



Ministry
of Defence

SECRETARY OF STATE
MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
MAIN BUILDING
WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

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This Christmas, our Armed Forces are deployed across the world keeping our nation safe. While the nature of operations is changing, we know that the impact of deployment on Service families' lives is significant – we remain indebted to you for the strength and support you provide to our Servicemen and women. This is never more apparent than during the festive period when many of you celebrate Christmas without your loved ones. I am writing to sincerely thank every one of you for your support to those you love, and to your support for defence.

As well as thanking you, I want to offer some reassurance that I am acting on the issues which some of you are faced with. Alongside the impact of separation and concern for your loved ones, the requirement for mobility can create difficulty with accessing local services. In my first year as Defence Secretary I have made it a personal priority to understand some of these problems, from accessing school places to the availability of childcare provision and opportunities for spousal and partners' employment.

With the help of the Armed Forces Covenant, we are making good progress in some of these areas. The extension of the Education Support Fund and the expansion of the Department for Education's Common Transfer File will provide education professionals with the resources and knowledge they need to support Service children relocating to new schools. Building on this, during 2019 I am committed to improving the support available to families with children at critical stages of their education and those with special educational needs and disability provision, for whom the impact of relocation can be especially profound.

The diverse make-up of the Service family in 2019 means that the support we provide needs to be flexible and where possible offer a choice. This has been a guiding premise in the development of transition and accommodation policy. The new Transition policy, which will be launched in early 2019, will focus on preparing not just the Service person, but their family for the inevitable return to civilian life. Reflecting the varied needs of the modern Service family, our future accommodation policy is being developed with the aim of allocating subsidised housing for Service Personnel, based on need, not rank or marriage.

For those keen to put down roots, the Forces Help to Buy scheme provides that helping hand to aspiring first time owners and I am delighted to announce the extension of this popular and successful scheme until 31 December 2019.

I am determined that we honour the vital role of the Service family and the sacrifices which you make to support Defence. One way we can do this is by acknowledging the demands of modern life and becoming a more flexible employer. I am delighted to be able to say that in April 2019 we will be delivering opportunities for Service personnel to work part-time or to restrict the amount of time they spend away on duty for periods of time under the new Flexible Service policy. This will allow people to have more certainty over their free time and where they work at times when they need it, whether that is to help manage childcare responsibilities, care for elderly parents or even to study.

All that's left to say is that I wish you and your family members, wherever they are, a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and to thank you again for your support and dedication.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'G' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

THE RT HON GAVIN WILLIAMSON CBE MP