

PE1603/X

Medact Letter of 12 January 2017

I'm writing with Medact's submission to the Public Petitions Committee regarding Petition PE1603: Ensuring greater scrutiny, guidance and consultation on armed forces visits to schools in Scotland.

Medact is a public health charity, which in October 2016 published the report: *The recruitment of children by the UK armed forces: a critique from health professionals*.¹ The authors and contributors of this report included medical academics, psychologists and psychiatrists.

This report examined the evidence that those recruited into the military as children face disproportionate health risks across the course of their military career, when compared with those recruited as adults. These health risks include PTSD, self-harm, suicide, death and injury. It also found that military recruitment marketing techniques take advantage of adolescent cognitive and psychosocial vulnerabilities.

In line with this report, Medact supports the requests of Petition PE1603 and recommends that the Committee push for guidance ensuring balance around armed forces visits to schools, transparent information around these visits and guaranteed parent/guardian consultation when the visits occur.

Medact's report details the reasons why adolescents are more likely than adults to be vulnerable to persuasion and influence, and to making poorly processed decisions that will affect their long-term future, particularly if those decisions involve risk, -such as a career in the armed forces. While the final act of recruitment - the signing up itself - does not take place in schools, recruitment by the military's own admission² is a long process beginning from an early age, and engagement in schools is all part of the military's efforts to recruit children and young people. These activities are part of a broader marketing strategy which, as our report explains, exploits adolescent susceptibilities.

Some adolescents are more vulnerable than others to making ill-informed decisions, and to peer pressure. Factors heightening vulnerability can include socio-economic

¹ https://www.medact.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/medact_childrecruitment_17-oct_WEB.pdf

² The MoD [made it clear in 2011](#) that recruitment is one of the two main objectives of its 'youth engagement' programme (of which visits to schools comprise a significant part): activities 'should have two clear Defence outcomes: An awareness of the Armed Forces' role in the world and the quality of its work and people, in order to ensure the continued support of the population; *and recruitment of the young men and women that are key to future sustainment and success.*'

* The MoD's [2007 document 'Engagement with UK Schools'](#) states that, 'Our overall rationale for engaging with schools is to encourage good citizenship, provide an environment which raises awareness of the MOD and Armed Forces among young people, provide positive information to influence future opinion formers, *and to enable recruiters to access the school environments...In gross numerical terms the main driver is recruitment...There are many other reasons given for visits but many of these have implicit careers links and any positive image created by an engagement is likely to have a positive effect in the recruiting environment.*'

disadvantage and experiences of childhood adversity. It is important for the Committee to note that children with these heightened vulnerabilities are likely to be present in every school - not only schools in typically socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

This petition does not call for an end to armed forces visits to schools, nor does it ask for the recruitment age to be raised to eighteen. It simply calls for mechanisms as part of a national structure ensuring that the school environment is not used to market a military career to adolescent children without their parent or guardian's consent and without full information about the difficulties and long-term risks of a military career, as well as alternative options.

Medact is in agreement with the UN and the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland that this petition constitutes a child rights and welfare issue, and as a health charity we emphasize to the Committee members the known psychological vulnerabilities of adolescents and the valuable protection such national mechanisms would provide for them.

Medact therefore joins the petitioners in calling for:

Guidance - on how visits to schools by the armed forces should be conducted so that information presented to children takes account of the unique nature of armed forces careers, ensures political balance, and offers a realistic representation of the role of the armed forces and what a career in the armed forces involves.

Information - to be collected to enable public monitoring of the number and location of visits, the purpose and content of visits, and comparison with the number of visits by other employers

and

Parents/guardians - to be consulted as to whether they are happy for their child to take part in armed forces activities at school.