

BRITAIN IS BROKEN LET'S FIX IT

Permission to expand

The Combined Cadet Force (CCF) is a voluntary, school-based programme, linked to 'our Armed Forces' - the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army, and Royal Air Force - and supported by the Ministry of Defence. It helps young people develop confidence, leadership, and resilience through structured, challenging activities.

New polling shows strong public support for expanding cadet access in state schools.

Yet just 1 in 13 state secondary schools currently offers cadets, with around 80 schools stuck on a waiting list to join. With targeted support, the CCF could become a mainstream offer, especially in schools struggling with post-Covid absence, disruption, and disengagement.

This briefing sets out how the Combined Cadet Force, a proven model for building confidence, belonging and resilience, can play a part in a wider mission to **Rebuild Britain**.

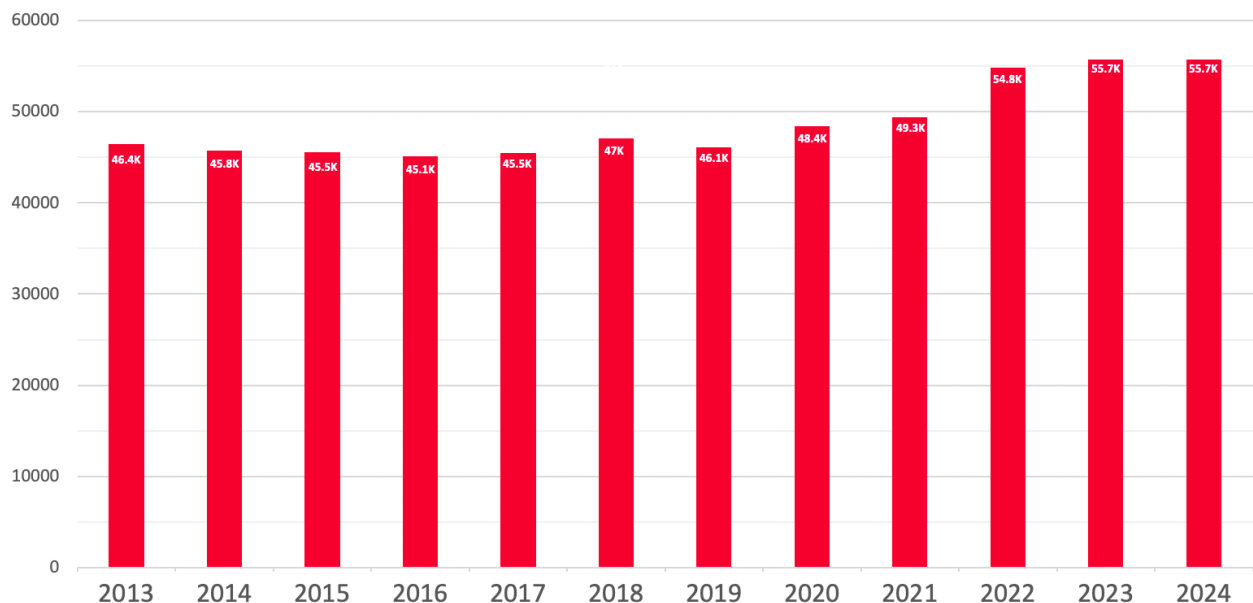
As Britain faces the lasting scars of the pandemic and a fraying social fabric, rebuilding must be about more than just economics. It must mean restoring pride, purpose, and opportunity in every school and every community - not just repairing the damage but creating something stronger and fairer in its place.

A model that works: but out of reach for most

Cadet units operate in both state and independent schools, but historically access has been concentrated in the latter. The previous Labour Government began to open up access by encouraging partnerships between private and state schools and backing early proposals to expand cadet provision across the comprehensive system. Then Prime Minister Gordon Brown¹, alongside Schools Minister Lord Adonis², championed the initiative as a way to build confidence, discipline, and aspiration, particularly among young people in disadvantaged areas.

