

[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.

[News story: UK takes delivery of final F-35B Lightning this year](#)

Operated jointly by the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, the F-35 Lightning jets will be able to operate on land or embarked on the UK's new aircraft carriers. This delivery is a significant milestone for the Lightning Programme and in particular, alongside the formal commissioning of the HMS Queen Elizabeth Carrier into the Royal Navy earlier this month, demonstrates the advancement towards the establishment of the UK's Carrier Enabled Power Projection capability.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

This Christmas delivery is the 14th jet to join our fleet of fifth-generation F-35 fighters over in the US. The Carriers have taken centre-stage this year, and next year we look towards these aircraft joining us in Britain and taking off from HMS Queen Elizabeth's enormous deck to undertake First of Class Flight Trials. With our famous Royal Air Force coming into its 100th anniversary, the F-35 keeps us right at the cutting-edge of combat air power.

Peter Ruddock, Chief Executive of Lockheed Martin UK said:

There are more than 500 UK companies in our supply chain who play a

vital role in producing every F-35 and we are proud to have delivered the UK's 14th aircraft on schedule. More than 260 F-35s are now flying from 14 bases around the world and we look forward to supporting the UK's Lightning Force, as they prepare to bring their F-35s to the UK and achieve initial operational capability next year.

There are currently some 200 British personnel based at Beaufort testing the aircraft and getting them ready to arrive in the UK next summer as 617 Squadron. Preparations are also being made for First of Class Flight Trials, due to take place on HMS Queen Elizabeth later next year. The programme is on schedule to achieve Initial Operating Capability from land next year with Initial Operating Capability Carrier Strike in 2020. In addition to its short take-off and vertical landing capability, the F-35B's unique combination of stealth, cutting-edge radar, sensor technology, and electronic warfare systems brings all of the access and lethality capabilities of a fifth-generation fighter.



The UK has taken delivery of its 14th F-35B Lightning II which flew into Beaufort, South Carolina last week. Crown copyright.

In 2018, the aircraft – along with the Navy and RAF pilots and ground crew – will arrive in the UK to officially stand up at RAF Marham in Norfolk. RAF Marham will be the Main Operating Base for the Lightning Force in the UK and from here, they will deploy forward to either embark on-board our Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers, or operate from Deployed Operating Bases.

Following successful trials on the land based ski-ramp design which is featured on the UK flagship, and with the RAF Marham runway infrastructure completed as part of a £250m major investment programme in preparation for the F-35 arrival, Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin earlier this year announced that the F-35 was cleared for take-off.

As the only level one partner on the F-35 programme, the UK has been working closely with the US from the outset. UK industry will provide approximately 15% by value of each F-35 to be built, which are due to total more than 3000 in number. The programme has already generated \$12.9Bn worth of orders for the UK and at peak production the programme will support over 24,000 jobs in the UK.

Some milestones reached on the F-35 programme this year include:

- 10% production milestone reached
- Runway resurfacing at RAF Marham complete
- F-35 is cleared for take-off from HMS Queen Elizabeth following successful land trials using the ski-ramp design
- Commanding Officer of 617 Sqn, Wing Commander John Butcher takes his first flight in an F-35B
- Delivery of 14th F-35

[News story: New homes for veterans in time for Christmas](#)

The pioneering Parry Court housing development, funded by £8.6 million in Government Libor fines, will provide housing for veterans as they embark on a new future outside of the military.

At a ceremony in Morden, South London, the Ministry of Defence's Chief of Defence People Lt Gen Richard Nugee handed over the keys of the first completed property to Private Jordan Collins, who received his new home in time for Christmas.

Minister for Defence, People and Veterans Tobias Ellwood said:

The Parry Court opening exemplifies our commitment to the wellbeing of our veterans. This new development will be an important stepping stone for veterans, providing affordability and stability as they start their new life in the Capital.

The housing development is a collaboration between the MOD and the Haig Housing Trust, and will provide eight one bedroom houses at a much cheaper rental rate than the private sector.

The Parry Court development will help individuals or couples start a new life in London who could otherwise not afford the high cost of the commercial market.

Rents at these properties will be set at less than 60% of the normal open market price in the area. This will offer affordability and stability for the individuals as they establish themselves firmly in a new job. The properties will be leased on a six monthly basis, extending up to two years.

