

The British armed forces: Why raising the recruitment age would benefit everyone

Read time: 5 min.

The UK armed forces are highly unusual internationally in enlisting high numbers of 16- and 17-year-olds.¹ In 2023–24, more than a third of the Army's intake was under 18 at the point of joining up; more new recruits were 16 than any other age.² These youngest recruits tend to come from deprived areas³ and are mainly sought for low-skilled, high-risk infantry jobs.⁴

This briefing makes the case for transition to an all-adult military in the UK. The change would:

- Safeguard children from the impacts of early enlistment, including onerous legal obligations, a high risk of dropping out, common experiences of maltreatment, and mental health problems.
- Encourage more young people to continue in full-time education up to age 18 to enhance their qualifications for lifelong employment, while leaving open the option of enlisting thereafter.
- Support modernisation of the armed forces with a simpler, more cost-efficient recruitment and training model.
- Make a valuable contribution towards a global end to all use of children for military purposes.

Obligations

A 16-year-old Army recruit assumes obligations that could not be imposed on civilians at any age.⁵ In the first six weeks, they cannot leave service,⁶ have visitors, or leave the training compound.⁷ Mobiles are confiscated, except for one short phone call each evening.⁸ After six weeks, a restricted discharge window then opens, but from their 18th birthday they are locked into service for the next four years.⁹

Consent

While parental consent is required, parents are not informed of the risks and obligations of military life before enlistment,^{10 11} nor can they withdraw consent afterwards. The UN has twice warned that the UK's arrangements for seeking consent from recruits and their parents are 'insufficient'.¹²

Education

Initial soldier training takes place at the Army Foundation College (AFC), which is inspected by Ofsted for its duty of care but is exempt from the education standards that apply in a civilian college.^{13 14} Most recruits spend less than one day a week in accredited courses, which are below the standard of GCSEs.^{15 16} The Army believes that enhancing trainee education 'risks discouraging' recruitment.¹⁷

Abuse

Former recruits have told CRIN that trainees at AFC were routinely slapped, punched, and kicked by staff. They were also shouted at, laughed at, and intentionally humiliated in front of their peers, which they said led to long-term problems with mental health.¹⁸

Despite holding an Ofsted 'outstanding' grade for welfare for a decade. AFC's record during this period includes multiple allegations of child abuse:

- 75 complaints of violence by instructors against recruits have been recorded since 2014;¹⁹
- An instructor was convicted in 2023 of the serial sexual abuse of several female recruits in his charge, all aged under 18,²⁰ which had gone unchallenged for ten months;²¹
- Between August 2022 and July 2023, 13 sexual offences at AFC, including nine of rape, were referred to local police;²² and
- A survey of female recruits at AFC in 2020 found that 48% had experienced bullying, harassment, or discrimination during training and only 30% said they would report such behaviour if they witnessed it.²³

Mental health

The adolescent brain, particularly in teenagers with a stressful childhood background, is vulnerable to prolonged stress,²⁴ and the Army's research has found an 'erosion of resilience' in recruits at AFC.²⁵

- Compared with the most economically deprived fifth of civilians aged 16–19 over two decades, serving soldiers of the same age have been nearly twice as likely to end their lives, and same-age veterans three times as likely.²⁶
- Over a similar period, 56% of infantry suicides have been of soldiers who joined under 18.²⁷
- Recruits enlisted age 16–17½ have suffered disproportionate rates of long-term stress-related mental health problems compared to both to older joiners and to civilians of the same age and social background.²⁸

Socioeconomic risk

Four out of five of disadvantaged 16-year-olds in England now continue in full-time education from age 16, with a high rate of retention.^{29 30} Accordingly, and as the MoD accepts,³¹ early enlistment is more likely to bring full-time education to an end than lift a young person out of unemployment. Those who do leave education for the Army are employed only precariously, since 33% drop out of their training, which leaves them out of work and education and consequently vulnerable.^{32 33}

Although the Army argues that its youngest recruits rise through the ranks the fastest,³⁴ this is not so. Soldiers who joined up aged under 18 between 2006 and 2009 and were still in service a decade later were half as likely as adult recruits to have reached the rank of sergeant or above.³⁵

Military benefits of change

Transition to all-adult armed forces would bring many benefits. Recruits would be more mature and robust, more likely to finish training, and deployable sooner – all without the legal and practical complexities of employing children.