This was then continued under the Tory/Lib Dem Coalition Government with The Cadet Expansion Programme from 2012.³

Participation in CCF has grown by nearly 10,000 since 2013



Ministry of Defence (MOD), "MOD Sponsored Cadet Forces: 1 April 2024." ⁴

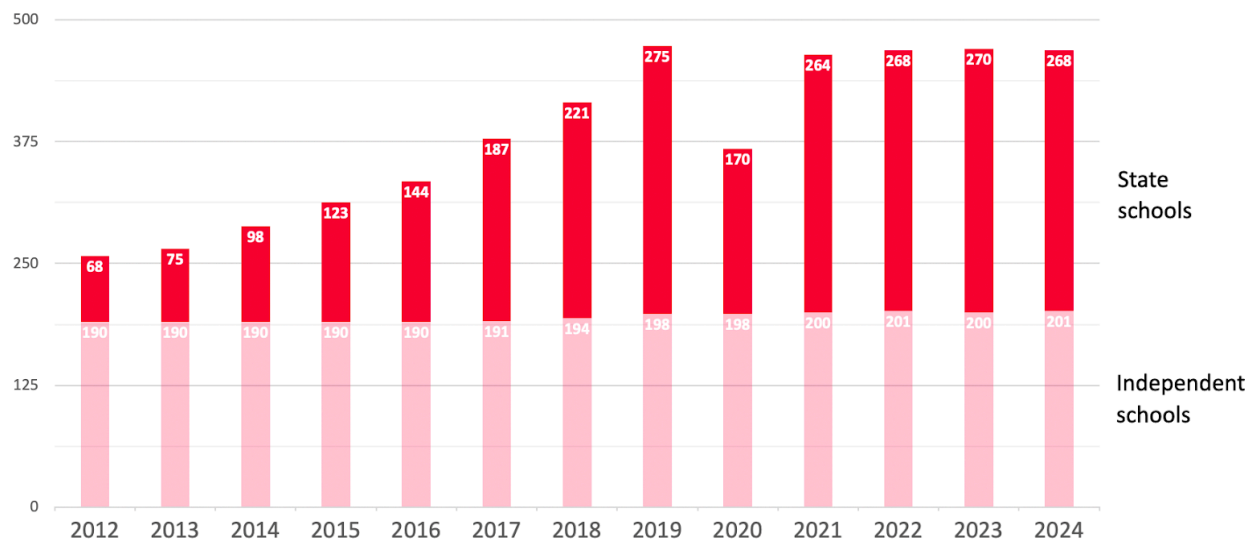
¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/apr/06/schools.uk>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/sep/19/publicschools.secondaryschools>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/expansion-of-cadet-forces>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mod-sponsored-cadet-forces-statistics-2024>

Still, just 1 in 13 state secondary schools in England currently has a CCF unit.



UK Parliament Written Question UIN 16413, answered on 8 March 2024 by the Ministry of Defence. ⁵

A majority want more cadet forces in schools

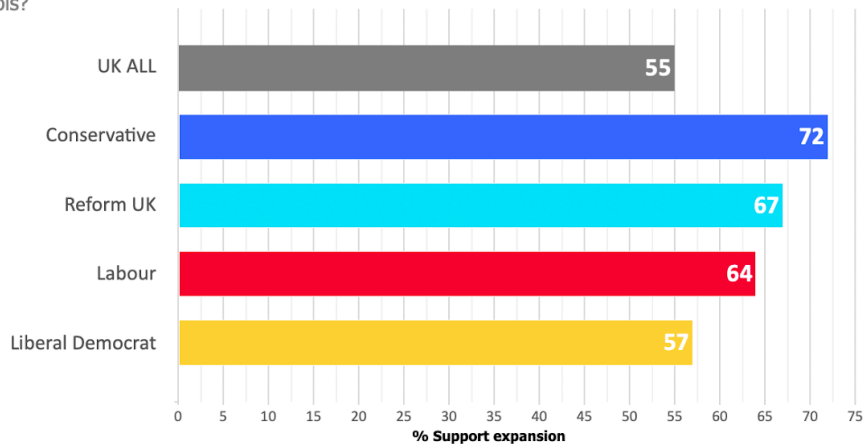
Polling by **More in Common** for **The New Britain Project** shows:

- **55%** of the public support expanding the CCF into more schools, with only **7%** opposed
- Support is strong across political lines:
 - **72%** of Conservative voters
 - **67%** of Reform UK voters
 - **64%** of Labour voters
 - **57%** of Liberal Democrat voters
- Support for expansion is most popular in the North East of England

⁵ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-29/16413>

The Combined Cadet Force (CCF) is a youth organisation linked to the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army, and Royal Air Force, offering young people a broad range of activities. It aims to develop personal responsibility, leadership, and self-discipline through structured programmes that include military-inspired elements.

Currently, the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) operates in some state and private schools across the UK. Would you support or oppose expanding CCF into more schools?



