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Dear Families,

As we rapidly approach the festive season, I know it will be difficult for those of you who are separated from loved ones who are deployed on various operations and peacekeeping missions around the world. I want to say how grateful I am for your crucial role in supporting our Armed Forces to operate across the world and for the sacrifices you make which enables us to keep the UK safe.

There is much to reflect on over what has been a tumultuous year. The celebration of Her late Majesty The Queen's Platinum Jubilee and the marking of Her passing with the State Funeral were historic occasions of immense significance in British history. With the eyes of the world upon them, the 12,000 Armed Forces personnel who were involved in the enactment of the Jubilee celebrations and Operation London Bridge, performed their role with admirable professionalism. I am proud of the example our Armed Forces set on such poignant occasions.

I was pleased to begin the year acknowledging the vital role of families through the commitments we set out in our new UK Armed Forces Families Strategy. Difficult times lie ahead, with the cost-of-living crisis impacting all of us. We are reviewing over 40 allowances to provide you with more flexibility in working arrangements to support different home circumstances. In response to rising fuel prices, a 7% uplift has been applied to commuting allowances from 1 August. To support our overseas personnel, a review into Get You Home (Overseas) is currently ongoing; our aim is that rates will become more reactive to current costs borne by personnel. We have frozen the daily food charge for this year, and we have limited to 1% the increase in Service Family Accommodation charges.

Guided by our new 10-year Strategy, we are thinking carefully about other ways we can help personnel and their families to balance military Service and home life. Providing flexible support that addresses the pressures of modern life for dual-working families is a cornerstone of the Strategy. Building on the successful pilot that began in 2021, I am pleased that this autumn we rolled out funding for wraparound childcare for all eligible families, to give you greater flexibility and choice.

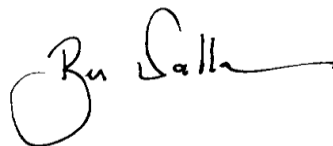
It is important that our policies are inclusive and reflective of modern society and the best way of knowing this is by asking you directly. In September, the Defence People Team consulted a cross-section of families through a series of focus groups, to capture your feedback on policies determining eligibility and entitlement to allowances and benefits. This is informing recommendations for how we can take a fairer approach that is more sensitive to a diverse range of family set ups. For example, in October we committed to widening accommodation entitlement so that families can also benefit from subsidised accommodation.

However, we know that we don't always get things right, and that many of you are experiencing problems with your accommodation. It is therefore a high priority for myself and the ministerial team to address this unacceptable situation. In September, Defence Infrastructure Organisation tasked each supplier to introduce a robust rectification plan, owned at Board level, to set out how it will rapidly bring performance up to acceptable levels, and progress is being actively tracked.

Outside of Defence, the MoD is collaborating with organisations across all levels of government and the charitable and private sectors to advocate for your interests under the Armed Forces Covenant. The new Covenant Duty, introduced in the Armed Forces Act 2021 and brought into force in November, places an obligation on specific public bodies to ensure they consider the Covenant principles in the areas of housing, healthcare, and education. By embedding and raising awareness of the complexities of Service life for Armed Forces communities, this Duty will help to improve your access to public services by ensuring your circumstances are taken into account and that you get a fair hearing.

In all aspects of our work, we strive to recognise and match the level of dedication you afford to our Armed Forces personnel and the United Kingdom in aid of protecting our people, territories, values, and interests, both at home and overseas. Personally, and on behalf of the Nation, I want to thank you all for everything you do in support of your loved ones.

I wish you and your family, wherever they may be, a very happy and safe Christmas and New Year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben Wallace', with a large circular flourish at the start.

**THE RT HON BEN WALLACE MP**