The funding for this project was provided through the Libor fines scheme set up by the Government in 2012. Over £200 million has been channelled directly to military related good causes, with a further £200 million given to the Armed Forces Covenant Fund.

At this year's Budget in November, the Government announced a further £36 million of Libor fines to support Armed Forces and emergency service charities.

[News story: UK and Japan strengthen defence ties](#)

The Defence Secretary and Foreign Secretary met their Japanese counterparts at Greenwich Naval College, a building that symbolises the historic maritime links between the two countries, to strengthen security and defence cooperation.

During the meeting, the Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson confirmed that HMS Sutherland will visit Japan next year. HMS Argyll will also be sent to the country to take part in exercises next year, as announced by the Prime Minister Theresa May in August 2017.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Japan is one of our closest partners in the Asia Pacific region and as tension grows on the Korean peninsula, our relationship is vitally important.

2018 will mark the year UK and Japanese forces work even more closely together, with two of our Royal Navy frigates visiting the country and UK troops training on Japanese soil for the very first time.

Both countries agreed a 3-year defence cooperation plan, which will deliver on the commitment made by Prime Minister Theresa May and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in August 2017 to work closer together on defence issues. It

demonstrates the UK's dedication to working with Japan as a long term security partner, including activity across air, land and sea in the Asia Pacific region. Alongside the Naval deployments the UK will:

- Send around 45 British Army personnel to train with Japanese soldiers next year, marking the first time ever that UK personnel have exercised on Japanese soil and the first occasion that non-US troops have exercised in the country.
- Continue to work closely with the Japanese Self-Defense Air Force, with plans for future joint-working after the successful deployment of RAF Typhoons to Japan last year.

Mr Williamson also confirmed that the UK will send a Royal Navy captain and five medics to the US-led Pacific Partnership deployment which will provide humanitarian and disaster relief training to military and civilian organisations.

Following the meeting, Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin will also take Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera to Portsmouth Naval Base for the first time on Friday, to embark on a tour of the world-class aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, which was formally commissioned into the Royal Navy just last week.

[News story: Defence Minister reveals new RAF Squadron at Qatar event](#)

[Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson was in Doha last weekend](#), where he agreed a package of training and co-operation between the British and Qatari Air Forces which will see them working together more regularly as part of the multi-billion pound deal to supply the country with 24 Typhoon aircraft.

Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin expanded on that agreement at a State of Qatar National Day reception in London today. She revealed that a new UK-based Typhoon joint squadron will be called No. 12 squadron, and that it will temporarily integrate Qatari personnel, including pilots and ground-crew based at RAF Coningsby, Lincolnshire.

Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin said:

Qatar proudly becomes the ninth nation to buy the world's leading multi-role combat aircraft.

The formation of a joint squadron means our RAF will take the lead in providing training and support to the Qatari Emiri Air Force as it brings the Typhoon into service.

The Qataris will not be a permanent part of the squadron, but will be integrated ahead of the delivery of the Typhoon aircraft. The move will provide the country with valuable joint frontline experience on an RAF Typhoon Squadron and speed up their preparation for when their own jets are delivered.

The UK and Qatar already share a close defence relationship, with a joint-exercise between the Royal Air Force and Qatar Air force just last week seeing Typhoon aircraft fly over the Arabian Peninsula. Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin visited the country at the end of last month, where she met the pilots taking part in the exercise.

The two countries share mutual interests in countering violent extremism, and ensuring stability in the region, and this formation will further reinforce those ties by helping to prevent terrorism from spreading and protecting the prosperity and security of the UK at home. The new 12 squadron is currently operating Tornados, and will transition to the future Typhoon force.

The biggest export deal for the Typhoon project in a decade, valued at around £6 billion and sustaining thousands of UK jobs, Qatar is the ninth country to purchase the Typhoon. This year also saw the first delivered to Oman, whilst the MOD is leading the offer to replace Belgium's F-16s with the jets and continues to discuss the prospect of a second batch of sales to Saudi Arabia, as it continues to bang the drum for Britain's world-leading aerospace industry around the world.

Notes to editors

- Qatar National Day is on Monday 18 December. Today's reception at The Savoy Hotel on The Strand was hosted to celebrate the occasion.