A nat rep online poll of 2058 adults in Great Britain undertaken for The New Britain Project by More in Common between 4th and 7th April 2025

- **3 in 5** would encourage a young person in their life to join the CCF if the option was available.

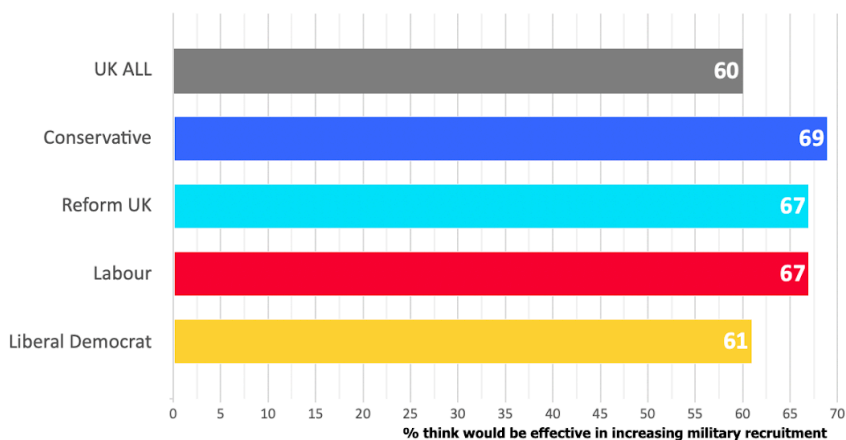
The public also believes expanding cadets into more schools would have wide benefits:

- **73%** say it would be effective at improving young people's physical health
- **59%** say it would be effective at improving young people's mental health
- **62%** say it would be effective at building a greater sense of national duty in young people
- **60%** say it would be effective at increasing military recruitment
- **54%** say it would be effective at supporting national security



Majority say cadets would boost recruitment and national resilience

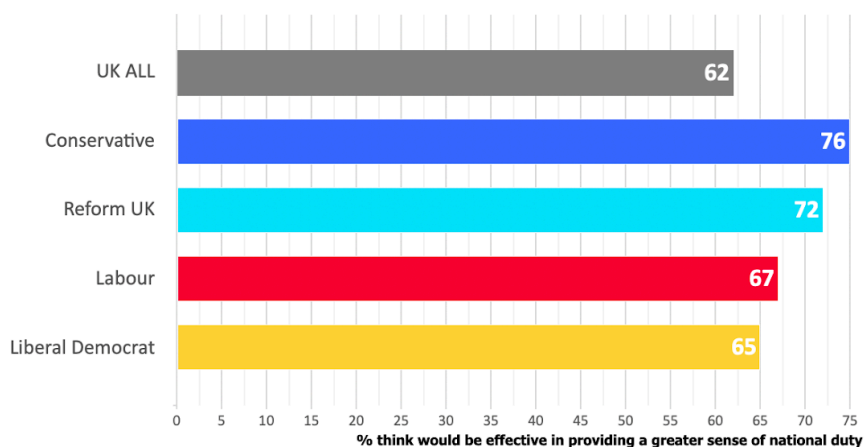
Do you think that expanding CCF in schools would be an effective or ineffective way to increase military recruitment



A nat rep online poll of 2058 adults in Great Britain undertaken for The New Britain Project by More in Common between 4th and 7th April 2025

Public backs cadets to revive pride, service and national duty

Do you think that expanding CCF in schools would be an effective or ineffective way to provide a greater sense of national duty



A nat rep online poll of 2058 adults in Great Britain undertaken for The New Britain Project by More in Common between 4th and 7th April 2025

The CCF model: Structure, skills, and a sense of belonging

The Combined Cadet Force (CCF) is a voluntary programme run in schools, that gives young people the chance to develop practical skills, leadership, and resilience through structured, challenging activities.

Pupils take part in activities such as fieldcraft, first aid, teamwork, and outdoor expeditions - experiences that help build confidence, independence and a strong sense of responsibility.⁶

⁶ <https://combinedcadetforce.org.uk/>

Participation is entirely optional, for both students and staff, and the emphasis is on personal development rather than military training.

The Cadet Expansion Programme (CEP) is funded and delivered by the Ministry of Defence, which provides training, equipment and oversight through its service cadet organisations.⁷ Until 2024, the Department for Education also contributed £1.1 million per year to support staff costs in state schools, but this funding has now ended, which according to Schools Minister, Catherine McKinnell was due to “the current challenging fiscal context”.⁸

The MoD has committed to continuing support for CCF expansion, with around **£3.6 million per year** allocated through to 2034.⁹ Schools run their CCF units with support from volunteer instructors, typically school staff, and guidance from local Armed Forces teams.

