

PE1603/KK

Petitioner submission of 13 June 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's letter to the Committee in relation to the recommendations made in your report *PE1603: Ensuring greater scrutiny, guidance and consultation on armed forces visits to schools in Scotland*.

While we appreciate that the Scottish Government is continuing to consider the recommendations and to finalise a timeframe, we would like to suggest that for transparency the conclusions could contain more detail than the communications already received.

We would also like to raise some concerns about the way the Committee's recommendations have been approached by the Scottish Government, as follows.

Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA)

The Deputy First Minister's letter indicates that a CRWIA is not directly applicable for the issue of armed forces activities in schools. We have had a conversation with staff at the office of the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People who expressed surprise at this conclusion.

Given that the CRWIA is seen as an increasingly important part of ensuring children's rights by the Scottish Government, we hope that they will be able to provide a detailed explanation of why a CRWIA is not a suitable mechanism, perhaps with reference to the stages and actions we detailed in our letter of October 2018.

Furthermore, if the Scottish Government is to incorporate the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law then military activities in schools must be addressed as this has been raised by both the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and by the UK's children's commissioners, with reference to the Convention on Child Rights and related optional protocols.

As we have previously stated, not having a policy in regard to these activities is a de facto policy.

Parental consultation

The Deputy First Minister makes no reference to the issue of parental consultation which the Committee recommended should be considered as part of the CRWIA process. We have spoken to Connect (formerly Scottish Parent Teacher Council) who have told us that:

"We are disappointed John Swinney's initial response to the Public Petitions Committee does not acknowledge the recommendation around consultation with parents. The Headteachers' Charter for School Empowerment states that

headteachers should make decisions in partnership with learners and parents, encouraging and supporting them to be involved.

“This is an emotive issue for many families: we often hear from parents concerned about the way armed forces operate in schools and that recruitment activity is taking place in some of our more deprived communities. As recruitment to the armed forces cannot be compared to recruitment by other employers due to the risk involved, it is important parents and young people are consulted about potential visits and their content. Where there are strong concerns these must be respected.”

Careers information

The Deputy First Minister has reported that they are working with Skills Development Scotland to look at how careers information represents military careers, which we welcome. But the letter also suggests that mechanisms are already in place to ensure balanced career information is provided, as Skills Development Scotland monitors the information on My World of Work.

However, currently the details about armed forces careers on My World of Work lack sufficient information about the welfare risks involved in an armed forces career. For example, while ‘dangerous’, ‘being away from your family’ and being ‘trained to fight’ are briefly mentioned on the Army Soldier page, it does not adequately address the risks, legal obligations and ethical issues involved or that military environments are not for everyone.

Given that the Scottish Government supports the UNCRC's position that young people under 18 should not be in the armed forces, it is surprising that careers information encourages enlistment at any age with little reference to creating informed consent. As has been recognised in a number of research and parliamentary publications¹, those who are recruited at a young age are more likely to suffer ill effects of military training and service, relating to health, wellbeing and short and long-term career progression.

We would welcome that the careers information endorsed by the Scottish Government discourages recruitment under 18 and refers young people to neutral and informed sources of information such as the Before You Sign Up website. This would support the Committee's recommendation that information resources are available which allow a balance of views.

We would also welcome wider measures to address balance in information given about military careers – not only that a balance is present where careers are being discussed but that balanced representations of military activity and alternatives to it are addressed

1 Medact (2016), The Recruitment of Children by the UK Armed Forces: a Critique from Health Professionals; ForcesWatch and Medact (2019), Selling the military: A critical analysis of contemporary recruitment marketing in the UK; House of Commons Defence Committee (2018), Mental Health and the Armed Forces, Part One: The Scale of mental health issues.

through peace and human rights education initiatives, such as we have called for elsewhere.²

In this regard, the Committee notes that this is not solely a question of balance provided in presentations by the armed forces but more widely within the curriculum.

Involvement of stakeholders

While we appreciate the Scottish Governments work in this area is ongoing, we are surprised that the expert opinions, that have already been expressed on this matter, appears to not be informing this work. These include the following who have made submissions to the Committee: Connect (formerly the Scottish Parent Teacher Council), Together (the Scottish child rights coalition) and the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People.

We hope that the Scottish Government plans around this work includes taking account of these stakeholders, and considering the considerable knowledge and expertise they have.

Finally, the Convention's Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict commits that,

“States should take all possible measures to prevent such recruitment –including legislation to prohibit and criminalize the recruitment of children under 18 and involve them in hostilities.”

It is vital that the Scottish Government takes a regulatory approach to this issue in line with this requirement. The best interests of young people will not be served by a hands-off approach that allows defence interests to use the education system for its own purposes.

While we recognise that the Deputy First Minister prioritises schools' autonomy with regard to employer access, it is widely recognised that armed forces careers are unique in the risks and obligations associated with them. As such they require additional consideration. Schools are familiar with guidance in all kinds of areas; this issue should not be an exception.

² Quakers in Scotland and ForcesWatch, 16 March 2018, Submission to the Human Rights and the Scottish Parliament Inquiry.