The change would be highly cost-effective. It costs £170,000 to train a 16-year-old for the infantry and only £71,000 to train an adult to the same standard,³⁶ albeit for a career one-third shorter on average.³⁷ An all-adult recruitment model would save c. £50m per year,³⁸ which could be used to improve retention.

The change is also feasible. The Navy and RAF already take relatively few child recruits. We have shown elsewhere that the Army, having downsized, can now also move with ease to all-adult recruitment.³⁹ Specifically, the Army will have reduced to around 72,500 personnel by 2025 to be 29% smaller than it was in 2012.⁴⁰ Many recruits who now join up at 16 would still do so at 18, having had the opportunity to spend two more years in full-time education in the interim.

International significance

Three-quarters of armed forces worldwide now recruit only adults from age 18.⁴¹ The growing global consensus that military work should be reserved for adulthood has already safeguarded countless children against its hazards and obligations, but many more remain at risk. The UK, by continuing to enlist from age 16, lends tacit encouragement to other states to follow suit. It could instead discourage the recruitment of children worldwide by making the transition itself to all-adult armed forces.

Support for change

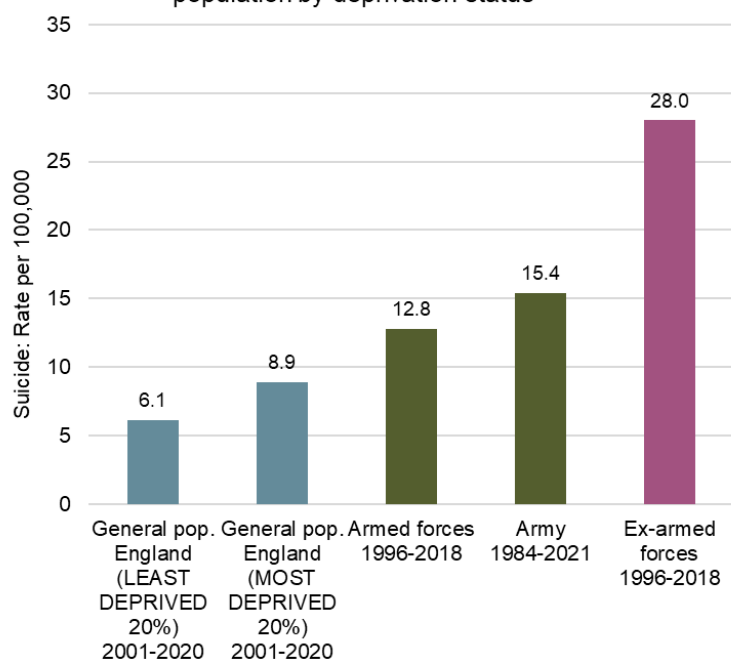
The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child,⁴² the UK Children's Commissioners,⁴³ major children's organisations,⁴⁴ and human rights groups⁴⁵ have all called for an end to child enlistment, as have health professionals,⁴⁶ faith groups,⁴⁷ trade unions,⁴⁸ and veterans.⁴⁹ The House of Commons Defence Committee has repeatedly challenged the MoD to account for its dependence on underage recruits.⁵⁰

Three-quarters of the public now believe that enlistment should be reserved for adulthood, according to a 2022 YouGov poll.⁵¹ Only 1 in 5 think otherwise, and only 1 in 10 in the 16–24 age group.

Appendix⁵²

FIGURE I: SUICIDE

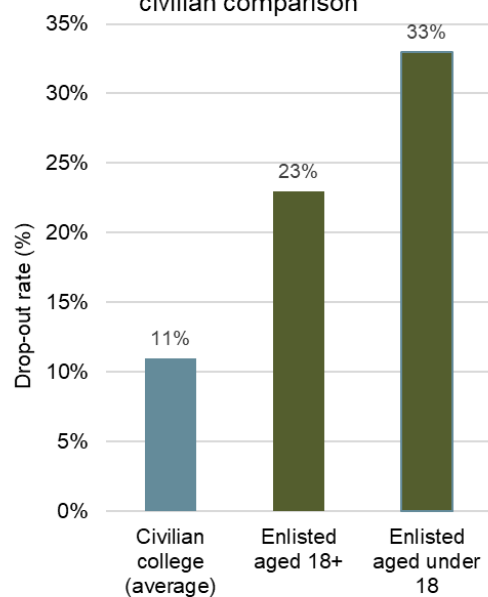
Male suicide at age 16–19 in armed forces personnel, former personnel, and the general population by deprivation status



