

PE1603/P

Scottish Youth Parliament Letter of 21 October 2016

Introduction

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) represents all of Scotland's young people. Our Vision for Scotland is of a nation that listens to and values the participation of children and young people. Our goal is to do our utmost to make this vision a reality. We see this as vital to ensuring Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people, ensuring that their voices are heard by decision-makers. We provide a platform for young people to discuss issues that are important to them, and support them to campaign for the changes they wish to see at community, local and national levels.

SYP's Values are:

Democracy - We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 14-25.

Rights - We are passionate about ensuring that young people are aware of their rights and ensuring that local and national government deliver policies that ensure those rights are fulfilled.

Inclusion - We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure that we represent young people from every community and background.

Political impartiality - We constructively engage with, and challenge, decision-makers from all political parties to ensure the voices of young people are at the heart of policymaking in Scotland.

Our approach

SYP welcomes the opportunity to comment on the issues outlined in this petition. Our response is based on consultation with 49 young people on their experience and views of armed forces visits to schools, and on the specific issues raised in the petition. These views were gathered through a focus group with 16 Members of SYP (MSYPs), and an online survey.

SYP does not have policy directly relating to armed forces visits to schools; however, as a rights-based organisation whose mission, vision, and values are grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), it is important to highlight the concerns raised by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child about recruitment of those aged under 18 to the armed forces, as outlined in its concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The concluding observations recommended that the state party:

“a) Consider reviewing its position and raise the minimum age for

recruitment into the armed forces to 18 years in order to promote the protection of children through an overall higher legal standard;

(b) Reconsider its active policy of recruitment of children into the armed forces and ensure that recruitment practices do not actively target persons under the age of 18 and ensure that military recruiters' access to school be strictly limited;

(c) In recruiting persons under the age of 18, strengthen its safeguards required by Article 3 of the Optional Protocol, in order to ensure that the recruitment is genuinely voluntary, and based on fully informed consent of the recruit as well as their parents and legal guardians, and ensure that recruitment does not have discriminatory impact on children of ethnic minorities and low-income families.”¹

We believe that the Committee should take the above recommendations into account in its consideration of the petition, particularly in regards to the need for young people to be “fully informed” if signing up.

Young people’s experiences of armed forces visits to schools

Of the 49 young people consulted, 27 had experienced an armed forces visit to school. Of these, 17 found this visit to be a positive experience, 8 did not find it to be a positive experience, while 2 were unsure.

Those with positive experience highlighted that they found the visit to be educational and informative:

“I learnt quite a lot about what the armed forces are about and how they help our country.”

“They were friendly, informative, and interesting.”

“It's always positive to meet the people in the uniform and see that they are just ordinary people, similar to police visits to school, I think.”

However, one young person noted:

“At the time, I found it inspiring. With retrospect though, I think this was damaging. It glorified violence.”

Those who did not find the experience positive highlighted that they found the visit to portray an imbalanced representation of the armed forces and enforce harmful stereotypes:

“As a 14 year old who was in the closet at the time, hearing “We’ll make you into a proper man” was damaging. They presented the armed forces in terms of the stereotype of a “macho man.””

¹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’ (June 2016): <http://www.crae.org.uk/media/93148/UK-concluding-observations-2016.pdf>

“No more *Top Gun* music (which I witnessed first-hand). It fictionalises what is really at points a matter of life or death, and glorifies killing.”

“The presentation talked about the positives of being in the army, but didn’t address negative consequences. The presenter completely sidestepped a question someone had about PTSD.”

Of the focus group participants who had experienced armed forces visits to schools, only one had experienced a presentation that highlighted possible negative consequences of a career in the army as well as the positive.

Young people’s views on armed forces visits to schools

Young people consulted were asked what they thought were the possible advantages and disadvantages of armed forces visits to schools.

Advantages

Young people consulted highlighted that armed forces visits to schools are informative, educational, and can open up opportunities to young people:

“We should know about it as it’s a career like any other.”

“Many young people are interested in a career in the armed forces anyway. Good opportunity to find out about the training offered.”

“Shows there are other career options than uni and college.”

“For some pupils I appreciate that armed forces can give a structure to life that few (if any) other organisations can give; many of my friends could not cope without the structure and support the military gives to their lifestyles.”

Disadvantages

Young people consulted highlighted that information from armed forces visits to schools could be manipulative and misleading for young people:

“Possibly does glamorise the experience. Sometimes young people hear very little about the alternatives.”

