

By Rachel Taylor, Child Soldiers International

Since the entry into force in 2002 of the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, states have been required to take all feasible measures to prevent individuals below the age of 18 from participating in hostilities. In light of this, the large majority of states have now set 18 as the minimum age for armed forces recruitment. As well as being the most effective way to implement the prohibition on underage deployment, this measure protects young people from the other inherent dangers and hardships of armed forces life until they reach legal maturity.

Since the UK ratified the Optional Protocol in 2003 it has prohibited the routine deployment of underage soldiers but has not yet amended its minimum recruitment age, which continues to be 16 years. The UK is the only permanent member of the Security Council and the only country in the European Union still recruiting from this age.

The House of Commons Defence Committee, the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have all recommended that the Ministry of Defence review the recruitment age with a view to raising it to 18 years, but to date no such review has been undertaken. There are numerous social and financial reasons why the Ministry of Defence might wish to consider undertaking such a review now.

Traditionally, the Ministry of Defence has argued that 16 was a suitable minimum recruitment age as it matched the statutory school leaving age. However, in practice the number of 16 year olds leaving education has declined dramatically in recent decades and in 2009/10 only six per cent did so. This trend will be reflected in and consolidated by the increase in compulsory education age to 18 being phased in by 2015.

By recruiting from this age group the Ministry of Defence is therefore working in opposition to overall education and social policies which seek to encourage young people to stay in education for as long as possible. Whilst the Ministry of Defence has often claimed that the armed forces themselves offer good educational opportunities to young people, the curriculum for 16 – 18 year old recruits is of very low standard when compared with the recommendations of the March 2011 Wolf Review of vocational education commissioned by the Department for Education.

A particular problem with the training and education provided for minors by the armed forces is its highly specialised nature. Recruits at the Harrogate Army Foundation College (a Phase One training centre for Junior Entry recruits) spend approximately one hour per day on literacy, numeracy and IT (combined), with the rest of course time being dedicated to military training which has little or no transferable value to any form of civilian employment. Whilst some employers may value the discipline and ethos of veterans, these alone are not enough to succeed in the highly competitive modern job market. This is reflected in a 2006 Royal British Legion study which found unemployment rates among 18 – 49 year old veterans to be double the equivalent civilian average, with "Lack of training, qualifications or skills" explicitly cited as a

problem among this group.

There also continue to be concerns about the mental health welfare of young recruits in the armed forces. Ministry of Defence figures reveal that the suicide rate of army males under 20 years of age is still around 50 per cent higher than among their peers in the civilian population. The Deepcut Review found that simply "being young, under or about 18" and in the Army was a significant risk factor of suicide or self-harm. A 2007 study in the British Journal of Psychiatry identified the likelihood of developing Post Traumatic Stress as more common among younger Army recruits than their older colleagues. These findings raise questions about whether very young recruits are mentally and emotionally mature enough for the armed forces.

The questionable suitability of minors for armed forces life is starkly reflected in the fact that they are significantly more likely than adults to drop out of training or be discharged early. In 2010/2011, 37 per cent of minors in Army training dropped out before completing Phase Two compared to just 28 per cent of adult recruits. Across all three services, the dropout rate for minors from initial training was almost double the average for adults. In the same year minors constituted 1.4 per cent of the armed forces' total (trained and untrained) strength but they accounted for 4.5 per cent of all armed forces discharges.

In addition to the significant financial wastage incurred by these high discharge rates, minors are inherently more expensive to train than adults. Phase One training for a Junior Entry soldier at the Army Foundation College Harrogate costs more than three times as much per recruit as equivalent training for an adult at the Army Training Centre Pirbright. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence could take two and a half adults through Phase One training at Pirbright for the cost of every one minor trained at the Army Technical Foundation College Winchester.

What is more, at the end of Phase Two training adult recruits can be deployed to relieve their colleagues on the frontline, but a recruit who enlisted at 16 will have to wait another 30 weeks (over six months), paid at the daily rate of a trained soldier, before they can go into active service overseas.

There is no evidence to indicate whether those minors who remain in service serve for significantly longer than adult recruits, thereby creating an overall return on the investment lost by their peers who drop out. When questioned by MPs, the Ministry of Defence was not able to provide any data indicating what proportion of recruits who enlisted as minors (compared to adult recruits) had extended their service contract beyond the minimum service period, had left the armed forces before completing their minimum initial service period, or had been in service for ten years or more. It appears that no cost-benefit analysis has been undertaken, despite the clear evidence of high wastage.

As the national school leaving age rises to 18 (in law as well as practice) and the global consensus towards 18 as the minimum armed forces recruitment age continues to gain strength, the UK's recruitment policy grows increasingly anachronistic. A thorough review is long overdue.