

# The British armed forces: Why raising the recruitment age would benefit everyone

Read time: 5 min.

## Overview

In 2022–23, the UK enlisted 2,250 under-18s,<sup>1</sup> mostly for the Army, where more new recruits are 16 than any other age.<sup>2</sup> These recruits tend to come from deprived areas<sup>3</sup> and are mainly sought for lower-skilled, higher-risk infantry jobs.<sup>4</sup> While some comparable militaries recruit from 17, the UK is one of only 15 countries worldwide and the only country in Europe to enlist from 16.<sup>5</sup>

This briefing makes the case for transition to an all-adult military in the UK. The change would:

- Encourage more young people to continue in full-time education up to the age of 18 to enhance their qualifications for lifelong employment, while leaving open the option of enlisting thereafter.
- Support the modernisation of the armed forces by introducing a simpler, more cost-efficient recruitment and training model, which is already the international norm.
- Safeguard children from onerous legal obligations, high trainee attrition, a disproportionate impact on mental health, educational disadvantage, and maltreatment during training.
- Make a valuable contribution towards a global end to the military recruitment and use of children.

## Consent and terms of service

While parental consent is required, recruitment marketing understates the risks and obligations of military life and recruiters are not required to meet directly with parents before enlistment.<sup>6</sup> The UN has twice warned that the UK's arrangements for seeking consent from recruits and their parents are 'insufficient'.<sup>7</sup>

Once enlisted, a 16-year-old Army recruit assumes obligations that could not be imposed on civilians at any age.<sup>8</sup> They have no right to leave service in the first six weeks,<sup>9</sup> or have visitors, and are allowed only one short phone call each day.<sup>10</sup> A restricted discharge window then opens, but from their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday they are locked into service until age 22.<sup>11</sup> Parents cannot withdraw consent after enlistment.

## The training experience

Initial soldier training takes place at the Army Foundation College (AFC), which is inspected by Ofsted for its duty of care but is otherwise exempt from the standards that apply in a civilian college.<sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> The armed forces are exempt from the law that requires all young people aged 16 and 17 to participate in a minimum amount of education each year.<sup>14</sup> GCSE results are not offered at the AFC<sup>15</sup> and most recruits spend less than a day a week in accredited courses at sub-GCSE standard.<sup>16</sup> The Army believes that enhancing trainee education 'risks discouraging' recruitment.<sup>17</sup>

Despite holding an 'outstanding' grade for welfare for a decade, the AFC holds a long record of alleged and proven abuse by staff, including sexual abuse. 72 formal complaints of violence by instructors have been recorded since 2014, including assault and battery.<sup>18</sup> In 2021 alone, 22 recruits, mostly girls, were victims of sexual offences; three of the alleged perpetrators were staff.<sup>19</sup> Several former recruits and their families have spoken out.<sup>20</sup> These facts are publicly available but remain absent from Ofsted reports.<sup>21</sup>

## Mental health

The adolescent brain, particularly in teenagers with a stressful childhood background, is known to be vulnerable to prolonged stress.<sup>22</sup> The intensity of military training aggravates this vulnerability, leading to what the Army's research has called an 'erosion of resilience' in its youngest recruits.<sup>23</sup>

The impact on mental health can be profound. Compared with the most economically-deprived fifth of civilians aged 16–19, soldiers of the same age have been nearly twice as likely to end their lives, and

same-age armed forces veterans three times as likely, over the last two decades.<sup>24</sup> Of in-service suicides in the infantry in particular, 56% have been of soldiers who joined under 18.<sup>25</sup>

Other mental health outcomes show a similar pattern. Child recruits enlisted from around 1995 have had between two and three times the odds of long-term PTSD compared to civilians of the same age and social background.<sup>26</sup> Since 2003, soldiers recruited under age 17½ have had ‘twice the odds of alcohol misuse and twice the odds of reporting episodes of lifetime self-harm’ relative to older joiners.<sup>27</sup>

### **Socioeconomic risk**

In the UK, it has now become the norm for young people, including those from deprived backgrounds, to continue full-time education to age 18: four out of five of disadvantaged 16-year-olds now do so, with a high rate of retention.<sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup> As the MoD accepts,<sup>30</sup> the Army is less likely to rescue an economically deprived 16-year-old from unemployment than bring their full-time education to an early end.