Sources: MoD, ONS

FIGURE II: DROP-OUT RATE

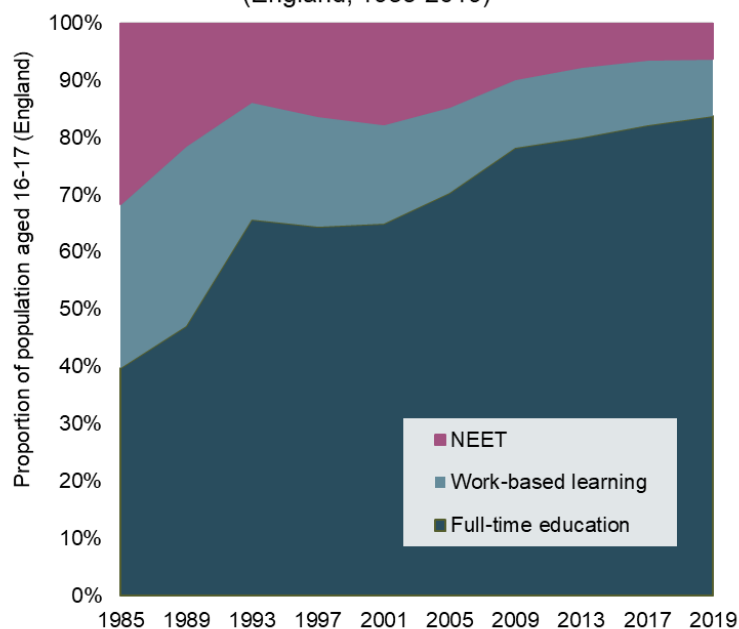
British army trainee attrition by age at enlistment (2015-2018), with civilian comparison



Source: MoD

FIGURE IV: CIVILIAN EDUCATION PARTICIPATION AT 16

16- and 17-year-olds continuing in full-time education, work-based learning, and not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (England, 1985-2019)



