

News story: Defence Secretary and O2 team up for 2000th signing of Armed Forces Covenant

Updated: quote added

The news comes after a record breaking year for the Armed Forces Covenant with more employers signing up in a single year than ever before.

O2 is the latest employer to sign the Armed Forces Covenant, bringing the total number of signatories up to 2,000. Today, Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson and O2's CEO Mark Evans co-signed the Covenant at a ceremony in London. The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2017 by the Ministry of Defence was also published today, looking back at the achievements of this year.

The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise from the nation to those who serve or who have served, and their families, which says we will do all we can to ensure they are treated fairly and are not disadvantaged in their day-to-day lives.

Among O2's pledges of support for members of the Armed Forces and their families, O2 is offering paid leave for Reservists to complete their annual training as well as suspension of their mobile phone contracts in the event of deployment.

As part of their pledge to support Veterans and Cadets, O2 are offering them access to their WAYRA initiative. WAYRA is a world-leading start-up accelerator programme which takes between nine and 12 entrepreneurs for a nine month period in London, Oldham, and Birmingham to develop their business ideas.

By signing the Armed Forces Covenant, O2 joins large and small organisations across the country who are helping to ensure that current and ex-Forces personnel and their families get a fair deal when accessing goods and services as well as equal opportunity when transitioning to civilian jobs.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans Tobias Ellwood:

Britain prides itself on the professionalism of our Armed Forces, who are the best in the world. The transferrable skills they take into civilian life are phenomenal. They are natural leaders, can work in a team, are disciplined, reliable, committed, brave and extremely well trained. These attributes are not lost when veterans hand in their uniform for the last time, and I would encourage any organisation to reflect on the value veterans can bring to their business.

Annual Report

Since 2013, the number of employers turning their pledges into positive initiatives for the Forces through the Armed Forces Covenant has doubled every year. The Covenant has leveraged growing support from companies in many sectors such as education, manufacturing, construction, arts, entertainment, and recreation, to name but a few. From supermarkets to banks to football clubs and charities, the Covenant is also attracting wide support from companies of all sizes.

The achievements of the Armed Forces Covenant over the last twelve months are set out in the 2017 annual report and include:

- Fairer mobile phone contracts, freezing the accounts of Armed Forces personnel and their families posted overseas and removing cancellation fees
- Better deals in motor insurance, allowing personnel to keep their no claims bonuses and avoid cancellation fees when posted overseas at short notice
- Better access to banking, such as savings accounts to Service families posted overseas
- Tackling commercial disadvantage previously experienced by the Armed Forces community in relation to credit rating and access to mortgages on offer, allowing Service personnel posted overseas or in the UK to rent out their homes without having to switch to a 'buy to let' mortgage and incurring additional fees.
- Over 12,800 payments and £193 million advanced to Service Personnel through the Forces Help To Buy scheme, helping the Armed Forces community get on the property ladder
- Committing over £22.5 million of Service Pupil Premium funding to benefit over 75,000 eligible pupils from Armed Forces families in primary and secondary schools.
- Employer networks in a wide range of sectors to support Service leavers through their transition to new careers.
- Better access to mentoring, work placements and employment opportunities for personnel leaving the Services
- Increased funding and sponsorship of military charities and sports

events such as the Invictus Games

- Flexible paid or unpaid leave for mobilised Reservists
- Employment support for Veterans, Reservists, Service spouses and partners, as well as support for Cadets
- Discounts and special deals for individuals and their families

The Armed Forces Covenant delivery partners include businesses and trade bodies, charities and community organisations, local authorities and government departments. Signatories tailor their own pledges to support the Armed Forces community and implement these promises through their choice of policies, services, and projects.

Ministers should cancel their latest multi-billion pound tax break for bankers and start protecting the most vulnerable children instead – Emma Lewell-Buck

Emma

Lewell-Buck MP, Labour's

Shadow Education Minister for Children and Families, commenting on the recent findings made by the NSPCC that 90 referrals are made per-week to local agencies over fears of sexual abuse, said:

"This is the latest evidence that demand for child protection services is going up, just as funding is being cut. The Government's own figures show that spending on children's services has already fallen by a tenth under the Tories, and we are heading for a £2bn shortfall by 2020. Ministers should cancel their latest multi-billion pound tax break for bankers and start protecting the most vulnerable children instead."

Ends

Teachers' pay being cut due to lack of annual pay rises says NEU survey – Angela Rayner

Angela Rayner MP, Shadow

Secretary of State for Education, commenting on NEU survey showing Teachers' pay being cut due to lack of annual pay rises and performance related pay progression, said:

"This survey is the latest evidence that the Tories have left schools and teachers in an impossible position. After imposing a pay cap that left teachers £5,000 worse off in real terms, they are now acting as if they have ended the public sector pay cap, but won't give schools a penny to fund pay rises.

"If the pay cap effectively continues by the back door, it will only make it harder for schools to recruit and retain the staff they need to give every child the best possible start in life.

"The next Labour

Government will scrap the public sector pay cap, with ring-fence funding to give teachers the pay rise they deserve, as we create a National Education Service and build a country for the many, and not just the few."

Ends

PIP assessment process is not fit for purpose – Debbie Abrahams

Debbie Abrahams MP,

Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, commenting on the Government's response to Paul Gray's second independent review of the personal independence payment assessment, said:

"It is clear the Personal Independent Payment (PIP) assessment process is not fit for purpose. Instead of supporting people, the process leaves individuals and their families lives in tatters. The recommendations from Paul Gray's second review regarding improving trust and transparency, timely reporting and quality assurance have not been accepted in full.

"There remains an evident distrust of the assessment process by sick and disabled people. This is no surprise with a record 68% of PIP decisions taken to tribunal being overturned by judges. The assessment process is getting worse, not better.

"Labour will scrap the Personal Independence Payment and Work Capability Assessments and replace them with a personalised, holistic assessment process which provides each individual with a tailored plan, building on their strengths and addressing barriers, whether finance, skills, health, care, transport, or housing related. "

Ends

[Serbian murder suspect arrested in Spain with Eurojust's support](#)

18 December 2017

In the evening of 14 December, the Spanish Guardia Civil apprehended a dangerous and armed fugitive, a Serbian national nicknamed "Igor the Russian", in the Province of Teruel, Spain. A shooting occurred during the arrest, and two officers of the Guardia Civil and a third Spanish citizen tragically died as a result.

The arrested fugitive was sought by the Italian Authorities for two murders and other serious crimes committed in Italy. The Public Prosecution Office of Bologna, which coordinated the Italian investigation carried out by the Italian Carabinieri, sought the support of the judicial and law enforcement authorities of Spain, Serbia, Austria and France to identify the fugitive's whereabouts and apprehend him. Their fruitful collaboration and mutual support was instrumental to Thursday's apprehension.

In particular, the Italian and Spanish authorities formed a close partnership to secure the arrest of this dangerous fugitive, coordinated by Eurojust and supported by the Italian Central Directorate for Anti-drugs Services

(Direzione centrale per i Servizi antidroga – DCSA).

Within the framework of this close cooperation, the Italian and Spanish authorities exchanged several rogatory letters, shared operational information and organised technical and operational activities on Spanish territory.