

## Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee 15 September 2016

### Transcript extracted from the official draft report of committee proceedings on the Scottish Government website

#### CONVENER

\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)

\*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP) \*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Mairi Campbell-Jack (Quakers in Scotland)

Rhianna Louise (ForcesWatch)

Emma Sangster (ForcesWatch)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Catherine Fergusson

#### LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

### **Armed Forces (School Visits) (PE1603)**

The Convener: PE1603 is on ensuring greater scrutiny, guidance and consultation on armed forces visits to schools in Scotland. The petition has been lodged on behalf of Quakers in Scotland and ForcesWatch, from which we will take evidence today.

I welcome to the meeting Mairi Campbell-Jack from Quakers in Scotland. I understand that our two witnesses from ForcesWatch are en route so I am happy for us to start with you, given the time constraints. If your colleagues arrive in time, they can join us. I invite you to make a short opening statement, if you wish, and we will then move to questions from members. Again, it would be helpful if questions and answers were as succinct as possible.

Mairi Campbell-Jack (Quakers in Scotland):

Thank you convener. I apologise for the lateness of my colleagues; I believe that they have had some traffic trouble.

The Convener: They have just arrived.

I welcome Emma Sangster and Rhianna Louise from ForcesWatch, who will join Mairi Campbell-Jack in presenting the petition.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: I represent Quakers in Scotland. The Quakers formed in 1652, so we have been around for almost 400 years.

At a very early stage, the peace testimony of Quakers became a central part of their belief and, for many Quakers today, it is still a strong part of their identity. The peace testimony has seen Quakers working on battlefields and in conflict zones across the centuries and around the globe, tending to the injured, comforting the dying and brokering peace.

In the modern day, we have worked in places such as Rwanda on truth and reconciliation, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in elections in Burundi to make sure that they are free and fair. The peace testimony is not just people sitting in the warmth and comfort of their own homes, wishing for a better world. Quakers go out and live their peace testimony, sometimes putting their own safety and lives at risk.

Quakers in Scotland are concerned at an increasing militarisation in society since the Iraq war, and we are especially concerned when it comes to the militarisation of our young people in schools.

We believe that there are several issues here. One is child welfare. There is increasing evidence that the younger somebody joins the armed forces, the worse their outcomes are, including death, disability, addiction and poor mental health. There is a concern about informed choice as it appears that often, when the armed forces go into schools, there is no adequate balance. They present a glossy, glamorised and adventurous image of life in the armed forces and that does not take into account the uniqueness of the career, its dangers and the ethical problems that soldiers and other people in the armed forces might face.

Our final concern is about parental choice. It appears that not all parents are informed by the armed forces or the school of the visits, so they do not have an opportunity to discuss the visit with their child, with the school or with the teacher concerned. Their right to conscientiously object is removed.

The petition is asking for scrutiny and to make transparent and accessible information available to the public. There should be guidance so that teachers and parents know how balance is achieved in the classroom, and there should be consultation so that parents and children can consider and have a voice on the issue.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move to questions.

On your point about parental choice, do you think that, at senior school level, the choice should be exercised by the student rather than the parent?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: We would expect students and parents to talk to each other about the issues. How parents and students want to have that conversation in their own homes is not up to us, but we would hope that, as children get older, they would be able to start their own process of critical thinking about these issues.

The Convener: I am trying to establish that, if somebody is over 16 and therefore able to vote, it should be within their right to determine whether they withdraw from an event in school where the armed forces are present, rather than expecting a decision from the parent.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: I agree with that.

The Convener: The petition says that the armed forces use a narrow definition of recruitment, in that it refers only to the act of signing up. How would you define recruitment and would that definition apply to other organisations? Should all careers-related activities in schools that promote particular careers or organisations be considered to be recruitment?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: We see recruitment as a process rather than an event—like many things in Scotland—and we know from armed forces documents that they see it as a process as well.

Emma Sangster (ForcesWatch): We know from internal armed forces documents that they think that the pre-recruitment interest that they would like to gain in young people takes place over a number of years and that it might be sparked by any one encounter with the armed forces. We of course accept that the actual process of recruitment—of signing on the dotted line, as it were—does not take place in the school. In any case, it needs to involve parents at that final stage. However, we are concerned that a lot of what happens in schools is that pre-recruitment activity. There is certainly quite a bit of evidence from internal Ministry of Defence documents that that is how it views the situation.

The Convener: Is that a process that other organisations go through when they go into schools?

Emma Sangster: We are not experts on what other organisations seek to get out of their activities in schools, but we have done some research on other public service visits to schools. None of the data that we found showed anything like the level of visits that the armed forces make to schools. The fire service goes into schools, but that is to talk about fire safety; it is not particularly to talk about becoming part of the fire service.