“I think it has the potential to lead people down paths that, with more maturity, they wouldn’t be happy following. I am concerned that visits to schools is taking advantage of young people when they aren’t necessarily at a state of mind where they can critically analyse their involvement in a military organisation.”

“It can paint an incorrect image with young people who may feel it’s all they can do if they struggle academically.”

“Young people may not understand the level of commitment.”

At the focus group, it was also highlighted that schools with strong links to the armed forces could be unbalanced when it came to other potential employer visits. Two focus group participants related their experience of going to a school with strong links to a military base:

“The school can’t function without [the military base]. They have loads of access to the school as a result. On Careers Day, 90% of the stalls were armed forces. It’s positive if you’re interested in the armed forces, but I have absolutely zero interest and there’s nothing for anyone else.”

Young people’s views on petition PE01603

Young people consulted were asked for their views on the petition’s three main recommendations on guidance, monitoring, and consultation.

Guidance

Young people consulted were asked if they agreed with the petition’s call for guidance to be developed to ensure that armed forces visits to schools offers a realistic representation of a career in the armed forces. Of the young people consulted, 34 out of 45 young people agreed with the petition’s call, 7 disagreed, and 4 were unsure.

“I feel this is a very good plan because people who join the armed forces need to know everything that is involved in their role.”

“There should be different standards for the armed forces as recruiters [compared to other employers] because of the seriousness of a career in the armed forces.”

Young people suggested the following if guidance were to be developed:

- Young people themselves should be consulted on the development of guidance
- The armed forces and pacifist organisations should be consulted equally
- There should be a set number of visits to schools from armed forces per year
- There needs to be a balance between armed forces visits and other employer visits
- The guidance should focus on ensuring harmful stereotypes aren’t enforced
- Guidance should show both the advantages and disadvantages of life in the armed forces

Monitoring of armed forces visits

Young people consulted were asked if they agreed with the petition’s call for monitoring of armed forces visits to schools. 31 out of 45 young people agreed with the petitioners, 7 disagreed, and 7 were unsure.

Young people in the focus group felt that some schools were targeted more than others, particularly in deprived areas. However, they felt that this anecdotal evidence needed to be backed up by consistent monitoring.

Others believed that it was not solely deprived areas that are being targeted:

“I strongly disagree with the suggestion that this is necessarily more of an issue for pupils in deprived areas. Many private schools have army, navy and RAF cadet forces which expose a large number of pupils to the possibility of a career in the forces on a weekly basis.”

Consulting parents and guardians

Young people were asked if they agreed with the petition’s call for parents and guardians to be consulted as to whether they are happy for their child to take part in armed forces activities in school. 15 out of 45 young people agreed with the petition’s call, 23 disagreed, and 7 were unsure.

Those who disagreed largely asserted the need for young people to be able to decide for themselves if they are happy to take part in armed forces activities in school:

“Young people should be able to give/withdraw consent for it too.”

“I feel that the child should be able to pick what they want to hear about.”

“If parents decide they don’t want their child to have a career in the Armed Forces they can have that conversation with them; excluding the child from the rest of his classmates while they hear a little bit from those in the Armed Forces seems a little extreme.”

Others felt that it depended on the age of the child as to whether the parent or the young person should be consulted:

“For children under 16 parents should be consulted. But 16+ is an individual decision.”

“Parents should be consulted for primary school, but not for high school as youth are old enough to know.”

“If you’re old enough to get married and leave school, you can make your own choices.”

Others felt that both young people and parents should be involved:

“It is for the young person to decide - but informing the parents is a good idea as it could open up constructive debate at home about the pros and cons of military service.”

“For vulnerable young people, like my brother who is on the autistic spectrum, he needs support to make decisions.”

Conclusion

SYP’s consultation with young people suggests that, while many young people have a positive experience of armed forces activities in schools, there is inconsistency in

the delivery of these visits. It is worrying that some young people are being exposed to harmful gender stereotypes and are not being informed of the possible negative aspects of a career in the armed forces, contravening the UN's concluding observation recommendation for young people to be "fully informed". The majority of young people consulted, including those who had a positive experience of armed forces activities in school, agreed that guidance should be developed to ensure a balanced, realistic representation of the armed forces. They felt that young people should be involved in the development of this guidance, alongside armed forces and pacifist organisations alike.

The majority of young people consulted also felt that there should be public monitoring of visits to schools, with focus group participants citing their own experiences of some schools in their constituency being more targeted than others.

Young people consulted had more mixed views on the call for parents and guardians to be consulted, with the majority disagreeing; many felt that it should be the child or young person consulted as to whether they want to take part in armed forces activities in school.

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