Those who do enlist face immediate insecurity. While some do fare well, 30% of child recruits, about 500 per year, drop out of their training, which leaves them highly vulnerable: out of education and work.<sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup>

Although the Army argues that its youngest recruits rise through the ranks the fastest,<sup>33</sup> this is not so. Soldiers who joined up under age 18 a decade ago and are still in service are half as likely as adult recruits to have reached the rank of sergeant or above.<sup>34</sup>

### **Military benefits of change**

Transition to all-adult armed forces would bring many benefits. Recruits would be more mature and robust, more likely to finish training, and deployable sooner – all without the legal and practical complexities of employing children.

The change would be cost-effective. It costs £103,000 to train a 16-year-old for the infantry and only half that to train an adult to the same standard,<sup>35</sup> albeit for a career one-third shorter on average.<sup>36</sup> An all-adult recruitment model would save c. £50m per year,<sup>37</sup> which could be used to improve retention.

The change is also feasible. The Navy and RAF already take relatively few child recruits. We have shown elsewhere that the UK’s now smaller Army can now also move with ease to all-adult recruitment.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, the Army will have reduced to around 72,500 personnel by 2025, 29% smaller than it was in 2012.<sup>39</sup> Many recruits who now join up at 16 would still do so at 18, having had the opportunity to spend two more years in full-time education in the interim.

### **International significance**

Three-quarters of armed forces worldwide now recruit only adults from age 18.<sup>40</sup> The growing global consensus that military work should be reserved for adulthood has already safeguarded countless children against its hazards and obligations, but many more remain at risk.

The UK, by continuing to enlist from age 16, lends tacit encouragement to other states to follow suit, but could effectively discourage the recruitment of children worldwide by making the transition itself to all-adult armed forces. In view of the UK’s influence, particularly with Commonwealth militaries that recruit children, this change would be a major step towards the end of child recruitment worldwide.

### **Support for change**

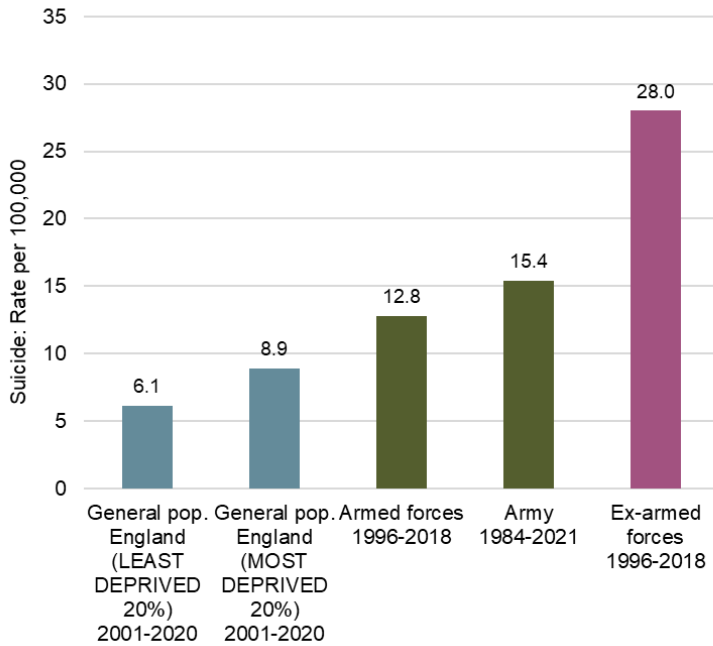
The prospect of all-adult armed forces already enjoys widespread support. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child,<sup>41</sup> the UK Children’s Commissioners,<sup>42</sup> major children’s organisations,<sup>43</sup> and human rights groups<sup>44</sup> have all called for an end to child enlistment, as have health professionals,<sup>45</sup> faith groups,<sup>46</sup> trade unions,<sup>47</sup> and veterans.<sup>48</sup> The House of Commons Defence Committee has repeatedly challenged the MoD to account for its dependence on underage recruits.<sup>49</sup>

Three-quarters of the public now believe that enlistment should be reserved for adulthood, according to a 2022 YouGov poll.<sup>50</sup> Only 1 in 5 think otherwise, and only 1 in 10 in the 16–24 age group.

