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I was very proud to be appointed Secretary of State for Defence in July this year. I know you will be all too aware that it has been another challenging year for our dedicated Armed Forces, who have once again reminded us and the world why we value them so highly. As I write, 5,500 Service Personnel are deployed on overseas operations in 30 countries, including those: contributing to the fight against Daesh; maintaining freedom of navigation in the Gulf; and providing security, reassurance and deterrence in the Baltic States as well as through our Continuous At Sea Deterrent. A further 7,000 are also abroad, projecting our global influence and 12,000 are on standby to support crises at home and abroad.

Service families are essential in meeting these commitments and I am acutely aware of the impact that this separation has on you at the time of year when most are looking forward to being at home with their loved ones. I want you to know that I am immeasurably grateful for your sacrifice. This is why it is a priority for me to address the concerns you raise and to make your lives easier. The recommendations of the Independent Review of support provided to Service families, led by Andrew Selous MP will be important in informing the future priorities of the new Families Strategy for 2020 and beyond.

Central to this will be the need to offer more choice and flexibility. In April this year, we introduced Flexible Service, giving Regular Personnel more choice in how they manage their careers against the demands of modern life and the needs of their family. Nearly 130 Regular Personnel have benefitted from these new measures by working part-time and/or restricting the amount of time they spend away on duty, allowing them to spend more time with you their families, better manage new responsibilities, or even study. While Flexible Service offers more choice when circumstances change, I know you will understand that operational capability must be our priority. We are currently exploring further modernisation of both Regular and Reserve Service, that could provide more of the choice and flexibility Service families deserve.


The greater choice afforded to families through the Future Accommodation Model (FAM) should also allow you to live in a location and property which is more compatible with home life and your family's specific circumstances. The FAM pilot, launched in September of this year at HMNB Clyde, is planned to continue at Aldershot Garrison and RAF Wittering in 2020. FAM plans to give you more of a say on where, how, and with whom you live, making use of the private rental sector and supporting home ownership, alongside retaining existing options of SFA and SLA. We are keen to listen to your experiences, so that we can take an informed decision on whether to proceed with the wider implementation across the UK. In the interim, to support increased choice, I was pleased to announce the extension of Forces Help to Buy, to the end of 2022. Through the Families Strategy we aim to support all types of family and from 1 April this year, Service Personnel with more than four years' Service and in a long-term relationship or with residential responsibility for a child, are now eligible to apply for surplus SFA.

While we will continue to strive for flexibility and choice, mobility will always be part of Service life, presenting in parallel unique opportunities and challenges in terms of continuity of support other families take for granted. Through the refreshed Families Strategy and with the help of our partners in central and local government under the Armed Forces Covenant, we aim to help you face these challenges. We know that undertaking that final relocation and making the transition from military to civilian life can be a daunting prospect for some. The publication in October of JSP 100 Defence Transition Policy, alongside the launch of a new organisation 'Defence Transition Services', acknowledges this. The new policy plans to embed support for Service Personnel and their families throughout Service and during their return to civilian life at the end of their Service, however long or short that may be.

Sometimes it is difficult to balance the competing demands of Service life with the needs of your family. Through the Families Federations you've emphasised the difficulties that some of you have accessing good quality, affordable childcare. That's why I've made it my personal priority to deliver, through our manifesto, flexible wrap around childcare which will meet the needs of modern forces families.

The delivery of the Covenant remains a cross-Government priority and a nationwide promise and partnership, to ensure those who serve and have served, and their families are not disadvantaged. I would like to express my personal gratitude for the support you provide throughout the year and the sacrifices you make to enable our brave Service Personnel to carry out their duties, whether it be here within the UK, or deployed overseas.

I wish you all wherever you are a very Merry Christmas and a safe and Happy New Year.



THE RT HON BEN WALLACE MP