

When one hears the phrase 'child soldiers' it immediately conjures up the mental image of 9 year olds dressed in outsize military fatigues and bare feet holding automatic rifles in war torn area of Africa; certainly not images of 16 year old recruits in the UK. This was my initial reaction, when, as a Member of the Defence Committee this issue was raised in our discussions.

John Glen MP was very sceptical of the use of the phrase 'child soldiers' to describe 16 year olds being recruited into the British Armed Forces and believed it over sensationalised something that probably provided stability, discipline and best of all a 'trade and training' for those young people who had had a difficult start to their lives and may well have fallen on the wrong side of the law if they hadn't had the military to turn to.

Lately he has come to question those assumptions and so have looked into it more deeply. These are his conclusions

Value for money?

Surely it is sensible to consider the costs and benefits involved in the present model, as the Army is currently doing, to see if it is providing value for money. However, more importantly, we must consider the outcomes achieved by those young soldiers themselves. Are they receiving good training, and transferable skills for their post service life? In fact, it's a vicious circle - soldiers who enlist youngest, with the fewest qualifications, are most likely to join the least technical roles (such as infantryman). As a result, their training will focus on military-specific skills and they are unlikely to acquire significant transferable qualifications; last year only 20 soldiers in an army of over 78,000 non-officer ranks gained GCSEs in English or maths while serving. The recent Ashcroft review of veterans' transitions highlighted the particular difficulties faced by Early Service Leavers in finding further employment - 35% of whom enlisted as minors.

Junior Entry training of soldiers takes place at the Army Foundation College (Harrogate). Recruits are given their phase 1 training there and can be aged from 16 to 17 years 5 months on joining. They then complete their phase 2 training (alongside adult recruits) at their unit. In the financial year 2012/13 Harrogate took 1,362 recruits with the cost for Phase 1 training being approximately £45k per person. There is also a fairly high drop out rate of approximately 30% to

take into consideration, so of the 1362 recruits taken on, just over 900 went on to Phase 2 training. It should also be remembered that as minors have an automatic right of discharge up until age 18 they do not offer a guaranteed return on investment for the MoD even if they make it through training.

We can compare this to the training of over 18s at the Infantry Training Centre (Catterick), where in that same year they took on 3418 recruits and put them through both Phase 1 AND Phase 2 training for the cost of approx £29,500 per recruit. There is also a lower drop out rate in this age group with 20% failing to join after training.

This would seem to show that, for the cost to the army of one 16 year old completing Phase 1 training, approximately 2 adult recruits could complete both Phase 1 and Phase 2 training. This is a significant saving which could usefully be used to reinforce the reserves recruitment budget.

Proposals

If we are to change this aspect of recruiting then we need to look at options to put in its place. It may be worth looking at practices in other countries. It is interesting to note that no other country in Europe, NATO or Permanent Member of the UN Security Council now recruits from 16. For example, in the US there is a minimum educational requirement of a High School Leaver's diploma or equivalent, which means you need to have successfully completed secondary level education before you can join.

However, in our own country we already have other options which are worthy of scrutiny as an alternative way of engaging 16-18 year olds in an education programme designed for those who wish to join the army. The first of these is Welbeck College, a (top-ranking) sixth form college in Leicestershire which prepares 16-18 year olds for entry to university and then a career in their chosen Service as an officer. It has an enviable rate of retention with 90% plus of leavers going on to have a career in the Armed Forces. Not only that, for those who don't go on to enlist, it provides a strong and transferable academic foundation from which to pursue a different career. Admittedly, it caters for those wishing to go on to be officers, but this model could be used for 16 year olds who wanted to join the Armed Forces in other ranks.

Other courses exist which cater for young people who wish to join at non-commissioned rank, such as the Military and Public Services Academy at Bicton College in Devon. The course was established in 2012 to prepare young people for an armed forces career and reduce Army initial training costs. It provides a higher level of qualifications and similar core military training as that which is currently on offer at AFC Harrogate, but at significantly lower cost and with a 100% completion rate, according to an independent evaluation of its first year. Courses such as this provide young people with an academic platform and good foundation, enabling those who take the course to gain a realistic insight into the Armed Forces before they commit to enlistment, and could go a long way to reducing wastage rates during training. Courses like this could be very useful in bridging the gap and also providing well qualified and motivated recruits to go into the Armed Forces at 18.

Whilst AFC Harrogate has a strong record of raising recruits' basic English and maths skills, the qualifications on offer are at the lowest level permitted under Apprenticeship criteria, and fall a long way short of what is now available to their peers in the mainstream. Both the army and young recruits themselves deserve more.

I would put forward two models which could be used to replace the recruiting of 16 year olds.

Option 1

The first is to modify existing establishments such as Harrogate into academies and follow a Welbeck or Bicton style model suitable for those wishing to enter the Armed Forces at a more junior level. These academies would be part of the mainstream education system but would have a compulsory Combined Cadet Force (CCF) element to the curriculum. The curriculum would include academic, personal and physical development and ensure that the students left with recognisable qualifications. As with Welbeck entrance would be selective with candidates having to pass a fitness test and interviews. Students successfully completing the course would then be guaranteed a job in the Army. The Army would benefit from receiving well qualified recruits, (and those who are unsuited to an army career would be filtered out before they start using up valuable MoD training resources.) Those recruits would hopefully have a sound

academic background which would be useful when they leave the Service or would provide a respectable foundation for a career elsewhere, if they choose not to pursue a military option.

Option 2

The second option is to stop enlistment at 16 altogether and invest the money saved into a national cadet scheme which would give a far broader access than we have now for 16 to 18 year olds to experience the military and decide whether it would be a suitable career choice for them. These cadet schemes could also be tied in with the drive to recruit more reservists and provide a stronger message to society at large that a career in the military is worth exploring whilst at school.

Conclusion

It is not wrong to challenge assumptions and where there is a case for it, make changes. The data on cost and outcomes strongly suggests to me that the enlistment of U18s is not financially sensible in its current form. The high drop-out and early discharge rates of those enlisting under 18 harms the armed forces. At the same time it appears that for all its potential benefits, specialising too early in military training can also harm the future prospects of the youngest recruits, even if they complete a relatively long and successful armed forces career.

I think that as the Armed forces are undergoing such huge change at present, now is the ideal time to reflect on the policy of enlisting under 18s and to examine alternative options. These options could prove to be better value for money in the long term and encourage more to apply for the Regular Army and also the Reserves. They could also provide a better educational outcome for those choosing to make the Services their career and build a stronger platform for the military across our British society.