



Independent Advisory Panel (IAP)

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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IAP Chair's Foreword

This report is intended for current parents and families of Junior Soldiers (JS) in training, as well as those considering joining the Army Foundation College (Harrogate) (AFC(H)) in the future.

The aim of the Independent Advisory Panel (IAP) is to provide an independent, non-statutory source of challenge, advice and support to AFC(H). This includes supporting the College in its efforts to improve the experience of Junior Soldiers (JS) during training, and offering constructive challenge where evidence suggests that standards may not be fully met.

As an independent body of unpaid civilian volunteers, the IAP supports Junior Soldiers and instructors by providing an external perspective and acting as a 'critical friend' in relation to the Army's safeguarding responsibilities and duty of care. The Panel has unrestricted access to AFC(H) and may speak with Junior Soldiers and instructors at any time. The effectiveness of the IAP's role depends on the openness of Junior Soldiers and staff in raising issues, and on the willingness of the Army to respond constructively and drive improvement.

Throughout 2025, the Panel observed the journey of over 1,000 Junior Soldiers, from arrival through to graduation. During this period, the IAP consistently noted significant personal development, increased confidence and a strong sense of pride among Junior Soldiers in their achievements.

Across the year, the IAP observed clear evidence of AFC(H)'s continued commitment to duty of care, safeguarding and welfare, alongside proactive steps to strengthen a respectful, supportive and inclusive culture. These observations are reflected throughout this report.

The Panel is grateful for the constructive manner in which the Command Team and the wider Army have engaged with its observations, questions and recommendations, and for the positive actions taken in response.

The IAP also recognises the commitment of Panel members, whose willingness to ask challenging questions, raise issues and support benchmarking against wider educational and public-sector practice remains central to the effectiveness of the role.

Karen Lister IAP Chair

December 2025

The Army Foundation College

The Army Foundation College (Harrogate), located at Uniacke Barracks, North Yorkshire, trains future soldiers for the majority of the Arms and Services of the British Army, excluding the Royal Military Police, Intelligence Corps and Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps.

AFC(H) is a purpose-built facility that opened in 1998 on the site of the former Royal Signals Army Apprentice College. School leavers aged between 16.5 and 17.2 years may attend, subject to meeting the relevant entry criteria (see [The British Army | Army Jobs and Recruitment](#)).

At any one time, up to 1,344 male and female Junior Soldiers (JS) are in training at AFC(H), supported by more than 375 permanent military and civilian staff. Non-military education and training is delivered by TQ Pearson within the specialist Vocational Education Wing.

There are two full-time residential courses at AFC(H):

- **A 49-week Long Course** (including eight weeks' leave) for JS joining the Household Cavalry, Royal Armoured Corps, Royal Artillery, Infantry and selected Royal Logistic Corps roles. Entry points are in September and March. Graduates progress to Phase 2 Initial Trade Training before joining the Field Army as 18-year-old adult soldiers
- **A 23-week Short Course** (including three weeks' leave) for those JS joining the more technical branches of the Army. These are Royal Engineers, Royal Signals, Army Air Corps, Royal Army Medical Corps, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Corps of Army Music and some Royal Logistic Corps roles. Entry points are in September and March, with graduates progressing to longer Phase 2 Initial Trade Training course before joining the Field Army as 18-year-old adult soldiers

JS graduate from AFC(H) in February or September, depending on their course and entry point.



The IAP

Following the 2006 Ministry of Defence inquiry into the deaths of four young soldiers at Princess Royal Barracks, Deepcut, all training for under-18 recruits was relocated to dedicated establishments. AFC(H) is the only Army training establishment in the United Kingdom where all recruits are under 18 years of age throughout their training.

As minors under British law, JSS require an enhanced duty of care. The IAP was established at AFC(H) in 2007 to provide assurance to JS, their families and the Army that this duty of care is upheld across all aspects of College life, which includes in training, in the classroom, on the parade ground, in the gym, out on military exercises or in the living accommodation at AFC (H).

Two IAP members are attached to each of the five Training Companies. The Panel may conduct both scheduled and unscheduled visits, including evenings and weekends, and engages directly with JS during each visit. Observations, examples of good practice and any matters requiring further investigation are recorded and reviewed at formal meetings with the Commanding Officer, Company Commanders and members of the College Leadership Team.

Although IAP have unfettered access to Harrogate Army College, the Junior soldiers and the army command, it simply is not possible for the IAP personnel to be onsite at all times to witness potential incidents. The IAP rely on a combination of open dialogue with the JS as well as the Army command to highlight aspects and issues that require IAP input such as best practice improvements and the introduction of further mitigation processes.

