

# CHALLENGING ARMED FORCES DAY

## What is Armed Forces Day?

Armed Forces Day in the UK takes place each year on the last Saturday in June. In 2026, it will be on **Saturday 27th June**. Occasionally events occur on other days, and some areas have an Armed Forces Week or Weekend instead.

Every year, the Armed Forces Day website lists hundreds of parades and 'fun days' around the UK. Many of the events listed on the Armed Forces Day website are framed as celebrations and/or include elements aimed at children and families.

In 2026 the **National Armed Forces Day event** is being organised by Rushmoor District Council, which covers the Aldershot and Farnborough areas, where there is a large military and arm company presence. **Wales** and **Northern Ireland** also have larger nation-level events.

Armed Forces Day may also be marked in schools, while the government and parts of the media will use the day to push strongly militaristic messages.

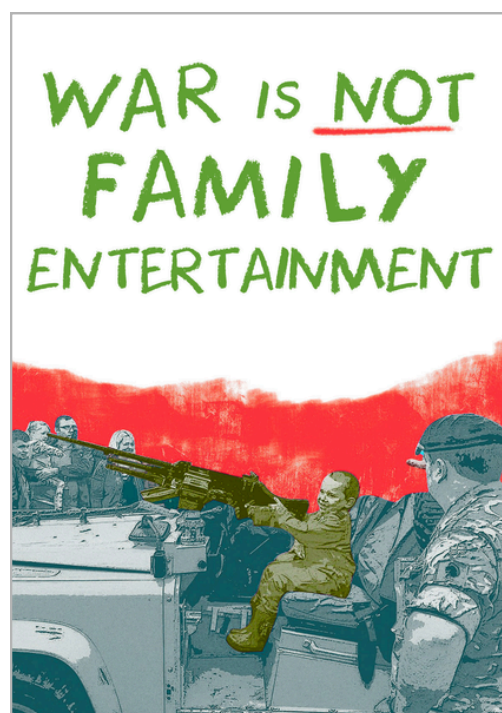
## Armed Forces Day and militarism

Armed Forces Day was introduced in 2009, in the wake of widespread public criticism of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was one of several recommendations from the 2008 *National Recognition of our Armed Forces* report, which sought to increase the visibility of the armed forces and promote support for them.

Other initiatives included the expansion of cadets and 'military ethos' programmes in schools. The Armed Forces Covenant, introduced in 2012, also promotes the organisation of public displays of support for the military – alongside more access to services for military personnel and veterans – by local authorities and other organisations.

Since it started, Armed Forces Day has been part of a rise in militarism in everyday life in the UK. In more recent years, we have seen a new wave of militarisation as governments across Europe call for more preparation for war. The UK's 2025 *Strategic Defence Review* stated that the military must 'reconnect with society' and increase visibility and emphasised the importance of public displays and activities in schools.

**Armed Forces Day is an important opportunity to call for far greater recognition of the devastation and chaos that war causes, and for alternatives to war and human security to be prioritised.**



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# What's wrong with Armed Forces Day?

## **Armed Forces Day presents a simplistic image of armed force as glamorous and fun.**

While some Armed Forces Day events are geared toward those in military communities, many events and activities are aimed at families and children, such as 'family fun' days, and/or are framed as celebrations of the armed forces. War should not be presented as entertainment.

## **Children are frequently invited to handle weapons or explore military vehicles at events.**

It is common to see very young children handling weapons so big that they can barely reach the controls. Children are not shown the effects of weapons on the people they are used against. Displays of military hardware aim to spark an interest in future enlistment in young people but may make weapons dangerously appealing.

## **Armed Forces Day normalises armed force.**

People hold a range of views on the complex ethical and political issues around war and peace. But uncritical celebration of armed force gives children and young people the impression that such issues are uncontroversial and that everyone supports the military. Children should not be presented with a biased view on contested political or ethical issues.

## **Armed Forces Day prevents debate about the reality of the armed forces.**

Uncritical celebrations, such as Armed Forces Day, add to an atmosphere in which the establishment and pro-military media will not countenance criticism of the armed forces as institutions. Vague claims that the armed forces 'keep us safe' or 'fight for our freedom' gloss over how controversial modern wars have been, and that military action has led to devastation and repression overseas.

## **Armed Forces Day blurs support for the individuals in the military with support of the military itself.**

Many councils feel an obligation to host public displays of support for the military as they have signed the Armed Forces Covenant. There is an important difference between a commitment to providing support for individual service personnel and veterans living in a community and the wholesale - and very public/pronounced - celebration of the institution to which these individuals are connected. This distinction is liable to becoming lost to viewers of large-scale, flashy, and celebratory Armed Forces Day events.

