

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

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson and O2 Chief Executive Mark Evans sign the Armed Forces Covenant.

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.

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.

[News story: Could your experiment fly on the International Space Station?](#)

International Space Station. Credit: NASA.

There is a growing community of scientists looking to experiment in microgravity – where astronauts and objects float weightlessly. The UK Space Agency will select a number of ideas for development which could then be flown on board the International Space Station.

The UK can propose national experiments through the European Space Agency's European Exploration Enveloped Programme, ensuring UK science benefits directly from human spaceflight.

The unique environment of the ISS offers a great opportunity to investigate novel materials, life in space, the human body, fluid physics, new technologies and many other things. Previous experiments with UK involvement have created new metal alloys, studied microorganisms and analysed changes to the human voice.

The European Space Agency announced in December 2016 that it intends for all of the astronauts that were selected in Tim Peake's 2009 class to be assigned a second mission.

Libby Jackson, Human Spaceflight and Microgravity Programme Manager at the UK Space Agency, said:

"This programme gives UK researchers and businesses the chance to do real science in space.

“Microgravity provides a unique facility for scientific research, allowing us to gain new knowledge that will improve life on Earth.”

Ideas are welcomed from all UK organisations, including university-led academic research proposals and industry-led commercial research proposals.

Applications ideas will then be invited to provide full detailed experiment proposals. Subject to confirmation must be received by 28 February 2018. Selected of future funding, a number of these experiments will be selected for development and nomination to ESA for flight.

View full [details of the call](#).

[News story: Preferred candidate chosen for the role of Executive Chair of the Medical Research Council](#)

Professor Watt is currently Director of the Centre for Stem Cells and Regenerative Medicine at King's College London. Here she leads a team of 80 academic researchers and is internationally recognised in her field with particular expertise in the stem cells of healthy and diseased skin.

The current MRC Chief Executive, Sir John Savill FRS, steps down at the end of March 2018 before UKRI is launched.

Professor Watt said:

I am deeply honoured to be selected as the Government's preferred candidate to lead the MRC at this time of extraordinary opportunity for the UK's biomedical researchers.

Sir Mark Walport, UKRI CEO Designate, said:

Professor Fiona Watt is a distinguished biomedical scientist who will be an outstanding leader of the Medical Research Council. I am delighted she has been selected as the Government's preferred candidate for the role of MRC Executive Chair.

The post of MRC Executive Chair is potentially subject to a pre-appointment hearing by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. The Committee will consider this in due course. If a pre-appointment hearing is requested then arrangements will be made for this in the New Year.

[News story: Businesses encouraged to bid for transformative innovation funding](#)

Innovative businesses with plans to transform UK transport have the opportunity to bid for life-changing funding.

Mobile ticketing via Bluetooth, measures to cut commuting time, and a pilot helping partially-sighted people navigate urban transport systems are just some of the proposals that have received money in the past from the [Transport Technology Research Innovation Grant \(T-TRIG\)](#).

[T-TRIG announcement DriverNet](#)

Today (18 December 2017) the grant opens for its fifth round of applications – giving businesses the chance to bid for up to £30,000 – a £5,000 increase from previous rounds.

For the first time in the targeted call, bidders have been asked to focus on 2 key themes for this round of T-TRIG funding:

- improving the UK's road network using big data and machine learning
- reducing shipping emissions

Transport Secretary Chris Grayling said:

Ground-breaking pilot projects are already benefiting passengers around the country, and this new round of innovation funding will give more businesses a chance to make their ideas a reality.

I look forward to hearing from pioneering companies about their plans.

Up to £1.14 million is available through this round of T-TRIG funding.

[T-TRIG announcement Biella Research](#)

The programme began in 2014 as a pilot, and has subsequently been followed by 4 further rounds of funding.

News story: UK-China Energy Dialogue

The 5th annual UK-China Energy Dialogue took place in Beijing last week (Friday 15 December).

This year's Energy Dialogue demonstrated the continued importance of secure, affordable and sustainable energy in the golden era of UK-China relations, and both countries continued commitment to the Paris Agreement and efforts to decarbonise our economies.

Co-chaired by Business and Energy Secretary Greg Clark and Nur Bekri, Vice Chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission and Administrator of the National Energy Administration of China, the Dialogue saw the agreement of an Action Plan to implement the UK-China Clean Energy Partnership.

Agreed in 2015 as part of President Xi's State Visit to the UK, the UK and China's Clean Energy Partnership MoU is underpinned by an understanding from both governments that each country's significant experience and expertise has the potential to reduce the costs of energy, while promoting opportunities for economic growth, development of cheaper technologies, greater use of clean energy and trade in green goods

The Action Plan signals the next step in the UK-China energy relationship, by creating an agreement to facilitate extended, systematic and sustained collaboration on clean energy between both countries. It sets out future cooperation in priority areas including clean energy technologies, civil nuclear energy, power market reforms and third country activity including the Belt and Road Initiative.

Demonstrating the breadth of UK-China collaboration, the Action Plan will support further collaboration across research, development and deployment; commercialisation; policymaking and implementation; Industrial Strategy; and commercial partnerships. It will be underpinned by a forthcoming UK Energy and Low Carbon Prosperity Fund programme for China.

The Energy Dialogue was held alongside the 9th UK-China Economic and Financial Dialogue co-chaired by Chancellor Philip Hammond and Chinese Vice Premier Ma Kai, providing an opportunity to highlight the links between economic growth and a clean energy transition.