Appendix<sup>51</sup>

FIGURE I: SUICIDE

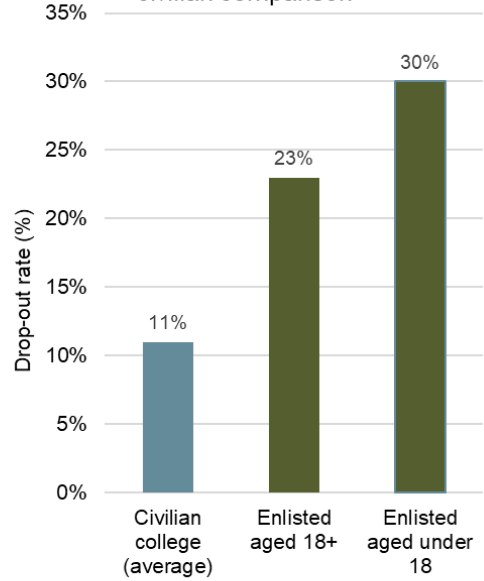
Male suicide at age 16–19 in armed forces personnel, former personnel, and the general population by deprivation status



Sources: MoD, ONS

FIGURE II: DROP-OUT RATE

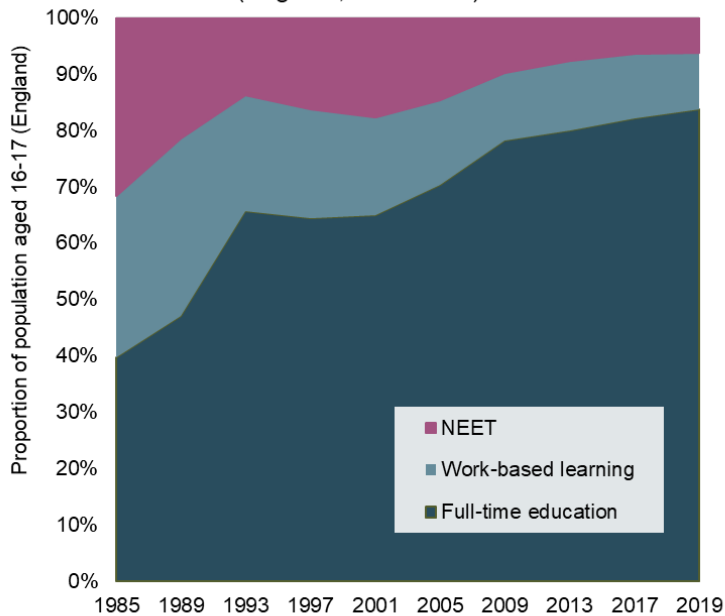
British army trainee attrition by age at enlistment (2015-2018), with civilian comparison



Source: MoD

FIGURE IV: CIVILIAN EDUCATION PARTICIPATION AT 16

16- and 17-year-olds continuing in full-time education, work-based learning, and not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (England, 1985-2019)



