



SECRETARY OF STATE
MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
FLOOR 5, ZONE D, MAIN BUILDING
WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

Telephone 020 7218 9000
Fax: 020 721 87140
E-mail: defencesecretary-group@mod.gov.uk

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Dear Friends, Colleagues,

There is an adage that the only constant in life is change. This year in Defence reflects that saying, including for me being given the privilege of taking on the role of Secretary of State for Defence. I am honoured to have been given this role and I will do everything that I can to ensure that Service personnel and their families are given the best possible chance to succeed in their vital roles.

However, there are things too that remain a constant such as the vital role that you play in supporting our Armed Forces wherever they might be across the world in helping to keep us all safe. The importance of family was acknowledged by Rick Haythornthwaite in his review of incentivisation of the Armed Forces which was released earlier this year. In that report, Rick recognised that ensuring family voices are heard is central to encouraging our personnel to remain in the Armed Forces.

To that end we have already been busy changing the way in which our people are remunerated, with total consolidated pay increases ranging from 9.7% for the most junior ranks to 5.5% for senior military officers, along with increases to most other payments such as reservist bounties, recruitment and retention payments and allowances.

We have successfully delivered the policy and legislative changes required to implement the McCloud remedy which addresses the unlawful discrimination that occurred when some members were allowed to remain in their old pension scheme when public service pension schemes were reformed in 2015.

Many of us spend more time at home during this time of the year and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation has been working collaboratively with their contractors to ensure they have enhanced resilience across the supply chain to enable them to effectively respond to the challenges the colder months bring to families' homes. Pinnacle have increased their call handling resource at the National Service Centre by 55%, Amey have increased their resources by 40%, VIVO have

recruited out of hours scheduling staff in addition to existing teams to ensure urgent repairs are managed over weekends and bank holidays and have also launched the new Customer Experience team in their Regional Service Centre to manage contact with families and ensure communications are in place for follow-on works. In addition, the DIO and their contractors are ensuring improved availability of parts, including temporary heaters which are distributed nationwide, and have arrangements in place to switch resource from planned works to response maintenance in periods of peak demand.

The DIO has received an investment of £400 million over the next two financial years as part of the Defence Command Paper Refresh 2023, which will be spent on improving the quality and thermal efficiency of homes across the estate. This investment includes kitchen and/or bathroom refits in more than 1,000 homes, boiler and heating upgrades for around 1,500 homes, more than 4,500 damp and mould remediation packages, and major work for more than 4,000 further properties to improve thermal efficiency in order to prevent damp and mould and reduce the cost of living for families. These works will include new doors, windows and roofs, the installation of external wall insulation and extensive, high-quality refurbishments of around 1,000 currently unused homes to increase the number of modern homes available to Service families.

Families have told us about the need to modernise our language to better reflect a more modern society and so during this year we have sought to change the language of our policies to replace the antiquated terms such as dependant when designating spouses and partners of our Service personnel; we continue to look at ways in which our policies can better reflect the community that the Armed Forces are made up of and will make further changes over the next twelve months.

Defence recognises the importance of providing accommodation to support the mobility of Service personnel and their families. From Spring 2024, under the New Accommodation Offer, we will extend that support to recognise better how many of our people want to live today: Personnel in long-term relationships and those with non-resident children will receive entitlement to family accommodation, and there will be more flexibility for families to choose from a wider range of homes, whilst still ensuring families can secure accommodation appropriate to their family's needs. This marks a generational change and allows us to be fairer and more flexible in how we use our estate, in the UK and overseas.

It is not just within Defence that your support is appreciated. November saw the first anniversary of the Covenant Legal Duty coming into force, which places a new Covenant legal obligation on local public service providers. This will ensure they take into account the impacts of Service life when making decisions about their provision to you of healthcare, education and housing services. In the last few months I have spent some time getting out to hear the voice of our Armed Forces but I equally know that during the year we have managed to help

celebrate the successes of our families. April built upon the previous year's Month of the Military Child and saw a number of children present their art, including pictures and poems, which brightened the atrium within the Ministry of Defence Head Office in London. Our second annual Celebrating Forces Families awards, which I am told was an exceptional, and somewhat noisy, night where families got to tell their stories and be recognised for their work, also took place. In June this year we hosted 100 delegates for the biennial Forces Additional Needs and Disabilities (FANDF) Conference with a focus on 'transition' and the importance of getting this right.

Lastly, I also want to make sure that I convey to you how immensely proud I am of the contributions that our Service personnel made towards the largest ceremonial operation for 70 years in this country when they accompanied Their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camila to a spectacular Coronation service at Westminster Abbey this year. More than 7,000 of our soldiers, sailors, and aviators across the UK and Commonwealth participated in ceremonial activities across processions, flypasts, and gun salutes to mark this historic event.

We recognise that the strength of our military is deeply rooted in the unwavering support of their families. As we continue to learn and change, we remain committed to enhancing our policies and programs to better serve you and to ensure that your contributions are acknowledged and celebrated and that you have all the support that you need.

I wish you and your family, wherever you and they may be, a very happy and safe Christmas and New Year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grant Shapps', written in a cursive style.

THE RT HON GRANT SHAPPS MP