Source: DFE

FIGURE IV: TRAINING COST

Infantry training cost per recruit, by age at enlistment



Source: MoD

Notes and references

- ¹ The UK is the only major military power, the only country in Europe, and the only Permanent Member of the UN Security Council to allow enlistment from age 16. The others are mostly Commonwealth states (Bangladesh, Canada, India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, Zambia), in addition to Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Iran, and Mauritania.
- ² In 2023–24, 2,350 new armed forces enlistees were under age 18. 1,760 of these joined the Army, making up 36% of the enlisted intake; more new Army recruits were 16 than any other age. MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics*, 2024, Table 9a.
- ³ Army marketing is targeted specifically at neighbourhoods where households earn less than £10,000 per year. H Agerholm, 'British Army targets recruitment of young working class, military document reveals', *Independent*, 10 July 2017. The Army recognises that 'the majority of the current JE cohort' have a 'tendency to live in poorer areas'. British Army, *Junior Entry Review – Final Report*, 2019, p. 2.
- ⁴ According to the MoD, Junior Entry recruitment (aged 16–17.5 years) 'presents an opportunity to mitigate Standard Entry (SE) shortfalls, particularly for the Infantry'. 'SE' refers to recruits aged 17.5 years and above. MoD, *Policy on recruiting Under-18s (U18)*, 2013, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/00618, 12 February 2015, p. 2. Official sources show that the British infantry's rate of fatality and serious injury in Afghanistan was seven times higher than the rest of the armed forces. See D Gee, *The last ambush? Aspects of mental health in the British armed forces*, 2013, p. 58.
- ⁵ See Child Soldiers International, *Out of step, out of time: Recruitment of minors by the British armed forces*, 2016.
- ⁶ Under-18 recruits cannot leave at will during the first few months: they have no right to leave at all during the first six weeks, after which a 14-day notice-period applies, and after the first six months a three-month notice period applies up to the age of 18, at which point they are locked into the Army until their 22nd birthday. The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).
- ⁷ During the first six weeks, no visitors are allowed and recruits are prohibited from leaving the base without permission. British Army, 'Army Foundation College Commanding Officer's Supervisory Care and Safeguarding Directive Risk Assessment', 2018, point 2.1. Freedom of information request, ref. FOI2019/05572, 10 June 2019.
- ⁸ During the first six weeks, recruits are allowed 'controlled access' to their mobile phones for a 40–60 minute period between 8pm and 10pm; the rest of the time it is kept in a sergeant's office. Ibid.
- ⁹ The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).
- ¹⁰ R Louise, C Hunter, S Zlotowitz, *The recruitment of children by the UK armed forces: A critique from health professionals*, 2016.
- ¹¹ MoD, *Armed Forces: Young People - Written question – 223161*, 3 February 2015; MoD, *Armed Forces: Young People - Written question – 227584*, 16 March 2015; and Freedom of information request, ref. FOI2015/04176, 20 May 2015.
- ¹² Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom*, 2016, p. 23; reaffirmed in CRC, *Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom*, 2023, p. 22.
- ¹³ See Annex B in Ofsted, 'Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training', 2018. In January 2019 the Minister of State for Education confirmed: 'Ofsted does not grade the Army Foundation College in Harrogate on the same basis as civilian colleges for the age group.' DfE, *Army Foundation College – Written question – 209858*, 17 January 2019.
- ¹⁴ Since 2015 the Education and Skills Act (2008) has required all young people aged 16 and 17 to continue to participate in education. Those in full-time employment must complete 280 guided learning hours of education annually towards accredited qualifications. It is this part of the Act from which the armed forces are exempt. The exemption is specified in The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2013, no. 1205.
- ¹⁵ MoD, *Armed Forces: GCSE - Written question – 33689*, 18 April 2016.
- ¹⁶ AFC recruits who arrive without Level 2 qualifications in English, maths or ICT are enrolled on Functional Skills courses in English, maths and ICT at Level 1, with the option of progressing to Level 2, which combined entail 80 hours' teaching time per subject (240 hours across all three subjects). Over the 49 week 'long course' at AFC, and allowing for the eight weeks of holiday, 240 hours is equivalent to 5.9 hours per week. See MoD, Freedom of information request, ref. FOI2020/00269/10/06, 5 February 2020.
- ¹⁷ British Army, *Junior Entry Review – Final Report*, 2019, p. 1.
- ¹⁸ For examples, see CRIN, 'Parents of under-18 recruits speak out about abuse at army training centre', 2021.
- ¹⁹ On 7 December 2023, a PQ revealed that 15 complaints of violent behaviour by staff had been recorded since 1 November 2020. This is in addition to the 60 such complaints up to that date since 2014. L Pollard, 'Army: Crimes of Violence', UK Parliament: Written question, 7 December 2023, HC 5872; E Lewell-Buck, 'Army: Young People', UK Parliament: Written question, 30 October 2020, HC 109376.
- ²⁰ D Sabbagh, 'Nine rapes at Harrogate military college reported to civilian police in 13 months', *Guardian*, 5 October 2023.
- ²¹ *R v Bartram* 2023.
- ²² D Sabbagh, 'Nine rapes at Harrogate military college reported to civilian police in 13 months', *Guardian*, 5 October 2023.
- ²³ Army Foundation College Harrogate, *Project Athena: A pilot training to optimise basic training for female junior soldiers*, 2022, p. 5.
- ²⁴ Under prolonged stress, adolescents are more likely than adults to develop anxiety-related mental health problems and difficulties regulating emotions. See, for example, K Campbell, 'The neurobiology of childhood trauma, from early physical pain onwards: as relevant as ever in today's fractured world', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 2022a, 13(2); L P Spear, 'The adolescent brain and age-related behavioral manifestations', *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews*, 2000, 24(4), pp. 417–463; T Paus, M Keshavan, & J Giedd, 'Why do many psychiatric disorders emerge during adolescence?', *Nat Rev Neurosci*, 2008, 9, pp. 947–957.
- ²⁵ 'The erosion of resilience [during initial training of 16-year-old Army recruits] is assumed to have been a broader and natural consequence of attendance on the AFC(H) [Army Foundation College] programme, recognising that initial military training is designed to provide a physically and mentally stretching developmental environment.' Army Foundation College Harrogate, *Project Athena: A pilot training to optimise basic training for female junior soldiers*, 2022, p. 28.
- ²⁶ For sources, see Figure 1.
- ²⁷ Freedom of information request, ref. ArmyPolSec/D/N/FOI2022/12210, 14 November 2022.
- ²⁸ For details and sources, see CRIN, 'Recent research on outcomes for junior armed forces entrants: A response', 2021.
- ²⁹ 'Disadvantaged' is defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as school students eligible for free school meals or in care, of whom 81% were continuing in education after Key Stage 4 (normally GCSE level) for a 'sustained period' in 2018. DfE, 'National table NA21b: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4 by disadvantage status and gender, state-funded schools (mainstream and special)'.

