

Press release: Defence Secretary launches first ever Veterans Strategy and new cross-Government Veterans Unit

The ground-breaking strategy has been commissioned by the Defence Secretary and today it will be confirmed that a new Veterans Unit with input from across Whitehall will be created.

The Veterans Unit will champion the changing needs of the ex-service community and ensure action is taken to meet these.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

We have a golden opportunity to ensure our veterans get a fair deal for their service and sacrifice to our country.

The vast majority of those leaving the Armed Forces go on to lead fulfilling and rewarding lives, which is a testament to their professionalism and resilience. However, for those who need help it is right that we step forward, create new opportunities, and remind them that they are not alone.

Everybody across our society has a responsibility to make sure we protect those who protected us.

Mr Williamson today urged other departments and the devolved administrations to meet the evolving needs of former service personnel from across the UK.

The Defence Secretary announced his new initiatives during a meeting of the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board, which was established last year to get the whole of Government behind the Armed Forces Covenant.

Over the next decade, the veterans population will experience a dramatic generational shift from the Second World War and conscripted generation to the younger, all professional cohort both with vastly differing needs. A dedicated team will now begin engaging with stakeholders and the veterans' community ahead of releasing the strategy in the autumn.

The Defence Secretary has identified several key pinch-points that affect a small but significant number of veterans and asked the new team and Ministerial Board to prioritise these issues:

- Debt – How we can best help veterans meet the financial demands of civilian life. This issue represents the highest percentage of calls to

the Veterans Gateway.

- Housing- How to offer the best advice for those leaving the Armed Forces. Whilst the Covenant already puts an obligation on local authorities to ensure they provide fair access to housing for veterans there are still a small number of individuals that require further support.
- Social Isolation – Supporting community integration for those who feel a loss of camaraderie upon leaving the Armed Forces. Younger veterans can struggle with a disassociation from civilian life so the new strategy will focus on connecting with the Loneliness Strategy to help address this.
- Mental and Physical Wellbeing – Ensuring this is maximised, especially for those with lasting physical or mental health issues as a result of their service.
- Public Perception – Improving how veterans are viewed, perceptions are often inaccurate, outdated or clichéd and do not recognise that most veterans are proud members of our society with a huge amount to offer.

At the inaugural meeting of the Ministerial Board last autumn each Department represented was asked to nominate a Minister to lead on veterans issues and the Armed Forces Covenant. These were announced at today's meeting and will help to ensure the new Veterans Strategy is implemented across Government.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Tobias Ellwood said:

I am pleased to have seen real progress made since the last meeting of the Ministerial Board, including a significant cross-government effort to ensure our veterans are in no way disadvantaged by their previous career.

Recent initiatives, such as the troops to teachers bursary, the new veterans ID cards and the growing popularity of the Veterans Gateway are all making a practical difference and I look forward to seeing how this new strategy can help build on the Armed Forces Covenant to show that our commitment to our brave men and women lasts long after they have left service.

**Press release: Statement by
International Development Secretary on**

Save the Children

Following the launch of a statutory inquiry by the Charity Commission, Save the Children UK has decided to withdraw from bidding for new UK Government funding until DFID is satisfied that they can meet the high standards we expect of all our partners.

I am committed to driving up standards across the aid sector and I expect every organisation that we work with to have rigorous reporting and complaints mechanisms in place to protect beneficiaries and employees alike.

News story: Couple sentenced for operating fake online pharmacy

Following a guilty plea, Mr Jakub Woźniak, 36, was sentenced to a total of 18 months immediate custody while Ms Izabela Wojciechowska, 37, received an eight-month sentence suspended for two years, in addition to 180 hours of unpaid work. The pair were also ordered to pay £3,000 in related costs.

During one raid MHRA enforcement officers seized large quantities of unlicensed and prescription-only medicines such as erectile dysfunction pills, steroids and illegal slimming tablets with a total value of more than £25,500. The slimming pills alone were valued at £7,900.

Additional investigations uncovered evidence of financial transactions for the sale of unauthorised medicines totalling more than £87,500 while a follow-up raid on Woźniak's home revealed he had continued offending after the first raid and a further £10,752.4 worth of steroids were seized.

Despite neither being registered doctors nor pharmacists, the guilty pair were operating an illegal online pharmacy which provided a mail-order service with customers across the UK. They had different roles in the operation, with Wojciechowska handling slimming pills and Woźniak dealing with all other medical products.

Alastair Jeffrey, MHRA Head of Enforcement said:

Selling potent unlicensed or prescription-only medicines is a serious criminal offence. If taken without medical supervision these medicines can be very dangerous.

We work relentlessly with regulatory and law enforcement colleagues to identify and prosecute all those involved.

Criminals only want your cash and don't have the slightest interest in your health.

MHRA is currently running the #FakeMeds campaign to warn people against buying potentially dangerous or useless unlicensed medicines sold by illegal online suppliers.

Visit www.gov.uk/fakemedes for tips on buying medicines safely online and how to avoid unscrupulous sites.

