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Penny Mordaunt MP
Minister of State for the Armed Forces
Ministry of Defence
Whitehall
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23 May 2016

Dear Minister

We write to ask for an end to the enlistment of children by the British armed forces.

Most of the world now recognises that the recruitment of children for military purposes is detrimental to their best interests and is not appropriate in modern armed forces.¹ Indeed, the UK is an active participant in international efforts to end the practice in other countries. In British society, the law safeguards children by proscribing choices that entail significant risks until they turn 18, the legal age of majority. It is therefore incongruous that the British armed forces still enlist personnel at age 16 and accept applications from age 15.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges the UK to ensure that the best interests of children are a primary consideration in all matters affecting them.² Yet in the British armed forces, minors are exempt from the full legislative protection provided to civilian workers,³ and from the minimum standards of education participation that apply to civilians of the same age.⁴ The legal obligations applied to minors at enlistment, including a minimum service period that is longer than for adult recruits, would be unlawful in civilian life.⁵ In a society that seeks to safeguard the best interests of young people, they should not be subjected to such differential standards as these.

Premature enlistment can also bring significant risk and disadvantage. Having exited education early, around one third of underage army recruits leave during their training to face elevated risks of unemployment and mental health problems afterwards.⁶ Although minors are no longer routinely deployed, they are actively sought for frontline roles, particularly the infantry, where the risks in war are highest over the course of a military career.⁷ Since the mental health effects of childhood adversity can be aggravated in a military environment,⁸ the effects of enlisting too early can be particularly harmful for some young people.⁹ In contrast, there is no evidence to suggest that enlisting at age 16 is advantageous when compared with enlisting from age 18.

Since the Deepcut Review a decade ago, the armed forces have sought to improve welfare provision for the youngest recruits and introduced a qualified statutory right of discharge up to the age of 18. These are steps forward, but they cannot redress the many hazards that arise from enlisting too early. We recognise that many young people may wish to choose a career in the armed forces, but in view of the risks and legal obligations involved, the choice to enlist should be fully informed and only made once young people have reached the age of legal majority.

By recruiting adults only the government would save an estimated £51 million annually – equivalent to around £25,000 per recruit who now enlists as a minor.¹⁰ This substantial saving could instead be invested in specialist programmes providing the social, practical and academic

support needed by the most disadvantaged young people in our society to ensure their welfare and best interests are served in the short and long term.

Most states worldwide now only allow enlistment from age 18.¹¹ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UK Joint Committee on Human Rights have consistently called on the UK to stop enlisting minors.¹² Polling indicates that three-quarters of the British public would support a transition to all-adult armed forces.¹³ Today we do the same, urging you to join most of the rest of the world and raise the minimum age for enlistment to 18.

Yours sincerely,



Demelza Hauser, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Child Soldiers International

Catriona Williams OBE, Chief Executive, Children in Wales

Christine Blower, General Secretary, National Union of Teachers

Dr David McCoy, Director, Medact

Jackie Brock, Chief Executive, Children in Scotland

Jane Williams, Chair of the Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group and co-Director of the Wales Observatory on Human Rights of Children and Young People

Juliet Harris, Director, Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

Kate Allen, Director, Amnesty International UK

Kathy Evans, Chief Executive, Children England

Koulla Yiasouma, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Lily Caprani, Deputy Executive Director, Unicef UK

Louise King, Director, Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)

Sara Ogilvie, Policy Officer, Liberty

Natasha Finlayson, Chief Executive, The Who Cares? Trust

Nicola Noone, Consortium Director, Just Fair

Paddy Kelly, Director, Children's Law Centre (N.I.)

Sally Holland, Children's Commissioner for Wales

Stephen Bowen, Director, British Institute of Human Rights

Tam Baillie, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

cc. Mark Lancaster MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Defence Personnel and Veterans

References

¹ Child Soldiers International, *Louder than words: An agenda for action to end state use of child soldiers*, 2012, pp. 142-160, http://child-soldiers.org/global_report_reader.php?id=562.

² Art. 3, Convention on the Rights of the Child.

³ Among the human rights that enlistment suspends are: the right to free speech, the right of union representation, the right to choose one's work, and the right of minors to be tried for alleged offences in the juvenile justice system. For more details, see Child Soldiers International, *Out of step, out of time: Recruitment of minors by the British armed forces*, 2016.