³⁰ In 2018–19, the retention rate in full-time education in England for the post-16 age group was 89.3%, varying little by qualification level. DfE, '2018 to 2019 education and training NARTs overall headline' [see table 'Headline', cell H7], 2020.

³¹ For example, see J Heappey, MP, Letter to Tobias Ellwood MP, 17 Dec 2020; and British Army, *Junior Entry Review*, 2019, op cit.

³² In the three-year period 2017–18 to 2020–21, the Army enlisted 8,340 new recruits aged under 18, of whom 2,746 (33%) left before finishing their Phase 2 training. Freedom of Information request, ref. Army/Sec/FOI2023/09868/09870, 8 September 2023 MoD, UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: April 2023, Table 9A.

³³ Applied to the most recent financial year, 2022–23, when the Army enlisted 1,690 children, a 30% dropout rate is equivalent to 507 individuals. MoD, UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics, 2023.

³⁴ See, for example, British Army, *Junior Entry Review*, 2019, op cit., p. 3, where the Army confuses the proportion of senior NCOs who enlisted under 18 with the proportion of enlistees under 18 who were promoted to senior NCO.

³⁵ Of the 2,650 minors who enlisted in the three-year period between 2006–07 and 2008–09 and were still in the Army ten years later, 290 had attained the rank of Sergeant or above (10%). Of the 4,960 adults who enlisted in the same period and were still in the Army ten years later, 1,130 had attained the rank of Sergeant or above (20%). MoD, Freedom of information request, 12 February 2020, Ref: FOI2020/00600/04/02.

³⁶ Cost of standard infantry training by age at enlistment: 16–17½ years (Junior Entry), Phase 1 at AFC @ £133,000 + Phase 2 at ITC Catterick @ £37,000 = £170,000; 17½+ years, Phase 1 @ £36,000 + Phase 2 @ £35,000 = £71,000. For Junior Entry costs, see MoD, Army: Training - Written question – 202061, 13 October 2023; for Standard Entry costs, see MoD, Army: Training – Written question – 6896, 13 December 2023.

³⁷ Soldiers who enlist as children serve for an average of 11 years, versus 7 years, 10 months for adult recruits, whose typical career is therefore 29% shorter (though they can be deployed earlier than child recruits). British Army, *Junior Entry Review*, 2019, op cit., p. 3.

³⁸ ForcesWatch and Child Soldiers International, 'Army recruitment: Comparative cost-effectiveness of recruiting from age 16 versus age 18', September 2014.

³⁹ See C Cooper and D Gee, 'Has the time come for an all-adult army?', *RUSI Commentary*, 27 May 2021; and D Gee and R Taylor, 'Is it counterproductive to enlist minors into the Army?', *RUSI Journal*, 2016, 161, pp. 36–48.

⁴⁰ The regular Army's trained strength requirement in 2012 was 102,000; by 2025 it will be c. 72,500, 29% smaller. N Dempsey, UK defence personnel statistics, 2018, p. 17; BBC News, 'Defence review: British army to be cut to 72,500 troops by 2025', 22 March 2021.