Source: DFE

FIGURE IV: TRAINING COST

Infantry training cost per recruit, by age at enlistment



Source: MoD

## Notes and references

- <sup>1</sup> MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics*, 2023, Table 9a.
- <sup>2</sup> In 2022–23, the Army enlisted 1,690 16- and 17-year-olds, who made up 29% of the intake; more new Army recruits were 16 than any other age. MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics*, 2023, Table 9a.
- <sup>3</sup> Army marketing is targeted specifically at neighbourhoods where households earn less than £10,000 per year. H Agerholm, 'British Army targets recruitment of young working class, military document reveals', *Independent*, 10 July 2017. The Army recognises that 'the majority of the current JE cohort' have a 'tendency to live in poorer areas'. British Army, *Junior Entry Review – Final Report*, 2019, p. 2.
- <sup>4</sup> 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. Official sources show that the British infantry's rate of fatality and serious injury in Afghanistan was seven times higher than the rest of the armed forces. See D Gee, *The last ambush? Aspects of mental health in the British armed forces*, 2013, p. 58.
- <sup>5</sup> The UK is the only major military power, the only country in Europe, and the only Permanent Member of the UN Security Council to allow the enlistment from age 16. The others are mostly fellow Commonwealth states (Bangladesh, Canada, India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia), in addition to Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Iran, and Mauritania. Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> R Louise, C Hunter, S Zlotowitz, *The recruitment of children by the UK armed forces: A critique from health professionals*, 2016. MoD, *Armed Forces: Young People - Written question – 223161*, 3 February 2015; MoD, *Armed Forces: Young People - Written question – 227584*, 16 March 2015; and Freedom of information request, ref. FOI2015/04176, 20 May 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom*, 2016, p. 23, reaffirmed by the CRC in 2023 *Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom*, p. 22.
- <sup>8</sup> See Child Soldiers International, *Out of step, out of time: Recruitment of minors by the British armed forces*, 2016.
- <sup>9</sup> Under-18 recruits cannot leave at will during the first few months: they have no right to leave at all 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 up to the age of 18, at which point they are locked into the Army until their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).
- <sup>10</sup> During the first six weeks, recruits are allowed 'controlled access' to their mobile phones for a 40–60 minute period between 8pm and 10pm; the rest of the time it is kept in a sergeant's office. No visitors are allowed in this period, and recruits are prohibited from leaving the base without permission. British Army, 'Army Foundation College Commanding Officer's Supervisory Care and Safeguarding Directive Risk Assessment', 2018, point 2.1. Freedom of information request, ref. FOI2019/05572, 10 June 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).
- <sup>12</sup> See Annex B in Ofsted, 'Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training', 2018. In January 2019 the Minister of State for Education confirmed: 'Ofsted does not grade the Army Foundation College in Harrogate on the same basis as civilian colleges for the age group.' DfE, *Army Foundation College – Written question – 209858*, 17 January 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> Since 2015 the Education and Skills Act (2008) has required all young people aged 16 and 17 to continue to participate in education. Those in full-time employment must complete 280 guided learning hours of education annually towards accredited qualifications. It is this part of the Act from which the armed forces are exempt. The exemption is specified in The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2013, no. 1205.
- <sup>14</sup> The armed forces are exempt from the provisions in the Education and Skills Act (2008) requiring all young people in full-time employment to complete 280 guided learning hours of education annually towards accredited qualifications. The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2013, SI 1205.
- <sup>15</sup> MoD, *Armed Forces: GCSE - Written question – 33689*, 18 April 2016.
- <sup>16</sup> AFC recruits who arrive without Level 2 qualifications in English, maths or ICT are enrolled on Functional Skills courses in English, maths and ICT at Level 1, with the option of progressing to Level 2, which combined entail 80 hours' teaching time per subject (240 hours across all three subjects). Over the 49 week 'long course' at AFC, and allowing for the eight weeks of holiday, 240 hours is equivalent to 5.9 hours per week. See MoD, Freedom of information request, ref. FOI2020/00269/10/06, 5 February 2020.
- <sup>17</sup> British Army, *Junior Entry Review – Final Report*, 2019, p. 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Between 2014 and February 2023, AFC recorded 72 formal complaints of violence against recruits by staff, including assault and battery. At least 13 of these cases were proven following investigation. Leo Docherty MP, 'Armed Forces: Offences against Children', 26 April 2022 (2022a) and 19 May 2022 (2022b). Freedom of information request, ref. *Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/13445*, 30 November 2021, and ref. *Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/15645*, 11 January 2022, and ref. *Army/Sec/U/A/FOI2023/02395*, 23 March 2023; Johnny Mercer MP, *Army: Young people – no. 109376*, 4 November 2020,.
- <sup>19</sup> Leo Docherty MP, 2022a, op cit., and 19 May 2022 (2022b), op cit.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, Child Rights International Network (CRIN), *Parents of under-18 recruits speak out about abuse at Army training centre*, 2021; and CRIN, *The pressure cooker: Child recruitment and suicide in the British armed forces* (in press), 2023.
- <sup>21</sup> Ofsted, *Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training*, 2018, pp. 37–38; *Welfare and duty of care...*, 2022.
- <sup>22</sup> Under prolonged stress, adolescents are more likely than adults to develop anxiety-related mental health problems and difficulties regulating emotions. See, for example, K Campbell, 'The neurobiology of childhood trauma, from early physical pain onwards: as relevant as ever in today's fractured world', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 2022a, 13(2); L P Spear, 'The adolescent brain and age-related behavioral manifestations', *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews*, 2000, 24(4), pp. 417–463; T Paus, M Keshavan, & J Giedd, 'Why do many psychiatric disorders emerge during adolescence?', *Nat Rev Neurosci*, 2008, 9, pp. 947–957.
- <sup>23</sup> 'The erosion of resilience [during initial training of 16-year-old Army recruits] is assumed to have been a broader and natural consequence of attendance on the AFC(H) [Army Foundation College] programme, recognising that initial military training is designed to provide a physically and mentally stretching developmental environment.' Army Foundation College Harrogate, *Project Athena: A pilot training to optimise basic training for female junior soldiers*, 2022, p. 28.
- <sup>24</sup> For sources, see Figure 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Freedom of information request, ref. *ArmyPolSec/D/N/FOI2022/12210*, 14 November 2022.
- <sup>26</sup> B P Bergman, D F Mackay, N T Fear, and J P Pell, 'Age at entry to UK military service and long-term mental health', *BMJ Military Health*, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> M Jones, N Jones, H Burdett, et al., 'Do Junior Entrants to the UK Armed Forces have worse outcomes than Standard Entrants?', *BMJ Military Health*, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> 'Disadvantaged' is defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as school students eligible for free school meals or in care, of whom 81% were continuing in education after Key Stage 4 (normally GCSE level) for a 'sustained period' in 2018. DfE, '[National table NA21b: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4 by disadvantage status and gender, state-funded schools \(mainstream and special\)](#)'.