The Convener: Yes, but if private companies go into schools to recruit, would you expect there to be some kind of monitoring of what those jobs involve and whether there are ethical questions in their work, too?

Emma Sangster: Yes. The education system should not be seen as a ready catchment for recruits into any industry, because going down any pathway needs a lot of consideration. Of course, it might be an arena where people start to gather information about different career pathways, but it should not be one where they go a significant way down any of those pathways.

The Convener: So you would be concerned more generally about careers fairs in schools where companies come in and talk about what they do.

Emma Sangster: Many of those are about opening up options for young people. The armed forces are a little different, because people can sign up at 16 and commit to a long period of service of up to six years, which is quite different from any other career. Also, there are the unique risks of an armed forces career. That needs extra consideration, and it is one of the things that the Welsh Government noted in particular. The unique nature of an armed forces career sets it aside from other employers in that respect.

Angus MacDonald: I note that you are concerned that schools in deprived areas are being targeted, although you say that there is not a straightforward link between the number of visits and levels of deprivation. The petition states that 83 per cent of state secondary schools have been visited compared with 50 per cent of independent secondary schools. A total number of visits is also provided for state schools, but do you have a total number of visits to independent secondary schools?

Emma Sangster: Yes, we have that figure, but I do not have it to hand. It was clear from the data set that we looked at that the visits to independent schools were just a fraction of the total number of visits and that far fewer of those schools were visited. In those two years, there was not a single recorded visit by the Army to an independent school. The visits to independent schools were all from the RAF or the navy, and the Army just visited state secondary schools.

Angus MacDonald: If you have that breakdown of figures, that would be great.

Emma Sangster: I can provide you with that.

Maurice Corry: Convener, I would like to declare that I had a visit to my office from Mr Jim White, an independent researcher, on that subject.

The location of armed forces careers offices is significant. Could you expand on that and say something about how that significance is demonstrated by evidence of career-related activities in schools?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: I think that ForcesWatch would be better at answering that question. It will be able to give you more information.

Emma Sangster: We found that certain local authority areas were visited more than others. If you look at the geographic range of visits, you see that there is a focus on the central belt and up towards Aberdeen and, at the time of the collection of data that we were looking at, that is where a lot of the armed forces careers offices were located. When we look at which schools are visited more than others, important factors include the location of the offices where regiments are based, where there might be a lot of armed forces families living, and where there might be other employment related to the armed forces. Perhaps one significant factor is the relationship that, over time, a school has built up with the armed forces or that the armed forces have built up with a school. That would also enable more visits to take place.

Maurice Corry: Scotland is unique in many ways for its regimental traditions and regimental families. In many parts of Scotland, there are unique ties with local regiments—more so than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Have you considered that and built it into some of your research?

Emma Sangster: We understand that that is particular to Scotland, but that does not undermine our concerns about how visits should be conducted and what guidance should be given to schools regarding those visits.

Maurice Corry: I am just thinking from the point of view of the families of the children who come forward and declare an interest in being recruited. Therefore, there is an external interest, which is very important for you to consider.

Brian Whittle: Has a comparison been made with the number of visits that are made by any other employer, be it public or private sector, or by other uniformed services such as the police, the fire service or the ambulance service?

Emma Sangster: As I said, we tried to get data through freedom of information about the number of visits from other public services, and we found that the armed forces visit schools at a significantly higher rate. We have not done a huge amount of further research into that area. We wanted to explore whether other public services visit schools to that degree and we can confidently say that they do not. I do not think that they are resourced in the same way that would allow them to visit schools at that rate. The armed forces put quite a bit of funding in that direction.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: We would also argue that comparing other public sector employers with the Army is not comparing like with like. One of our points is that the Army provides a job that is unique in its dangers and in the ethical questions around it. Although there are other jobs that are dangerous, such as being a fireman or a paramedic, which involve putting yourself at risk and going into risky situations, it is quite easy to quit those jobs, but that is not the case with the Army. We think that the Army needs to be treated differently from other employers and that its uniqueness should be recognised.

Brian Whittle: Is there any evidence, including from elsewhere in the United Kingdom, that visits to schools have a tangible impact on the number of young people joining the armed forces, or is the information gathering that the petition asks for part of being able to make that assessment?

Emma Sangster: We do not have particular information on whether young people in a school that is visited more often than others are more likely to join the Army. We know that more than 2,500 people under the age of 18 join the armed forces every year, and their decision to do so will have been precipitated by the armed forces having contact with those young people at some point, but we have not looked at that direct relationship. Not so much in Scotland but elsewhere in the UK, there are cadet forces in schools. That is being expanded, particularly in England and Wales. People's involvement in the cadets is perhaps more of a direct link with a later decision to join the armed forces.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: We started doing the research for this petition and gathering information through FOIs in early 2015, but we found it incredibly difficult to get hold of information. Some of the armed forces' information about visits to schools was in the form of handwritten notes. In other cases, personnel had changed or had left the armed forces and the information that we required was not available. In another case, a computer system had changed. All of that resulted in there being massive holes in the information that we could get. It is hard for people to have reliable information on what is happening in schools. That is one of the reasons why we believe that we need accessible information that the public can look up.

