

Comisiynydd Plant Cymru Children's Commissioner for Wales

Keith Towler

Mr Leon Russell

13 November 2012

Dear Mr Russell

Re: Military Presence in Welsh Schools

Thank you for your letter regarding your campaign to ban Ministry of Defence (MoD) recruiters from Welsh schools.

It is not my intention to comment on the age of recruitment into the armed forces, but to address the specific issue you raise in the petition which you have submitted to the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) Petitions Committee.

At this time, I am not minded to write directly to the Welsh Government and the NAfW Petitions Committee but I will copy both in to this correspondence for information and I am happy for you to share this letter with whomever you wish and to treat this correspondence as a public document.

I welcome the discussion on this subject and note the information that the Welsh Centre for International Affairs will be facilitating a debate via one of their children's debates. Hearing the voice of young people in this discussion is very important, as is hearing the experiences of those who have been through the processes of the armed forces whilst they were under the age of 18.

I am aware of past media coverage which suggested variations in army recruitment officers' visits to schools. The statistics, which, as far as I am aware, were not contested, was that schools in the most deprived areas were visited 50% more often than those in affluent areas and that there were big regional variations. I would have obvious concerns if levels of deprivation had any influence in recruitment strategy. However, a statement from the MoD at the time also explained that:

"The Army does not recruit in schools, but seeks to raise awareness of the Army and its place in a democratic society while building interest in the Army and its careers"¹

This position is in contrast to the UK state party's submission under Article 8, paragraph 1, of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict², which states:

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/6199274.stm>

“Army recruiting initiatives include presentations in schools by Army careers advisers (ACA), a variety of Army youth team and Army recruiting team activities, attachments and visits to units, school fairs, Combined Cadet Force (CCF), advertising and marketing initiatives, membership of the Army’s Camouflage Club.”

This contradiction needs to be resolved. I believe clarity is needed so that headteachers, pupils and parents are aware of the nature of MoD activity and can make informed decisions on whether or not they wish to be exposed to any presentations in school.

A recommendation by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2008 stated that the UK state party should:

“Reconsider its active policy of recruitment of children into the armed forces...”

Another key consideration in this debate is Article 13 of the UNCRC, which states:

“The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.”³

In presenting career options, the MoD has a responsibility to present a balanced and accurate picture. Elements which should be thoroughly covered include:

- the rights to discharge
- minimum periods of service
- fatality and injury rates
- effectiveness of prohibition on deployment into hostilities

I do have some reservations regarding the MoD’s ability to offer a balanced picture of military life. This statement is based purely on anecdotal examples of MoD online materials aimed at young people, for instance the *Camouflage* site: <http://army.mod.uk/camouflage/default.aspx>

The MoD’s position is that it visits schools by invitation only. Therefore it appears that this issue rests with headteachers, as you state in your letter. I can appreciate that headteachers may want to invite the MoD into their schools to ensure that pupils are provided with information about a wide range of career opportunities. I would hope that due consideration is afforded to inviting providers of other possible career avenues

² <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/CRC.C.OPAC.GBR.1.pdf>

³ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

Importantly, I also hope that head teachers seek assurances that all available information is accurate and balanced, including the elements discussed above.

I thank you again for bringing your campaign to my attention and I will continue to monitor developments in this area. I would also suggest that you engage with the Wales UNCRC monitoring group on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith Towler". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

Keith Towler
Children's Commissioner for Wales / Comisiynydd Plant Cymru

cc: William Powell AM Chair of NAFW Petitions Committee
Leighton Andrews AM Minister for Education