IAP members

IAP members are unpaid civilian volunteers, totally independent of the college and are recruited by the panel to reflect a range of experience in commerce, education and the public services. All members have Enhanced DBS (Disclosure Barring Service) clearance to allow us to visit and speak unsupervised with under 18's.

Overview of IAP activities in 2025

Following our Annual Report in 2024, our agreed priorities in 2025 were:

- **Duty of Care:** Our priority and primary responsibility is the Duty of Care and the welfare of the JS at AFC(H). Therefore, during visits the IAP will focus on the provision of welfare, the well-being of the JS, the compliance with welfare policy, procedure and good practice, highlighting any potential areas of concern and areas of good practice.
- **Mental Resilience:** During visits the IAP will continue to focus on the mental resilience of JS. Therefore, during visits the IAP will focus on the support the JS receive to increase confidence, resilience and preparedness for training, from pre-arrival at AFC(H) to the onward move to Phase 2.
- **Culture:** The AFC(H) Command Plan is clear in its ambition to create a culture that values diversity, equity and inclusion. Therefore, during visits the IAP will seek to understand the areas of college life that impact of the JS in terms of them feeling both valued and included as well as how AFC(H) promotes and ensures the important role the JS themselves have in contributing to a positive culture of valuing difference and their impact on others.
- **Financial Education:** During visits the IAP will continue to focus on the access to and quality of the provision of financial education to JS, encouraging and supporting an integrated approach to this alongside JS Education.
- **Instructors:** If instructors are valued and feel happy in their work then this can only have a positive effect on the life of the Junior Soldier. To this end the IAP will continue to take an interest in the welfare and lived experience of the military instructor at AFC(H).
- **Supporting AFC(H) in learning from and benchmarking against other external settings:** The IAP assist with advising, signposting and supporting development of relationships with SMEs, in relation to areas where AFC(H) are seeking continuous improvement e.g. communication with parents / guardians, information management, management of inappropriate sexual behaviour for U18s).

Duty of Care

Duty of Care remained a central priority for the IAP throughout 2025, aiming to ensure the JS found the AFC(H) a positive and rewarding experience. During regular visits to AFC(H) IAP members asked the JS for their lived experiences and challenged the instructors if they became aware of issues of concern. They also focused on the provision of welfare support to ensure the JS understood how to get specific support when they needed it. All areas of concern were recorded and raised at quarterly meetings with the Colonel and Company Commanders.

During these quarterly meetings the IAP members were briefed by the Colonel and his team about any disciplinary issues identified. This allowed us to check that procedures were appropriate and that AFC(H) was putting Duty of Care at the top of its agenda.

During 2025 all the IAP members were invited to and attended Junior Soldier Health Committee meetings for their respective Companies. These meetings are where the health and wellbeing, both physical and mental, of any JS identified as requiring extra oversight are discussed by the Company leadership teams, as well as representatives from Welfare / Medical / Chaplaincy / SENCO / Phoenix. This aims to provide as wide a support network as possible. The IAP were very impressed with the level of detail and extent of care that is given to those JS discussed. We were particularly impressed with the knowledge the staff have of historic and current issues of each JS and how best to support them throughout their time at AFC(H).

During this year there was an increased level of welfare support provided with the appointment of more welfare staff, led by Katie Elgie. This is a noticeable improvement and provided reassurance to the IAP and the JS that their welfare and Duty of Care are being taken seriously. IAP members regularly asked the JS if they were confident in being able to report issues to welfare etc using the QR code or face to face. We are confident that the JS are able to use these methods where appropriate.

In further recognition of the importance of Duty of Care, Colonel Russell held a team and relationship building day for all key staff across AFC demonstrating his commitment to this important subject.

Another notable change was the increased use of social media by the Companies to update parents/care givers about upcoming activities, "JS of the week", upcoming leave dates and also contact numbers for Coy section leaders. However, it appears to the IAP that this practice is not consistent across the Companies and so some parents/caregivers receive *more information than others.

Throughout 2025 there were only a few issues raised with the IAP or witnessed directly by the IAP, the most serious of these were:

- An allegation from several JS of misconduct by one of the Military Instructors (MI) regarding the punishment of one JS during the final exercise and generally negative feedback of that MI's behaviour towards the JS over a sustained period of time . This was raised via the Junior Soldier Company Sergeant Major on behalf of the other JS and the MI was dealt with formally by the Major of that Company. This

demonstrated that the reporting procedures were working, even without IAP involvement.