Emma Sangster: I would reiterate that. Having done a lot of the data analysis myself, I know about the difficulties of getting hold of the data and then using it. That is one of the issues that we think it is important to address.

Another element that is more recent and which we do not have much information on but which we think needs exploring concerns the involvement of Capita, the private company that has the recruitment contract with the MOD. Part of that involves working in education to interest young people in enlisting in the armed forces. You could say that the armed forces have a number of interests in going into schools, such as informing young people about what they do and imparting knowledge to young people, but Capita's single remit is to provide recruits. We do not know the extent to which the outreach team in Capita visits schools but, obviously, if it is visiting schools, its longer-term aim in doing so is to increase recruitment. We therefore think that there should be more transparency around and research into the role of Capita in this process.

Rona Mackay: Your petition talks about the need for a balanced view to be presented by the armed forces. What do you think the chances are of that happening?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: There are some questions around balance and who should provide that balance. It might be best if the class teacher provided balance after the visit, or if the school could provide balance by also having peace organisations come into the school to talk to children—there are some great organisations out there, such as Veterans for Peace and PeaceJam.

Our other concern is not so much about what the teachers and schools are doing, but about the presentations that the armed forces give, which seem to be quite glossy, glamorous and exciting. We know that young people's cognitive development means that they are not as good as older people at assessing long-term risk to themselves, and there is a risk that the armed forces will create a rather rose-tinted view of what that life is actually like.

There are questions around who would be best at providing balance, and how organisations such as Quakers in Scotland can support schools, teachers and local authorities in providing balance.

Rona Mackay: Are you saying that the armed forces do not give a balanced view when they do the presentations?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: We do not believe that they do.

Rona Mackay: I have a wee follow-up on that. Do you know what the pupils' views are when they see those presentations?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: Probably in most of Scotland the views will be very mixed. Some people will probably welcome the presentation and others might feel very neutral. We know from Quaker children that they have been left feeling very uncomfortable in the classroom. Sometimes they have been given no alternative but to attend, which has been very difficult for them. It would be great to have the plurality of views recognised.

The Convener: In terms of balance, the implication seems to be that the armed forces are in favour of war and the peace organisations are in favour of peace.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: Peace organisations are not necessarily in favour of peace—they are in favour of critical thinking around conflict issues, and would work with children to encourage that critical thinking. We feel that that does not come through when it is just an armed forces visit.

The Convener: I presume that if the armed forces talk about peacekeeping work through the United Nations, then the children are not seeing their work through just one prism.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: We are not aware of armed forces visits that focus on peacekeeping work.

Rhianna Louise (ForcesWatch): Besides peacekeeping, there is also peace-building and conflict transformation. There is a whole realm of material out there about conflict transformation that is not widely available to children in schools. If the armed forces are going in to talk about military responses to conflict, children should be made aware that there are other responses—for example, that diplomacy is also an option.

The information that is given to young people, even on the armed forces website, does not talk about conflict very much at all. It talks about other things such as skills development and exciting sports activities such as scuba diving. The actual combat is not really mentioned. It would be misleading to say that the armed forces talk about conflict itself very much when they go into schools.

Brian Whittle: Education is a precursor to a career path. I have a simple question. Do you oppose the idea that joining the armed forces is a reputable career path to go down?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: We oppose the fact that children are recruited into our armed forces.

The Convener: I am sorry: do you define a 16-year-old as a child?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: Legally, anyone under 18 is a child.

The Convener: We have moved to a point at which 16-year-olds are now recognised as young adults who have a vote.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: Yes, they do, and I personally welcome the fact that young people are being involved more and more in public life. However, the transition from childhood to adulthood does not happen on someone's birthday—it is a very slow process. We think that the very last part of that process should be someone choosing a job in which they may end up dying themselves or taking the life of another person, the impact of which should not be underestimated.

The Convener: Who would you see as being responsible for overseeing the collection of data and ensuring its rigour in terms of understanding what is happening in our schools? How was the question addressed in Wales?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: That is a really good question. Obviously schools and local authorities are under a lot of pressure, and teachers in the classroom are also under a lot of stress. We do not necessarily understand the way in which each individual local authority works and how that could fit in with their work, which is one reason why we would welcome an inquiry to open up discussion and debate around the issue.

Maurice Corry: Ms Campbell-Jack talked about Capita being a recruitment organisation for the armed forces. Do you have any research information from it on the visits? You talked about bits of paper being written on by the Army, but surely if Capita runs recruitment, you have information from it.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: I will pass that one over to Emma Sangster.