⁴¹ Child Soldiers International, Louder than words: An agenda for action to end state use of child soldiers, 2012.

⁴² Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom, 2016, pp. 23–24.

⁴³ For example, in their 2020 report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, all four UK Children's Commissioners urged the Committee to ask the UK, 'Will the State Party raise the age of recruitment to the Armed Forces to 18?'. UK Children's Commissioners, Report of the Children's Commissioners of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

⁴⁴ Major children's organisations calling on the UK to raise the enlistment age to 18 include the Children's Society, Save the Children, and Unicef UK. See Child Rights International Network and others, Letter to Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace MP, 22 June 2021; Child Soldiers International and others, Letter to Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Penny Mordaunt MP, 23 May 2016; and Save the Children UK, Stop the war on children, 2019, p. 54.

⁴⁵ Child Rights International Network, Letter to Ben Wallace MP, 2021, op cit. Signatories included Amnesty, Liberty, Human Rights Watch, War Child, and the child rights umbrella bodies for England, Scotland, and Wales.

⁴⁶ For example, see K Campbell, 'Childhood trauma: a major risk factor in the military recruitment of young people', *BMJ Military Health*, 2022; R Abu-Hayyeh and G Singh, 'Adverse health effects of recruiting child soldiers', *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 2019, 3(e000325)..

⁴⁷ Child Soldiers International and others, Letter to the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Mark Francois MP, 6 November 2013. Signatories included the Church of Scotland, all the bishops of the Church in Wales, and others.

⁴⁸ Trades Union Congress (TUC), UK Compliance with major ILO Conventions 2019, 2019; TUC and CRIN, Annex 3: Armed Forces Recruitment and Convention 182, 2019. For NEU support, see CRIN et al, letter to Ben Wallace MP, 2021, op cit.

⁴⁹ Tracy McVeigh, 'War veterans call for rethink on recruitment of 16-year-olds', *Observer*, 21 June 2015.

⁵⁰ House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC), *The armed forces covenant in action? Part 4: Education of service personnel (Fifth Report of Session 2013–14)*, 2013. See also Tobias Ellwood MP, Letter to Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heappey MP, 1 December 202. The Committee's predecessors also called on the MoD to 'examine the potential impact of raising the recruitment age for all three Services to 18', in HCDC, *Duty of care (Third Report of Session 2004–5)*, 2005.

⁵¹ A YouGov poll in 2022 found that 73% of the public believed the minimum enlistment age should be at least 18, 17% thought it should be 16 or 17 (and 1% that it should be less than 16), and 9% did not express a view. Survey question: 'When should people be legally allowed to join the armed forces?' YouGov, 'Most Britons think you shouldn't be allowed to join the armed forces until you are at least 18 years old', in 'YouGov Study of War: Britons on serving in the armed forces', 2022.

⁵² Sources for figures:

- Figure I: General population: Office for National Statistics (ONS), 'Number and age-specific rate of suicides in young people, by IMD quintile in England, registered between 2001 and 2020', 2023. Armed forces personnel: Freedom of information request, Ref. 2023/01191, 17 February 2023. Army personnel: Ibid. Veterans: C Rodway, S Ibrahim, J Westhead, et al., 'Suicide after leaving the UK Armed Forces 1996–2018: a cohort study' [pre-print], 2022, Table 1.
- Figure II: Military figures are an average calculated for 2017–18 to 2020–21 inclusive. Freedom of Information request, ref. Army/Sec/FOI2023/09868/09870, 8 September 2023 MoD, UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics : April 2023, Table 9A.; DfE, '2018 to 2019 education and training NARTs overall headline' [see table 'Headline', cell H7], 2020.
- Figure III: DfE, 'National table NA10: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4, state-funded mainstream schools'.
- Figure IV: Cost of standard infantry training by age at enlistment: 16–17½ years (Junior Entry), Phase 1 at AFC @ £133,000 + Phase 2 at ITC Catterick @ £37,000 = £170,000; 17½+ years, Phase 1 @ £36,000 + Phase 2 @ £35,000 = £71,000. For Junior Entry costs, see MoD, Army: Training - Written question – 202061, 13 October 2023; for Standard Entry costs, see MoD, Army: Training – Written question – 6896, 13 December 2023.