- An IAP member witnessed an “assertive dressing down” of a JS by one of the MI, involving aggressive behaviour and foul language. The IAP member reported this to the Company Sergeant Major along with the Company Command and action was taken to ensure all staff know what is expected of them. The Regimental Sergeant Major and Commanding Officer were also notified.

The success of the IAP role in ensuring AFC H maintains its commitment to Duty of Care is dependent on JS flagging up any issues they have, given the limited amount of time the IAP spend on campus. However, we are confident that, as discussed, several new initiatives implemented are ensuring that the JS have the necessary support mechanisms and escalation process alongside that of the IAP when issues occur.

Mental Resilience – Project Titan

In 2025 and moving into 2026, Project Titan remains a core bespoke initiative at AFC(H), designed to embed a culture of mental resilience among both JS and Instructors. The IAP prioritises this program to ensure the college's organisational values and mental resilience vocabulary are consistently applied.

Key Components of Project Titan:

- Continuous training for staff: Mental Resilience Training (MRT) for all instructors is a robust and adaptive process, updated based on evolving needs.
- Practical application for soldiers: JS apply MRT principles during high-stress activities, including high ropes, physical training (PT) sessions, and field exercises.
- Feedback Mechanisms: New initiatives like ‘Voice Meetings’ have been launched, providing a supportive forum for Junior Soldiers to communicate the impact of their training to staff.

During IAP visits members ‘question and probe’ both JS and instructors to verify how mental resilience provision is implemented and its real-world impact. Any concerns observed by panel members are flagged immediately to the instructors in charge or the Colonel. Throughout 2025, the IAP have been able to report that mental resilience remains a top priority, noting that the College has been transparent and open to learning from any issues raised.

Culture

The IAP have been proactively engaged and invited to observe several initiatives in relation to promoting a positive culture of valuing difference, as well as focusing on this area through observations and conversations with JS and instructors during IAP visits. The IAP have been pleased to see the progress made in 2025 in three specific areas;

- Increasing the focus on behaviour and JS being accountable for their behaviour and impact on others. There has been greater clarity provided for JS about expectations

and the consequences of when these are not met. There has also been a more proactive approach to requiring individuals who are not willing to comply with the values and standards to exit the army. During IAP visits we have heard from JS and instructors that this is having a positive impact both in terms of an improved environment free from disruptive behaviour and also in terms of motivation when JS see that there is a positive outcome for working hard and behaving in line with expectations.

- Promoting positive and respectful relationships between female and male JS. This is a difficult balance to maintain in a residential setting of over 1000 under 18-year-olds, specifically when female JS are in the minority. This has been supported by sessions being run with the female cohort, attended by an IAP representative, to understand their experience and seek their views in shaping any future approach. It was reassuring to see the confidence with which the female JS engaged in this process and also the positive way they spoke about their experience within AFC(H).
- The re-energised promotion of support networks for under-represented groups within AFC(H), it has been positive to see the efforts being made to ensure those from diverse backgrounds are appropriately supported. A representative from the IAP has so far attended a women's network meeting and the IAP look forward to attending other support network groups in the next year.

Financial Literacy

The IAP acknowledges the opportunities available through an Army career, particularly in terms of social mobility and the potential for financial independence and long-term stability. Through ongoing conversations with JS, it is abundantly clear that career progression and financial gain are the primary motivating factors for joining the Army. At enlistment, JS will be earning upwards of £25,000, with a level of disposable income they are unlikely to experience again in their lifetime, unless later in their careers or post-service.

This presents both a powerful opportunity and a significant responsibility. Without proper financial education, there is a tangible risk that JS may make short-sighted decisions that could undermine their financial future. Conversely, with targeted financial education, JS are empowered to make informed, sustainable financial choices that will not only benefit their personal lives but also ensure long-term financial resilience and success throughout their military careers and beyond.

In light of this, the IAP has proactively communicated to the Commanding Officer and senior leadership team the pressing need for the college to implement a comprehensive and structured financial education programme. This should encompass critical areas such as effective budgeting, the strategic use of banking and savings accounts, understanding the implications of interest rates, credit scoring, and the long-term benefits of sound financial decision-making.

