on MoD to end recruitment of children as sexual assault allegations revealed

The government should use tomorrow's Armed Forces Bill debate to raise the minimum recruitment age to 18, according to a letter sent today from children's rights and welfare organisations to the Defence Secretary.

The call comes as it emerges that girls aged under 18 in the armed forces have made 16 complaints of sexual assault to the military police since 2015.

[The joint letter](#) states that recruiting children from age 16 is "unambiguously incompatible with their rights and welfare", as it draws them out of education early, exposes them to the "intense stress of military training", and requires them to commit to "sweeping obligations that could not lawfully be imposed on a civilian worker of any age".

- 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.¹
- The latest recruitment figures show that in the year 2020-21, one in every five new recruits was legally a child; one in four in the army. 3,280 under-18s were enlisted into the armed forces; 2,410 of them joined the army.²
- Signatories of the joint letter include: the Children's Commissioners for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; Amnesty International UK; The Children's Society; Human Rights Watch; Liberty; the National Education Union; and War Child.
- New figures from the MoD show that, in the last six years, girls under the age of 18 in the armed forces have made 16 allegations of sexual assault to the military police, equivalent to 3 per year, or one for every 75 girls.³

¹ 16-year-olds have outnumbered any other age in the army's intake into the ranks in four of the last five financial years. Ministry of Defence, *Biannual Diversity Statistics*, 2021.

² Ministry of Defence, *Biannual Diversity Statistics*, 2021.

³ Ministry of Defence, Letter from Johnny Mercer MP to Carol Monaghan MP, 29 March 2021.

- Most recruits under the age of 18 train at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate. Recruits at the College, and their parents, made 60 complaints of violent behaviour by staff between 2014 and 2020.⁴

The letter argues that raising the recruitment age to 18 “can be done; just a small increase in adult recruitment would facilitate transition to all-adult armed forces. This simple step forward would set the same standard in the UK that it has asked of armed forces and groups around the world, and help to bring a global ban on the military use of children into view.”

Charlotte Cooper, Campaigns Coordinator at Child Rights International Network (CRIN), said:

“Any sexual assault of a child in an institution tasked with their care is unacceptable, but three a year is shocking. If the MoD can’t protect children from the risks of a military environment, it shouldn’t be recruiting them at all.”

Carol Monaghan MP, SNP Spokesperson for Education and for Armed Forces & Veterans, said:

“It is high time for the UK Government to follow NATO and European allies in raising the age of Armed Forces recruitment to 18...whilst military service can be a fruitful and fulfilling career for many of our service personnel, encouraging 16 and 17-year-olds to enlist can have a detrimental effect on young people’s mental health outcomes with many struggling to reintegrate into society.”

ENDS

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact: charlotte@crin.org / 07875 088580.

Notes to Editors

- Child Rights International Network (CRIN) campaigns for a global minimum military enlistment age of 18, including in the UK. This programme was previously based at Child Soldiers International, transferring to CRIN in June 2019.

⁴ Ministry of Defence, Response to Parliamentary Question 109376, 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>

- CRIN is a creative think tank that produces new and dynamic perspectives on human rights issues, with a focus on children's rights. We press for rights - not charity - and campaign for a genuine shift in how governments and societies view and treat children. Through research, artwork and our vision for the future, we encourage people to think critically about the world and challenge the status quo.