Emma Sangster: As a private company, Capita is not covered by freedom of information legislation, so it is even more difficult to get information about how it conducts its contract with the Ministry of Defence.

Maurice Corry: Have you spoken to it?

Emma Sangster: The information that we have has come via the MOD—

Maurice Corry: No. Have you spoken to Capita?

Emma Sangster: No. We have not spoken directly to Capita, but we would like to pursue that.

Maurice Corry: That is where the information will be.

Emma Sangster: We hope so. I think that a Scottish Parliament inquiry would open the doors for that information to be forthcoming. That would be very helpful.

Maurice Corry: Obviously, you have talked about armed forces visits, but it should be remembered that defence manufacturers such as British Aerospace look for modern apprentices, and that Lockheed Martin and various other organisations visit schools. Have you researched the frequency of their visits to schools?

Emma Sangster: We focused particularly on the armed forces. We are aware that there are developing relationships of that kind between education and industry, particularly for older children in the education system. Some of those things are very new, and we are looking at them, but we have not done substantial research into that.

Maurice Corry: Do you agree that you should look at that?

Emma Sangster: Yes. We are looking at the university technical colleges in England, which are really founded on partnerships with local industry, including the defence industry and the armed forces, in some areas.

Maurice Corry: Would you say that, at the moment, your case is rather narrow and not really broad, and that it just concentrates on the uniformed element?

Mairi Campbell-Jack: Yes. Part of the reason is that we are very small organisations that have part-time staff only. We do not have the kind of budgets that the MOD and Lockheed Martin, for example, have to put resources into the matter. It has taken us a year and a half of work to get here. There are lots of things that we would love to be able to do, but unfortunately resources and time do not always make that possible for us.

The Convener: As there are no other questions, I thank the witnesses very much for their evidence. There is an awful lot of stuff in that. We can have a think about what we want to do.

There has been a long-held concern that poverty is possibly the greatest recruiting sergeant to the Army. We would be very concerned if communities were targeted in that way.

My sense is that you are looking for transparency about what is happening and what the protections are. There is a more general issue about our wanting to know that when private companies or whoever go into a school, they do not promise the earth and encourage people to make choices that are not fully informed.

It is an interesting issue to try to get more information on. Do members have views?

Brian Whittle: I do not know what the modern Army recruitment process is when young men or women walk through the door to look to join it, so I would like to understand that a bit better. Obviously, there has been a general reduction in the armed forces in the country. I am unaware of how many people knock on the door, how many are accepted, and what the process is. I would like to know that.

Rona Mackay: I think that, in my local authority, the issue went to a vote at council, and the council decided not to allow it. Local authorities seem to have some autonomy in the matter. Have the witnesses gone round local authorities?

Emma Sangster: Yes, we have. We contacted every local authority in Scotland, and 26 responded. The information shows quite a varying picture. Some authorities do not particularly recognise the issues, while others have done more to give guidance to schools. The approach is not uniform. A lot of local authorities said that they leave it up to headteachers to decide.

Rona Mackay: A lot of buck passing is going on.

Emma Sangster: Yes—or there is a lack of clarity about where responsibility for the issue lies, because it falls within the careers service side of things as well as within education. A lot of different agencies can be involved. Where does responsibility lie?

The Convener: We would be interested in knowing what the Scottish Government's view is. I can see that individual schools in some localities where there is a strong connection to the Army might be very keen for such visits, but other areas will have less of a connection. Should we also contact local authorities or should we just approach COSLA at this stage and ask for its view? We would also want to contact the Army careers service in order to get its response to the petition. Are there any other suggestions?

Rona Mackay: You could widen out the approach to parent councils and so on, but maybe that is for further down the line. As you say, in the initial stages, perhaps we should just approach the Government and local authorities through COSLA.

The Convener: There is also Skills Development Scotland, which develops the careers approach in schools.

Brian Whittle: I would definitely like to understand how a school decides what presentations from which organisations it will allow. Would we contact the Educational Institute of Scotland and the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association in that regard?

The Convener: I am not sure whether the unions have a view at this stage. The briefing note suggests a number of organisations that we should contact, including the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament. We can perhaps expand that list, in consultation with the clerks.

At this point, we are trying to get a sense of people's views on the dilemma: on the one hand, particular communities are being targeted; on the other hand, we recognise that there would be good employment outcomes for some young people. Indeed, we have seen some young people make an active choice to go into the armed forces. We need to know what the safeguards are and the extent to which particular communities are being targeted. Would that be fair? Do members agree to that approach?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your attendance. We will await the responses to our correspondence and keep you in touch with how the matter will be progressed thereafter.

Mairi Campbell-Jack: Thank you very much for your time.