

Questioning the role of the military in schools

Emma Sangster spoke to Faringdon Peace Group in November about the work of 'ForcesWatch', an organisation which challenges the ethics of military recruitment and questions the climate of uncritical national pride in the armed forces. She spoke particularly about the increasing involvement of the military with young people and in schools. While she recognises that there could be benefits from some involvement, she feels that the issue has not been properly debated.

The UK is unique in Europe and one of only a few countries in the world that allows enlistment into the armed forces at age 16. After the first 6 months, when they can leave, they are locked into a 4 year contract. ForcesWatch campaigns to raise the age to 18. While the armed forces insist they do not recruit in schools, they have visited 44 out of 61 schools in Oxfordshire an average of twice a year (Faringdon Community College 3 times a year) offering careers advice and 'insight interviews' through which young people can learn more about life in the forces. They run cadet groups in some schools which, while they provide fun and exciting opportunities, do not give a full picture of service life and could be seen as pre-recruitment training.

Teachers' unions in particular are unhappy about the Dept. of Education's 'Troops to Teachers' programme which fast-tracks service leavers into teaching roles. A 'Free School' will open in Oldham next year with a military ethos, staffed entirely by ex-forces teachers. While some pupils may respond to army-style discipline, ForcesWatch questions whether this is the best way to nurture young people and help them achieve their full potential.

Oxfordshire County Council has signed up to the 'Armed Forces Community Covenant' which encourages communities to support forces in their area, observing 'Armed Forces Day' (introduced in 2009) and repatriations and involving personnel in community activities. Emma believes that the more normalised and embedded the military becomes in everyday life in this country, the more difficult it is to criticise their other activities and the wars that we send them to fight and die in. Legitimate debate is seen as disrespectful and unpatriotic, but is vitally important especially in relation to young people.

Faringdon Peace Group meets on the first Wednesday of the month at 8.00pm (changing to 7.30 in the new year) in the Friends Meeting House, Lechlade Rd. All are welcome. Disabled access and toilet.

Karen Vogt