## **Armed Forces Day promotes 'military values' that can be harmful to society and individuals.**

The values of teamwork and self-discipline are not unique to the armed forces, and 'service' should not be equated with military service. Military values include the belief that violence is the solution to conflict and that unquestioning obedience as something to be admired, rather than an assault on human dignity and conscience.

## **Armed forces perpetuate discriminatory and abusive power structures.**

The armed forces target disadvantaged young people for recruitment. An exception is the recruitment of officers, nearly half of whom have been privately educated. Abuse and harassment are endemic, particularly affecting women and ethnic minorities, and 16 and 17 year-old recruits are most vulnerable because of their youth and pre-existing experience of adversity. Many leave before they finish training, affecting their future prospects. Military training is brutalising in order to prepare personnel to use violence against other people.

## **For some, Armed Forces Day is compulsory.**

Children and young people have little option but to take part in school events. Their freedom to object is limited. We hear from teachers who feel that they cannot refuse to participate, and parents agonising over whether to keep their children off school.

## **Celebrations of the UK military are divisive.**

At a time where there is a lot of division around the UK involvement in, or response to, conflict overseas, and resistance to plans to increase military spending amid cost of living and climate crises, celebrating the armed forces in such an overt fashion feels completely tone deaf.

## **Armed Forces Day is a waste of money.**

Local councils contribute to the cost of Armed Forces Day events that are little more than celebrations of militarism. The Ministry of Defence grants up to £10,000 to subsidise local events, (totalling over £450,000 in 2025). They contribute £50,000 to the national event but most of the high cost of this will be borne by the host council and local people. At a time when public services are being slashed, and councils are struggling to maintain local provisions, spending public funds on celebrations of the military is inappropriate.

## **Armed Forces Day benefits arms companies.**

Larger Armed Forces Day events are often sponsored by arms companies. This year, the national event in Aldershot is sponsored by QinetiQ, BAE Systems and KBR - huge arms companies which contribute to death and destruction around the globe. These profit-driven companies are effectively paying to be promoted in schools and communities, and allowed to promote their careers and their industry alongside the 'family fun'.



*Youth Day in the Armed Forces Day Military Village in Falmouth, 2023: groups of primary school children line up to sit in a fighter jet and tank.*

# Challenging Armed Forces Day events in schools

Many local councils limit Armed Forces Day celebrations to public events. But in some cases, activities spill over into the school environment, adding to military and arms company visits to schools taking place at other times of the year.

## Taking school time for military purposes

Is it ethical to have an uncomplicated celebration of armed force within schools? These activities are for defence rather than education purposes.

## Are Armed Forces Day events in schools balanced with education about peace?

Education should be aiming to help build peaceful futures for the next generation. There are many education resources available for, and about, peace. The Peaceful Schools initiative and UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools are whole-school approaches, and the Peace Education Network brings together organisations working in the field and classroom resources, such as the *Teach Peace* primary and secondary packs.

## Do Armed Forces Day events in schools provide a balanced perspective?

The tone of many Armed Forces Day events risks minimising the devastating costs of war unless it is balanced by alternative perspectives. Section 406 and 407 of the Education Act 1996 state that schools have a legal duty not to promote partisan political views, and to take steps to ensure balanced presentation of a range of opposing political views. There are always different perspectives on violent conflict overseas and for many parents this is undoubtedly a political issue, and not the neutral issue these events seek to portray it as.

## Marketing military careers - schools' duty of care

Recruitment activities should not be happening in schools. Joining the armed forces is a profound decision with huge risks attached, including that many enlistees leave early as they have made the wrong choice, affecting their later prospects. Young people must be facilitated to make an informed choice, considering all the facts, rather than be targeted with marketing and partial information.

Schools have a duty of care to act in the best interests of their pupils. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated in 2023, in relation to the UK's recruitment of under 18's into the armed forces, that the government should: *'Prohibit all forms of advertising and marketing of military service targeted at children, particularly in schools, and the targeting of children belonging to ethnic minority groups and socioeconomically disadvantaged children.'* All Armed Forces Day activities in schools - and military visits at other times of the year - are in violation of this important statement aimed at protecting children.

## Arms companies in schools

Arms company sponsors may be permitted into schools, either around Armed Forces Day or at other times in the school year. These profit-driven companies are effectively paying to be promoted in schools. Opportunities for defence companies to interact with school pupils are facilitated under the guise of STEM education whilst obscuring the terrible impact of their activity on young people, schools and communities in other countries.