A 2025 evaluation by the Institute for Social Innovation and Impact at the University of Northampton found that cadets in schools:¹⁰

- Had **better attendance and behaviour** than peers
- Reported **higher levels of aspiration, resilience and wellbeing**
- Felt a **greater sense of belonging and community**

Early political support, flexible delivery models, and targeted start-up funding helped drive uptake of the CCF in state schools, with positive outcomes over time strengthening the case for expansion, especially as cadet forces remained voluntary, inclusive, and school-led.

But as school senior leader respondents to the evaluation for the University of Northampton attested, setting up a successful CCF takes time, often several years, and works best when fully embedded in the life of the school, not treated as a standalone add-on. As of early 2025, around 80 schools had applied to join the Cadet Expansion Programme, but limited service capacity is now a barrier to meeting this demand quickly.

⁷ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/funding-for-the-cadet-expansion-programme/>

⁸ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-10-28/11294>

⁹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-10-28/11294>

¹⁰ <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/institute-for-social-innovation-and-impact-cadets-report-2025.pdf>

The case for expanding CCF: A mainstream model for better attendance, behaviour and belonging

The CCF has shown it can deliver real and lasting benefits, for pupils, schools, and wider society, particularly when it is well embedded and properly supported. The model works, and demand is growing: around 80 state schools are currently waiting to join.¹¹

But funding has tightened and many schools need help to get started as service capacity is stretched. At the same time, schools across the country are struggling with **record-high levels of persistent absence**, rising behaviour challenges, and a growing number of pupils at risk of disengaging altogether.

In that context, the case for expanding a programme that supports **routine, responsibility, and belonging** is stronger than ever. And while the Ministry of Defence remains a key delivery partner, the **Department for Education must also play an active role**, not only in recognising the impact cadets have on attendance and behaviour, but in ensuring schools have the support they need to deliver it well.

The CCF is not a silver bullet. It cannot replace investment in teaching, mental health, or youth services. But it is a **practical, proven tool**, already in use in hundreds of schools, that could be scaled to support thousands more pupils, especially those who stand to benefit the most.

To meet growing demand and make cadets a core part of school life, especially in areas of disadvantage, the next phase of CCF expansion must be ambitious, properly targeted, and jointly owned across government.

Recommendations

1. Double the number of CCFs in state schools by 2029

Commit to reaching **500 state secondary schools** with CCF units by the end of the next Parliament.

Prioritise areas with **low current provision** and **high levels of disadvantage**, where the programme can make the greatest difference to attendance, behaviour and engagement.

2. Launch a Cadet Accelerator to unlock access

Build on the Cadet Expansion Programme by establishing a **Cadet Accelerator Grant** a flexible support package for schools with demand but limited capacity.

¹¹ <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/institute-for-social-innovation-and-impact-cadets-report-2025.pdf>

This would fund the **critical start-up costs** of training staff, securing equipment, storage, and transport, and offer a faster route into the programme for priority schools.

The aim is not to duplicate CEP, but to **strengthen and streamline it**, especially for schools facing the greatest barriers.

3. Make cadets a mainstream offer in schools over the next decade

Set a long-term ambition for the CCF to become a **normal part of school life** - available in **every state secondary school that wants one**, as a core enrichment option alongside music, sport, art and Duke of Edinburgh.

This will require sustained support, strong cross-sector partnerships, and a clear recognition, especially from DfE, that **character and belonging matter as much as a knowledge-based curriculum**.

4. Invest in recruiting and retaining high-quality School Staff Instructors (SSIs)

The **availability of experienced instructors is one of the most significant constraints on expansion**.

The Ministry of Defence, working with education partners, should explore new pathways to recruit, train and support SSIs - including targeted outreach to veterans, flexible roles for retired personnel, and incentives to attract new entrants into cadet leadership roles.

Image 1 credit: Kate Knight / Combined Cadet Force

Image 2 credit: Ernest Bevin College/Combined Cadet Force

The New Britain Project is an independent progressive think tank focused on bridging the gap between politics, policy and practice.

As a female-led organisation, we confront the lack of women in policymaking, bringing new perspectives to the table.

Our focus is on bringing frontline voices into policymaking, so that their insights can drive pragmatic solutions.

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