<sup>29</sup> In 2018–19, the retention rate in full-time education in England for the post-16 age group was 89.3%, varying little by qualification level. DfE, '[2018 to 2019 education and training NARTs overall headline](#)' [see table 'Headline', cell H7], 2020.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see J Heapey, MP, '[Letter to Tobias Ellwood MP](#)', 17 Dec 2020; and British Army, *Junior Entry Review*, 2019, op cit.

<sup>31</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. MoD, '[UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics](#)', 2021; James Heapey MP, '[Army: Recruitment](#)', Parliamentary Question no. 103588, 14 October 2020. (Note: figures from 2018–19 have been excluded since some recruits who enlisted during that year had not completed their training at the time the drop-out statistics were generated.)

<sup>32</sup> Applied to the most recent financial year, 2022–23, when the Army enlisted 1,690 children, a 30% dropout rate is equivalent to 507 individuals. MoD, '[UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics](#)', 2023.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, British Army, *Junior Entry Review*, 2019, op cit., p. 3, where the Army confuses the proportion of senior NCOs who enlisted under 18 with the proportion of enlistees under 18 who were promoted to senior NCO.

<sup>34</sup> Of the 2,650 minors who enlisted in the three-year period between 2006-07 and 2008-09 and were still in the Army ten years later, 290 had attained the rank of Sergeant or above (10%). Of the 4,960 adults who enlisted in the same period and were still in the Army ten years later, 1,130 had attained the rank of Sergeant or above (20%). MoD, Freedom of information request, 12 February 2020, Ref: [FOI2020/00600/04/02](#).

<sup>35</sup> Cost of infantry training by age at enlistment: 16–17½ years, £103,500; 17½+ years, £53,000. MoD, '[Army: Training – Written question – 128438](#)', 19 February 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Soldiers who enlist as children serve for an average of 11 years, versus 7 years, 10 months for adult recruits, whose typical career is therefore 29% shorter (though they can be deployed earlier than child recruits). British Army, *Junior Entry Review*, 2019, op cit., p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> ForcesWatch and Child Soldiers International, '[Army recruitment: Comparative cost-effectiveness of recruiting from age 16 versus age 18](#)', September 2014.

<sup>38</sup> See C Cooper and D Gee, '[Has the time come for an all-adult army?](#)', *RUSI Commentary*, 27 May 2021; and D Gee and R Taylor, 'Is it counterproductive to enlist minors into the Army?', *RUSI Journal*, 2016, 161, pp. 36–48.

