

Petitions Committee

Consultation on petition P-04-432 Stop the Army
Recruiting in Schools

Response from the Meeting of Friends in Wales (Quakers)

*Cyfarfod y Cyfeillion yng Nghymru,
Crynwyr*

*Meeting of Friends in Wales,
Quakers*



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ARMY RECRUITMENT IN SCHOOLS

P-04-432

To: The Petitions Committee

Meeting of Friends in Wales (Quakers) is charged by Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) to represent and advance the life and witness of the Society within Wales, and to communicate with the Welsh National Assembly on matters relating to peace, justice and social witness and interfaith relations. It represents Wales to Britain Yearly Meeting, and is therefore aware of its responsibilities to ensure that the voice of Quakers in Wales is heard.

As one of the historic Peace Churches, Quakers have maintained a peace witness across the centuries, we feel bound to respond to the petition on the involvement of the Armed Forces or Ministry of Defence recruitment personnel in Welsh schools. What follows indicates our areas of concern:

- Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is defined as anyone under the age of eighteen, and it is the duty of the UK government, party to the Convention, to promote the best interests of the child. The recruitment of children into the armed forces, in our view, subordinates or negates those interests since it limits the breadth and depth of their education,

as defined by Article 29 of the Convention.

- The 2011 Wolf Report - Review of Vocational Education (commissioned by the Department of Education) recognised that the armed forces educational system was fundamentally flawed, offering limited academic qualifications and excessive professional specialisation. Its deficiencies can therefore affect future prospects and may contribute to the high level of unemployment found amongst former military personnel. A study by the Royal British Legion in 2006 found 'unemployment rates among ex-Service personnel aged 18 – 49 to be twice the national average for the same civilian age group. Their lack of training and skills was cited as a reason for this.'¹
- The 2008 report by the UN Commission on the Rights of the Child recommended to the UK government that it should take measures to ban the recruitment of children into the armed forces.² In April 2008 there were 4,650 under eighteen year olds serving in the British armed forces.³ In 2007-08, 20% of all recruits in Britain had been under 18 years of age. While those under eighteen currently constitute about 1% of the trained strength of the armed forces, those recruited under the age of 18 amount to over a quarter of the army's fighting strength. The UN Commissions's recommendation should be heeded.
- The House of Commons Defence Committee in their third report of the 2004-05 session hinted strongly that recruitment of those under 18 should be seriously considered. They hinted that the practice should cease.⁴ The thrust and validity of their comments, throughout that report, highlight serious issues relevant to the recruitment of those under 18. All other EU and NATO countries ban the practice of recruiting below the age of 18. We should follow their example. The very notion that we encourage 'child soldiers,' whatever the safeguards, is troubling.
- 28 regular armed forces personnel, under the age of 18, died, while on service between January 1994 and 31st December 2003. In 2007 two under 18 year

1 *Mind the Gap: Education for minors in the British armed forces*, Child Soldiers International, July 2012, 4.

2 Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2008) *Concluding Observations on the initial report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict* (UN Doc: CRC/C/OPAC/GBR/CO/1)), para.13.

3 Parliamentary Question, 27.10.2008, PQ 229409.

4 House of Commons, Defence Committee Report, 'Duty of Care,' Third Session 2004-05.

olds died while on training.⁵

- Considerable evidence points to the fact that recruitment is concentrated on areas of deprivation and towards young people who may be vulnerable. Using information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Assembly Member Leanne Wood, 'showed that the army was 50% more likely to visit schools in the most deprived areas of Wales than to visit those in less deprived areas.'⁶ A 2004 survey in the Cardiff catchment area found that 40% of army recruits were joining as a last resort. A survey of their personal backgrounds found that of 500 recruits joining between 1998 to 2000:
 - 69% of recruits were found to have come from homes of severe disharmony;
 - 50% were classified as coming from a deprived background;
 - 16% had been long-term unemployed before joining;
 - 35% had had more than eight jobs since leaving school (nearly all on a casual basis);
 - just over 60% had left school with no academic qualifications;
 - just 14% had more than five GCSEs at grades A-C.
- Informed choice in respect of enlistment is essential as is opportunity for balanced judgement made in the light of all available evidence and in awareness of the ethical dilemmas the judgement may involve. We doubt that many 16 and 17 year old are capable of this, even when supported by their parents, but the absence of information about the implications and possible outcomes of enlistment should be remedied. A recent study undertaken by King's College, London, which found that of 2,700 men 'in the armed forces under the age of 30, 20.6% had been convicted of a violent offence, compared with 6.7% in the general population. Men who had seen combat in Iraq and Afghanistan were 53% more likely to commit a violent offence than those in non-frontline roles. Personnel who had multiple experiences of combat had a 70% to 80% greater risk of being convicted of acts of violence.'⁷ Associated with this was a worrying revelation that violent offending was most common among young men from the lower ranks of the army. Problems of

5 Ibid., 229408.

6 David Gee, *Informed choice? Armed forces recruitment practice in the United Kingdom*, www.informedchoice.org.uk accessed 19.3.13, page 16.

7 *The Guardian*, 13.3.13.

homelessness and mental ill-health amongst veterans also deserves to be highlighted. The report *Informed Choice?* found ethical shortcomings in recruitment practice. 'Although being over 18 is no guarantee of individual maturity, it is the formal moment of transition from the status of minor to adult. It could be argued that employment in the (armed forces), with its particular features, is inappropriate for minors.'⁸

- Present practice in marketing life in the armed forces relies on a high level of glamorisation, this accompanied by a culture which glorifies and fantasises 'killing', particularly in computer games, distorts understanding of the issues especially amongst the most vulnerable. If the recruitment of under 18s is to continue then it is vital that alternative views around peace building and keeping should be integrated into the curriculum. Promoting peace is, in our view, more important than reflecting upon military glory. Heroism is not merely the prerogative of the military.
- We do not hold with the militarization of young people on the spurious grounds that it may be an answer to the social ills which have disadvantaged them, nor do we hold with such a thing happening in schools. Given that headteachers and school governors have discretion regarding what happens in their schools we would encourage the Wales Assembly to reflect on this matter with due concern for the wider picture, and to issue guidelines in respect of recruitment and schools.
- Quaker independent schools do not allow the military to advertise and recruit, though at a later stage any individual might make the choice of visiting a recruiting office. We do not believe that scholars from these schools have been at a disadvantage because of this, nor by the absence of career advice on the armed forces.

We understand that the present situation regarding invitations to the armed forces to attend schools rests with the headteacher. This being so, we believe that the Assembly should reflect on the issues with a view to defining what is acceptable, and should be issuing firmer guidance to schools on how they should handle the involvement of the military. Matters relating to recruitment practices, the quality of training to members

8 *The Deepcut Review*, A review of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of four soldiers at Princess Royal Barracks, Deepcut between 1995 and 2002, HC 795-I, London, The Stationery Office, 2006, para.,12.36, 386.

of the armed forces, post-discharge support, housing, health etc. belong with the UK government, but they are issues which should affect informed thinking on recruitment in schools and upon which our National Assembly should have an opinion.

Signed on behalf of Meeting of Friends in Wales (Quakers), by
Christine Trevett and Ros Morley