The college has already made significant strides in this regard by refining and enhancing the *Serve and Protect Credit Union* briefing on financial resilience. In

collaboration with AFC(H), this has been tailored to better engage JS, ensuring they are not only more informed but also more actively involved in the process of building their financial knowledge and security. This initiative is expected to have far-reaching benefits, providing JS with the tools and confidence needed to navigate the complexities of personal finance, reduce financial vulnerability, and ultimately achieve financial independence, both in the Army and post-service.

Instructors

The IAP members have spoken regularly to instructors throughout the year and asked questions to ascertain the effectiveness of the training they receive. All staff receive a week of intensive, specialist training at the start of each new course. This includes safeguarding training as well as discipline, policy and procedure, etc. In addition, there are opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD) and MI are encouraged to pursue qualifications in areas of interest to them.

There are unique requirements of staff in their posting to AFC (H) and it is recognised that the impact upon the welfare of the instructors (in looking after so many young recruits) is a vitally important consideration. In 2025, new initiatives such as the “care for carers” program being trialled in Burma Coy provide opportunities for the instructors to off-load to, and receive support from, specialists if the need arises.

“They [the instructors] should be fully equipped with the skills to deal with the impact of hearing about some incredibly difficult, emotional issues. This will enable them to process, report on and monitor potentially highly sensitive conversations in a way that protects the JS, the MI, parents and the AFC itself” (IAP report Burma, April 2025)

An area the IAP continue to monitor is the observation that the frequency for staff to be deployed elsewhere within the army with little notice has risen. This adds pressure on the recruitment of fully trained staff at AFC(H), often at short notice and outside the scheduled period of in-service training. This presents challenges which are currently managed within the organisation with the necessary attention to detail, however it represents an ongoing area of concern.

Additional IAP Support

IAP members attended the various Open Days, Arrival Days, Passing-In and Graduation Ceremonies throughout the year which gave us the opportunity not only to speak to JS but also to their parents, guardians and family.

The IAP visited the Companies whilst on different field training exercises in Catterick, Ripon and Otterburn and witnessed JS being taken through, amongst other scenarios, weapon handling tests, bayonet, respirator, skill at arms training and live firing. In all our observations we have been satisfied that the duty of care to JS both physically and emotionally is prioritised in everything they do.

In our visits to the education department the IAP continues to be impressed with the support, care and strategies that go into helping JS find confidence in learning. The IAP

has also been impressed with the medial provision at AFC(H) and the expansion in welfare services.

Summary for 2025

Based on our observations on IAP visits to AFC(H) during 2025, the IAP is confident that the AFC(H) continues to prioritise duty of care and safeguarding effectively. The College's culture of openness supports continuous improvement and enables the IAP to fulfil its assurance role.

IAP Priorities 2026

It has been agreed by the IAP that is appropriate and relevant to continue with the 2025 priorities of (as detailed on page 5);

- Duty of Care
- Mental Resilience
- Culture:
- Financial Education
- Instructors
- Supporting AFC(H) in learning from and benchmarking against other external settings

1. Commanding Officer's Response

The Independent Advisory Panel (IAP) plays a crucial role in the Army Foundation College's accountability processes. The British Army has a longstanding moral and legal duty to operate with transparency and accountability, reflecting its commitment to the civilian society it serves. These obligations are more pressing than ever, and the College actively welcomes constructive external scrutiny—whether from Ofsted, ministers, safeguarding partners, or military leaders. However, on a daily basis, the IAP remains our most consistent and vital source of external challenge, advice, and support.

The independence of the IAP is fundamental to its purpose, and I am committed to safeguarding it. The panel, composed of non-military volunteers, must have unrestricted access to all aspects of the College at any time. This open approach enables the IAP to observe our practices, compare them to our stated policies, and provide unfiltered feedback on the effectiveness of our processes and behaviours. While their observations can sometimes be uncomfortable, they are invaluable in driving reflection and improvement. Importantly, the IAP also highlights our strengths, ensuring we preserve what we do well while addressing areas for growth.

In essence, the IAP is integral to fostering a culture of professionalism, honesty, and—above all—physical and psychological safety for the young people we train. This environment thrives when staff feel empowered and supported to deliver that safety. Over the past year, the IAP's insights have been both encouraging and instrumental in shaping our progress. From the welfare department uplift and the introduction of C-POMS software to enhanced mental resilience training, expanded support for underrepresented groups, and the “care for carers” initiative, the IAP has consistently guided us towards better practices. Their focus on protecting our instructors from workforce pressures and promoting financial literacy for our Junior Soldiers further underscores their impact.

The IAP's contributions continue to strengthen the College, ensuring we remain committed to excellence in all we do.