<sup>39</sup> The regular Army's trained strength requirement in 2012 was 102,000; by 2025 it will be c. 72,500, 29% smaller. N Dempsey, '[UK defence personnel statistics](#)', 2018, p. 17; BBC News, '[Defence review: British army to be cut to 72,500 troops by 2025](#)', 22 March 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Child Soldiers International, '[Louder than words: An agenda for action to end state use of child soldiers](#)', 2012.

<sup>41</sup> CRC, '[Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom](#)', 2016, pp. 23–24.

<sup>42</sup> In their 2020 report to the CRC, all four UK Children's Commissioners stated, 'Despite the Committee's recommendations, the UK continues to enlist children in the Armed Forces from 16, and actively recruit 16- and 17-year-olds. They enlist over 2,000 children annually, and target areas of deprivation to recruit young people.' They urged the Committee to ask the UK, 'Will the State Party raise the age of recruitment to the Armed Forces to 18?'. UK Children's Commissioners, '[Report of the Children's Commissioners of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child](#)'.

<sup>43</sup> Major children's organisations calling on the UK to raise the enlistment age to 18 include the Children's Society, Save the Children, and UNICEF UK. See CRIN and others, '[Letter to Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace MP](#)', 22 June 2021; Child Soldiers International and others, '[Letter to Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Penny Mordaunt MP](#)', 23 May 2016; and Save the Children UK, '[Stop the war on children](#)', 2019, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> Child Rights International Network, Letter to Ben Wallace MP, 2021, op cit. Signatories included Amnesty, Liberty, Human Rights Watch, War Child, and the child rights umbrella bodies for England, Scotland, and Wales.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see K Campbell, '[Childhood trauma: a major risk factor in the military recruitment of young people](#)', *BMJ Military Health*, 2022; R Abu-Hayyeh and G Singh, '[Adverse health effects of recruiting child soldiers](#)', *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 2019, 3(e000325).

<sup>46</sup> Child Soldiers International and others, '[Letter to the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Mark François MP](#)', 6 November 2013. Signatories included the Church of Scotland, all the bishops of the Church in Wales, and others.

<sup>47</sup> Trades Union Congress (TUC), '[UK Compliance with major ILO Conventions 2019](#)', 2019; TUC and CRIN, '[Annex 3: Armed Forces Recruitment and Convention 182](#)', 2019. For NEU support, see CRIN et al, letter to Ben Wallace MP, 2021, op cit.

<sup>48</sup> Tracy McVeigh, '[War veterans call for rethink on recruitment of 16-year-olds](#)', *Observer*, 21 June 2015.

<sup>49</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC), '[The armed forces covenant in action? Part 4: Education of service personnel \(Fifth Report of Session 2013-14\)](#)', 2013. See also Tobias Ellwood MP, '[Letter to Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heapey MP](#)', 1 December 202. The Committee's predecessors also called on the MoD to 'examine the potential impact of raising the recruitment age for all three Services to 18', in HCDC, *Duty of care (Third Report of Session 2004-5)*, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> A YouGov poll in 2022 found that 73% of the public believed the minimum enlistment age should be at least 18, 17% thought it should be 16 or 17 (and 1% that it should be less than 16), and 9% did not express a view. Survey question: 'When should people be legally allowed to join the armed forces?' YouGov, 'Most Britons think you shouldn't be allowed to join the armed forces until you are at least 18 years old', in '[YouGov Study of War: Britons on serving in the armed forces](#)', 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Sources for figures:

- Figure I: General population: Office for National Statistics (ONS), '[Number and age-specific rate of suicides in young people, by IMD quintile in England, registered between 2001 and 2020](#)', 2023. Armed forces personnel: Freedom of information request, Ref. 2023/01191, 17 February 2023. Army personnel: Ibid. Veterans: C Rodway, S Ibrahim, J Westhead, et al., '[Suicide after leaving the UK Armed Forces 1996-2018: a cohort study](#)' [pre-print], 2022, Table 1.
- Figure II: MoD, '[UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics](#)', 2021, op cit.; James Heapey MP, '[Army: Recruitment - 103588](#)', 14 October 2020; DfE, '[2018 to 2019 education and training NARTs overall headline](#)' [see table 'Headline', cell H7], 2020.
- Figure III: DfE, '[National table NA10: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4, state-funded mainstream schools](#)'.
- Figure IV: MoD, '[Army: Training – Written question – 128438](#)', 19 February 2018.