



Ministry
of Defence

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

13 December 2017

Christmas, and the approach of a new year, is a time for reflection, for giving thanks and for spending time with family, friends and those we hold dear. And, it is also a time of year where we turn our thoughts to you, our brave Service families, who give so much throughout the year. In particular, those of you who may not be sharing the festive period with your loved one, as they are deployed around the UK or on operations overseas.

It was my great honour to become Secretary of State for Defence. I have always been struck by the valour of Service families who unfalteringly support our troops every day – juggling the challenges of Service family life, coping with your own fears and emotions and helping often very young children deal with the difficulty of a loved one absent for long or regular periods of time. I have no doubt it is often a heavy load to carry and I am humbled and grateful for your fortitude and resilience.

As we approach two years since the publication of our first Armed Forces Families Strategy, I want to restate our commitment to providing ongoing support to you. I recognise the vital, often unsung, and difficult role that our Service families play in supporting our Armed Forces to deliver our operational capability, particularly during deployments.

Armed Forces Covenant

We remain fully committed to the Armed Forces Covenant and continue to strive for fairness and to remove disadvantage where it occurs for our families in accessing public service or goods. I was pleased to see the progress made this year in coordinating efforts across key areas of the Covenant, including the launch of the Veterans' Gateway, which provides a focal point for Veterans to access services which meet their needs.

I am also pleased that the Armed Forces Covenant Fund was able to award £3.5 million to help encourage integration of military and civilian communities. Alongside the publication of new guidance for Local Authorities, this is helping to increase understanding of how to provide effective support to Service personnel, Veterans and their families.

I am also delighted that in the recent budget the Government awarded a further £36 million over the next three years to support our Armed Forces community and the Emergency Services through a broad variety of projects, such as £1 million to the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA) to enhance their provision of personal face-to-face support to the Armed Forces community.

Employment offer

We continue to focus our efforts on modernising the employment offer for Service personnel to ensure we are able to attract and retain the very best talent, whilst meeting the aspirations of modern families. Our plans to provide additional flexible working opportunities will be especially helpful to families, allowing Regular personnel to work part-time or limit their separation during the year. This will provide opportunities for a better work life balance for a period, and enable Reserve personnel to commit more. These measures are being brought forward in the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which is progressing well in Parliament.

Accommodation

I know that some of you are worried about changes to the accommodation offer. I would like to reassure you that we will continue to provide subsidised housing for Service personnel and the total pot of money currently used to keep Single Living Accommodation and Service Families Accommodation charges low will not be cut. We will be moving to an accommodation model based on need, not rank or marriage, and I believe this is the right thing to do – there are better ways to reward seniority than through accommodation that not everyone wants. I was also very happy to see the introduction of a measure that will make any allowances paid under Future Accommodation Model tax free. This will mean that the total tax paid by someone in Service Family Accommodation and someone using Future Accommodation allowances will be the same offering greater choice coupled with fairness. But I would like to stress that Future Accommodation Model is a long term project. We are looking to start a small pilot towards the end of next year to make sure that the model works and that it delivers the benefits to family life that we believe it will. That pilot will run for a number of years before we decide whether and how we might roll it out across the country so we can listen to your views.

The coming year

Over the next 12 months I look forward to publishing our Transition Strategy for those exiting the Armed Forces, and furthering the good work on our Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Alongside this, we will publish a new strategy to build on our initiatives to end Domestic Abuse.

In everything we do to support of our families we rightly work hand in glove with the Families Federations who work tirelessly to ensure the needs and views of families are represented; I want to take this opportunity to thank them for their sterling work. But the most important thanks is to you, our families. I recognise that Service life is often far from easy, and that you are faced with making daily sacrifices in support of our Service personnel, and for that I am really very grateful indeed.

I hope that you and your families, whether at home or deployed elsewhere, have a safe and happy Christmas and a very Happy New Year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

THE RT HON GAVIN WILLIAMSON CBE MP