⁴ As of 2015, the Education and Skills Act (2008) requires 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. Armed forces trainees were exempted from this part of the Act in 2013 by *The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2013*, SI 1205, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/1205/regulation/8/made>.

⁵ Soldiers who enlist as adults and serve for four years may leave the army; those who enlist as minors and serve for four years must wait until they turn 22 before becoming eligible to leave. For more details, see Child Soldiers International, *Out of step, out of time: Recruitment of minors by the British armed forces*, 2016. This discrepancy is the subject of a Judicial Review claim by Child Soldiers International, which is pending appeal.

⁶ Between 2009-10 and 2013-14, 4,270 (33 per cent) of 13,030 enlistees under the age of 18 left the army during training. Joiners aged under 18: 2009-10: 3,630; 2010-11: 2,400; 2011-12: 2,930; 2012-13: 2,300; 2013-14: 1,770; TOTAL: 13,030. Joiners under the age of 18 who subsequently left the army during training: 2009-10: 1,370; 2010-11: 770; 2011-12: 990; 2012-13: 630; 2013-14: 510; TOTAL: 4,270. MoD, *Annual Personnel Report* [2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 editions], <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-armed-forces-annual-manning-statistics-index>; drop-out figures from Hansard: HL Deb, 27 April 2016 (no. 7676). (Note: figures from 2014-15 have been excluded since some of the youngest recruits who enlisted during that year had not completed their training at the time the drop-out statistics were generated and so may still have left.)

⁷ The infantry's rate of fatality and serious injury in Afghanistan was seven times higher than the rest of the armed forces. For sources and detail, see D Gee, *The Last Ambush: Aspects of mental health in the British armed forces*, 2013, p. 58.

⁸ For example, commenting on self-harm and suicide, the Deepcut Review noted that 'being young, under or about 18, and living 24/7 within the disciplined regime of an institution such as the Army is, itself, a significant factor indicative of risk.' N Blake, *The Deepcut Review*, 2006, para. 9.34, p.284. See also AC Iversen, NT Fear, E Simonoff, et al., 'Influence of childhood adversity on health among male UK military personnel', *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2007, Vol. 191, pp. 506-511; and AC Iversen, NT Fear, A Ehlers, et al., 'Risk factors for post-traumatic stress disorder among UK Armed Forces personnel', *Psychological Medicine*, 2008, Vol. 38, pp. 511-522.

⁹ For a discussion of the aggravating effect of military environment on prior childhood adversity, see D Gee, 2013, op. cit., pp. 26-27, 45-46.

¹⁰ The armed forces enlist around 2,000 minors per year. Were the army (alone) to enlist adults only, it would save approximately £51 million *per annum*, equivalent to around £25,000 for every recruit aged under 18. The savings are mostly due to the much longer training for minors compared with adult recruits, and their higher probability of leaving the army during training. The calculations, based on figures for 2013-14, are shown in full at Child Soldiers International and ForcesWatch, *Army recruitment: comparative cost-effectiveness of recruiting from age 16 versus age 18*, 2014, http://child-soldiers.org/research_report_reader.php?id=781.

¹¹ See footnote 1.

¹² Committee on the Rights of the Child, Consideration Of Reports Submitted By States Parties Under Article 8 Of The Optional Protocol To The Convention On The Rights Of The Child On The Involvement Of Children In Armed Conflict: Concluding observations, United Kingdom Of Great Britain And Northern Ireland, (CRC/C/OPAC/GBR/CO/1), 2008,

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC.C.OPAC.GBR.CO.1.pdf>; Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Children's Rights (Twenty-fifth Report of Session 2008-09)*, 2009.

¹³ Answering an open question in a 2014 Ipsos Mori poll about what the recruitment age for the British army should be, 77 per cent of those who expressed a view said it should be 18 or above; 14 per cent thought it should be 16 or above. Ipsos MORI, *Nationwide poll conducted in July 2014 by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd*, http://forceswatch.net/sites/default/files/IPSOSsurvey2014-Forces_age.pdf. Poll question: 'In your opinion, what should be the minimum age to join the British army? Please answer regardless of whatever you believe the minimum age is at the moment.'