Press release: 'Smart' safety advice for commercial drivers

In a pioneering move, the government company responsible for the country's motorways and major A roads has joined forces with the Freight Transport Association (FTA) to offer bespoke safety training for drivers who travel on smart motorways.

Aimed at commercial and haulage drivers, the course has been designed to provide practical, relevant training.

The eight hour, single day course covers the past, present and future of smart motorways, the different signals on the network, driver behaviour and the role of traffic officers.

A key aspect of the course is that it now integrates into the Driver Certificate of Professional Competence (Driver CPC), the standard qualification for which all professional bus, coach and lorry drivers must complete 35 hours of training every five years.

Senior Partnership Manager at Highways England, Wayne Carey said:

Hauliers are among the most frequent users of smart motorways so we want to ensure we are providing as much support as we can to ensure those journeys are as safe as possible.

Smart motorways reduce congestion, improve journey time reliability and add much needed capacity to some of the most congested sections of motorway and we are delighted with the take up to date of this course.

We urge any haulier who wants to sharpen up their skills to sign up.

Pertemps, one of the leading training providers has agreed to offer the training, and Müller is one of the first organisations to take it on.

Jen Cowie, Logistic Support and Development Manager at Müller said:

It's essential that our drivers are fully equipped to deal with their surroundings. We are delighted to be working with Highways England on this training, from concept to delivery, and we continue to work together closely, which not only benefits the business, but the overall road network.

National Trainer Manager at Pertemps Driver Training, Andy Smart said:

It is clear to us that smart motorways are the future in the UK and their use has undoubtedly reduced congestion and improved safety on some of the busiest roads.

As an employer of over 7000 drivers nationwide we are actively working with and supporting Highways England to promote the benefits of smart motorways within the haulage industry.

Malcolm Bingham, Head of Road Network Management Policy at the Freight Transport Association (FTA) said:

FTA is conscious that hauliers would appreciate more advice about driving on smart motorways. That is why FTA has worked in partnership with Highways England to produce the training module which is now approved for use on the Driver CPC course programme.

This is the right way forward – providing drivers with true guidance on how to use the network and not adding confusion about which parts of the road they can use and when. That has been borne out by driver feedback on the pilot courses we have run.

It also demonstrates the need to respect the Red X signs set up when there is a problem on the network and provides assurance that these lanes are vital tool in keeping drivers safe in emergency situations.

Any company which wishes to enrol their drivers on the training should email: SPTC_Driver_Education_Course@highwaysengland.co.uk

Highways England's call to hauliers comes alongside a number of other initiatives related to commercial vehicle safety launched at this year's Commercial Vehicle Show.

One of these is the commercial vehicle incident prevention programme, which focuses on safer people and aims to reduce the number of commercial vehicle related incidents.

As part of this comes the use of virtual reality to reduce the risk of commercial vehicle drivers being involved in incidents as they travel up and down the country.

Other examples include:

- a joint initiative with police using HGV cabs to target dangerously driven vehicles (one of the cabs with police representatives will be at the Show);
- the installation of sophisticated tyre/vehicle measurement (tyre pressure, tyre tread depth, vehicle weight, axles heat) technology at key locations;
- initiatives with the Health & Safety Executive and the police to improve load security; and interventions to reduce diesel spillages which damage the carriageway and cause long delays.
- development of truck stop apps in Polish and Romanian (they can also be seen at the Commercial Vehicle Show).

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[News story: 69,000 households benefit from cut to stamp duty](#)

69,000 first-time buyers have already benefited from the government's abolition to stamp duty land tax on properties under £300,000, according to [official statistics released today \(26 April 2018\)](#). The figures, covering the period up until 31st March this year.

Over the next five years, it is estimated that the policy will help over 1 million people getting onto the housing ladder. And those who have bought properties of up to £500,000 will have benefited from a stamp duty cut.

Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Mel Stride, said:

I'm proud that the cut to stamp duty for first-time buyers is helping to realise the dream of home ownership for a new generation, alongside building more homes in the right areas, and generous schemes such as the [Lifetime ISA](#) and [Help to Buy](#).

[Separate figures also published](#) today show that over 387,000 people have now used the government's Help to Buy scheme, and over 1.1 million accounts have been opened with the [Help to Buy ISA](#), offering government bonuses of up to £3,000.

The median age of a first-time buyer in the [Help to Buy](#) scheme is 27, compared to a national first-time buyer median age of 30.

Housing Minister, Dominic Raab, said:

It's good to see a record number of people benefiting from our [Help to Buy Equity Loan](#), so they can realise their dream of home ownership.

Through this scheme we have helped almost 159,000 households get a foot on the housing ladder.

These figures build on the government's long-term commitment to make housing more affordable. As part of the [Autumn Budget housing package](#), the Chancellor announced at least £44 billion for housing – which includes at least £15.3 billion of financial support for house building over the next five years – and an aim to build 300,000 new homes a year in the areas that need it, as well as encouraging better use of land in cities and towns.

In addition to government-backed schemes such as the Help to Buy equity loan and Help to Buy ISA, those hoping to make their money go further can open a [Lifetime ISA](#) – to either save for a first home, or for later in life.