*'Prohibit all forms of advertising and marketing of military service targeted at children, particularly in schools, and the targeting of children belonging to ethnic minority groups and socioeconomically disadvantaged children.'*

*United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child  
Concluding Observations on the UK, 2023*

## Are alternatives provided?

It is important that consent is requested from parents, and alternative choices offered to those who do not wish to participate. Some children are raised in faith or other traditions that believe war is unacceptable or only acceptable in very narrow situations. Students and their families need to have the right to exercise their conscience around weapons companies and military-themed activities as recognised in a child's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as described in Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

## What about children with experience of conflict?

Many children and families in Britain have fled war in other countries. Events such as Armed Forces Day can be marginalising if they seem to glorify war or sanitise its effects. Assessments should be carried out, in relation to these activities in schools, regarding pupils or their families who have direct experience of conflict.

## Safeguarding around weapons and military equipment

If local Armed Forces Day events involve children handling weapons or interacting with other military equipment in the school environment, schools have a duty to put safeguarding in place for this. These activities may risk creating a dangerous appeal around weapons, which has societal consequences and which schools should be directly addressing.

Available from <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/responding-to-military-engagement-schools>



# There are better things to celebrate!

When did your local council, school or community last celebrate nurses, firefighters, teachers, care workers or delivery drivers? Or the community as a whole? We are all in favour of building community, celebrating public service and running fun events for children and adults. While Armed Forces Day claims to be an inclusive event for the whole community, it is a divisive event that excludes many people in local communities that are concerned about, or may even have experienced, armed conflict and the inevitable devastation that war creates.

## What can we do to resist Armed Forces Day?

We invite you to join our actions, or organise your own, in the run-up to Armed Forces Day and on the day itself, 27 June 2026. There are many things you can do on or before the day:

- Share your thoughts with friends, family and colleagues, and this briefing and our resources.
- If your local council is organising an Armed Forces Day event, and ask them to consider alternatives. See how residents from York approached this in 2025 – with some success!
- Encourage your union branch, faith group, student society or other organisation to speak out against Armed Forces Day locally.
- Write to a local paper or call a radio phone-in.
- Organise an alternative event - to celebrate something more life-affirming!
- **Order our free postcards** and get a group together to hand them out on the day or in advance.
- Let us know what's going on in your area. This helps our campaigning and we are happy to publicise nonviolent protests and events against Armed Forces Day.
- **Get in touch** for support and ideas.

### QUESTIONS for ARMED FORCES DAY

**A celebration or obscuring the impact of war?**  
The tone of many Armed Forces Day events risks minimising the devastating costs of war for service personnel and communities.

**Harmless entertainment or early military recruitment?**  
Letting children handle military equipment risks ignoring the brutal truths of what happens when they are used.

**Fun weapons demonstrations or irresponsible promotion?**  
Displays of military hardware, which aim to create interest in young people, may make weapons dangerously appealing.

**Marketing or informing?**  
Without giving enough information, young people can't make informed choices about enlistment.

**Making war acceptable or building peace?**  
In a time of global instability, much more needs to be done to champion peace and international cooperation.

Produced by PEACE PLEDGE UNION, FORCESWATCH & QUAKERS IN BRITAIN

Scan the QR code to find out more or visit [linktr.ee/armedforcesday](https://linktr.ee/armedforcesday)



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## Resources

You can find all the below, along with more info, events and updates at: [linktr.ee/armedforcesday](https://linktr.ee/armedforcesday)

- **Article: Protest works: How local residents persuaded York Council to rethink Armed Forces Day**
- **Video: Is anti-militarism unpatriotic?** Where did Armed Forces Day come from and what is it trying to achieve
- **Podcast: Unpacking Armed Forces Day** Dr Ross McGarry in discussion with ForcesWatch, 2022.
- **Podcast: What's wrong with Armed Forces Day** Peace Pledge Union in discussion with ForcesWatch, 2020.

## Ideas for peace education

- **Teach Peace primary and secondary packs from the Peace Education Network** [www.peace-education.org.uk](http://www.peace-education.org.uk)
- **Peaceful Schools** [www.peacefulschools.org.uk](http://www.peacefulschools.org.uk)
- **Rights Respecting Schools** [www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools](http://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools)

The Peace Pledge Union, ForcesWatch and Quakers in Britain are working with groups and individuals around the UK to challenge Armed Forces Day and to resist militarism with nonviolent actions around the UK in the run-up to Armed Forces Day and on the day itself.

**Get in touch with questions, suggestions or requests for support.**  
You can reach us at [mail@ppu.org.uk](mailto:mail@ppu.org.uk), [office@forceswatch.net](mailto:office@forceswatch.net) or on 020 7424 9444.

Scan the QR code to find out more or visit [linktr.ee/armedforcesday](https://linktr.ee/armedforcesday).

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