



Ministry of Defence

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Dear Frank,

Thank you for your letter of 7 March and for your continued interest in the Armed Forces Bill. I know how seriously you take the issue of recruitment of young people into our Armed Forces. I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government's position on the issues you raised.

As I said during Committee stage of the Armed Forces Bill, we are very clear in our belief that junior entry offers a range of benefits to the individual, the Armed Forces and society - providing a highly valuable, vocational training opportunity for those wishing to follow a career in the Armed Forces. The provision of education and training for 16 year old school leavers provides a route into the Armed Forces that complies with Government education policy, while also providing a significant foundation for emotional, physical and educational development throughout an individual's career. It is also important to note that the majority of those recruited under the age of 18 complete their training and form a significant percentage of new entrants into the Army's deployable workforce - once they are trained and reach their 18th birthday. They fulfil around 15% of the Army's inflow requirement. We acknowledge the cost of their training can be substantial but we invest in them to maintain the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces.

We are very careful to ensure that we comply with relevant children's legislation, and of course, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) contributes to the Government's periodic reports and provides evidence about the recruitment of under-18s to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, particularly in relation to the Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict (although I would not wish to draw a comparison between those under-18s who volunteer to join Her Majesty's Armed Forces and those who are forced to join armed groups fighting wars in other parts of the world).

I wish to reassure you that we take our duty of care for under-18s joining the Armed Forces extremely seriously; we recognise their care and welfare requires particular attention. Our safeguards are therefore robust, effective, and independently verified. For example: Ofsted inspect the training environment, and use the 'Common Inspection Framework' (the national framework for inspection of

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post-16 education and training) to comment on the standard of initial training in the Armed Forces; and the MOD has an established Safeguarding Children Board (chaired by a person independent of the MOD) whose remit includes ensuring appropriate Safeguarding processes are in place for under-18s.

As you know the majority of under-18s are recruited into the Army (the proportion of new entrants below the age of 18 to the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and the Royal Air Force is very small indeed) and you expressed concern about their ability to understand the enlistment process. I wish to make clear that great care is taken to explain the terms of enlistment and to ensure that the precise nature of the commitment is fully understood by potential recruits. In the case of those aged under 18 years, the process includes ensuring that the parents or guardians of the potential recruits also understand the nature of the commitment. Throughout the recruitment process, their parents or guardians are given comprehensive written and oral guidance on the terms and conditions of service as well as the rights of discharge. It is only after this process has been followed that written consent from a parent or guardian for their child to enter Service will be requested. I should also explain that, by virtue of Regulation 7(4) of the Armed Forces (Enlistment) Regulations 2009, a recruiting officer is unable to enlist an individual under the age of 18 unless they are satisfied that the individual understands the terms on which they are to serve and the recruiting officer is satisfied that the individual is fit to be enlisted.

The recruitment of under-18s provides benefits both to the Army and to the recruits. The Army needs to attract school and college leavers at the earliest opportunity and in sufficient volume. Junior Entry (comprising the majority of the Army's under-18 trainees, who attend Junior Entry courses at the Army Foundation College, Harrogate) provides a suitable training route for these younger recruits. As for the benefit to them, the training offered is viewed as attractive to both potential recruits and their parents, delivering vocational education, leadership and initiative training as well as the core military syllabus. Should Junior Entrants decide to pursue a career in the Army, the training and education provided to them at this stage is a foundation-stone for their future service. Junior Entrant training provides emotional, physical and educational development to recruits.

All Army applicants (without Level 2 literacy and numeracy qualifications or their equivalents) undergo an assessment of their reading, writing, speaking and listening, and mathematical skills as part of the recruiting and selection arrangements. Those candidates assessed as being below the Army's minimum

recruit entry standard may be deferred to local Further Education colleges, or similar organisations, to improve their skills. The Army places great importance on education. It is committed to enabling all its personnel to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, and to ensuring they have the literacy and numeracy skills needed to undertake training, be operationally effective and well placed to take advantage of professional and career opportunities. All soldiers are required to reach minimum literacy and numeracy standards for promotion: National Level 1 standard for promotion to the rank of Corporal and Level 2 for Sergeant and above, and for selection for an LE Officer Commission. The Army's target is for all soldiers to have attained at least Level 1 (GCSE Grade D-G equivalent) literacy and numeracy standards, ideally, within three years of joining the Service. Attainment of these standards is measured through holding the appropriate national Functional Skills (English & Maths) qualifications (or their recognised equivalents).

The Deepcut Review noted that, "civilian society has not been notably successful in providing the opportunities for rewarding life-long careers for young people whose talents are not in the field of GCSEs and higher academic qualifications but lie, rather, in the technical trades or other careers offered by the Army. To deny these young people the chance to start training for such a career when they are of school-leaving age may deprive them of the opportunity they need to get away from difficult social circumstances and acquire new skills, and social discipline, before it is too late to adapt." Indeed, you may have seen the very recent media reports about the top-performing officer cadet at Sandhurst - a young man who grew up on a housing estate in Tottenham, was unable to read at the age of 11 and left school at 15. At 16 he applied to join the Army, did extremely well during the year's training at Harrogate that followed, and came top of his Commando course aged 18. He deployed to Afghanistan at the age of 19, where he served as a bombardier in the 29 Commando Regiment, Royal Artillery. He was later recommended for officer training and last week he was awarded the "sword of honour" as the top-performing cadet at the Sovereign's Parade. On the eve of his "passing out" ceremony he said that had it not been for joining the Army he would be dead or in prison.

That splendid young officer cadet made the right choice, but we recognise that not all those recruited under the age of 18 find they are suited to life in the Armed Forces. I wish, therefore, to make clear that those young people may change their mind at any time up to their 18th birthday. Since 2011, under Armed Forces Regulations, everyone under the age of 18 serving in the Armed Forces has a right to claim discharge up to their 18th birthday. For the first six months of service

this is achieved by giving not less than 14 days' notice in writing to their commanding officer after an initial period of 28 days' service. At any other time after six months' service, those under the age of 18 who wish to leave must give notice in writing to their commanding officer who must then discharge the under 18 within the next three months. For those who give notice just prior to their 18th birthday this means that the latest they will be discharged is at 18 years and three months of age. These three months represent a cooling-off period, to avoid the unintended consequence of a decision made in the heat of the moment. A shorter period may well be agreed with the commanding officer, but three months provides the under 18 with a period of due reflection and the right to rescind their request for discharge. This process ensures individuals under the age of 18 have an appropriate period of time to consider their decision to leave, and offers flexibility depending upon individual circumstances. Ultimately, all Service personnel under the age of 18 have a statutory right to leave the Armed Forces up until their 18th birthday. I also wish to assure you that every junior soldier and their parents or guardians are briefed on the right to discharge and the process to be followed.

In addition to the considerations I mention above, the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant state that those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether regular or reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. There is no reliable evidence that those who serve in the Armed Forces while under the age of 18 suffer any specific disadvantage compared to their peers in the civilian population. Should they however at any point be disadvantaged, then the Secretary of State is duty bound to report that to Parliament through the annual report. To report on under 18s as a specific group risks diluting the Government's whole-hearted commitment to address disadvantage for every member of the Armed Forces.

I hope this explains the situation and helps to allay your concerns on this issue.

*Yours sincerely,
Freddie*

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