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Dear Service Families,

This year, I write to you in very different circumstances as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a huge impact on all of us, not least military families. I understand the significant strains this has placed on your day to day lives, especially for those of you living overseas, and I want to reassure you that we have been looking at ways to reduce the pressures on you.

Wherever you are based, the ability to create a warm family home is paramount, which is why I was pleased to announce, in July, a £200m package to improve Service accommodation. Recognising that you would like a greater say on where you call home, we have introduced a requirement for suppliers to provide comprehensive details of Service Family Accommodation properties to allow you to make better informed decisions. Furthermore, our Future Accommodation Model pilot continues in HMNB Clyde, Aldershot Garrison and RAF Wittering giving you the choice to live in the private sector at those sites with financial assistance to do so, alongside the provision of subsidised accommodation.

Increasing quality and choice is not limited to the home and we are developing measures to attract, retain and motivate a diverse and talented workforce that have a say over how they live, flexibility in how they work and confidence that their welfare needs will be met to reflect the unique nature of Service life. Underpinning this is our commitment to strengthening the Armed Forces Covenant by further incorporating it into law in 2021.

For some time now you have made us aware of the difficulties in finding good quality, affordable childcare. I have listened to your concerns and made it a personal priority to offer wraparound childcare to children between the ages of 4 and 11 – that includes breakfast clubs and after school clubs. I am happy to say that the pilot operating in RAF High Wycombe and RAF Halton has, so far, received positive family feedback and take up. A second pilot launch is planned for eligible families assigned to Catterick and the Plymouth Naval area from January 2021.

Away from the demands of daily life we also all need to find time to invest in ourselves. In April this year, we launched HeadFIT, an online platform (www.Headfit.org) designed specifically for the Armed Forces community,

providing 24/7 access to tools that can enhance your mood, drive and confidence, and help manage the stresses of everyday life. I encourage you to make use of this fantastic tool because it is important that we all take a proactive approach in managing our mental health and wellbeing.

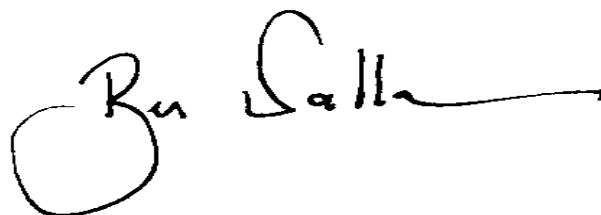
In an ever changing and unpredictable world it is more important than ever that we continue to work in partnership with the Families Federations and single Service HIVES and to pay close attention to the issues you raise. Improving support for families is central to everything we do and our response to the Independent Commission "Living in our Shoes", published in June this year, will shape the support we provide. The report is informing the refresh of our Families Strategy, so that we can raise the bar for Service families across the Nation and make a positive and meaningful difference in the years to come.

However, the immediate priority has been to provide extra, targeted support during the pandemic, and we have done this by improving access to allowances as costs rise. We have also introduced provision enabling those of you assigned overseas, with children who are being educated in the UK, to return with any immediate accompanying family members so that you can be reunited for Christmas.

I am immensely proud of the vital role our Armed Forces have played in assisting the Government's response to the pandemic, with approximately 4,000 military personnel deployed at any one time during the peak of the response and 7,500 still held at higher readiness to support whenever and wherever required across the UK. Indeed, the Prime Minister has rightly recognised this effort in his briefings.

Your loved ones continue to fulfil their vital roles protecting the UK and its interests, at home and overseas. As the festive season approaches, on behalf of the Nation, I thank you for the continued support you provide throughout the year and the sacrifices you make which enable them to carry out their important duties. I take this opportunity to wish you a healthy, safe, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, wherever you and your family are.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben Wallace". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B" and a long, sweeping horizontal line at the end.

THE RT HON BEN WALLACE MP