

By Gemma Doyle MP, Shadow Defence Minister

Our armed forces face major challenges over the coming years. The Government's Strategic Defence and Security Review has introduced some of the biggest changes to our forces for a generation, dramatically changing the shape and makeup of our forces, with thousands being made redundant. Despite the changes, one thing remains the same. Those who give so much to our country should get the service they deserve with the advice, support and training that will help them build new lives after they leave the forces. Resettlement provision improved greatly under the last Labour Government. The Service Command Paper in 2008 was a major watershed moment introducing key measures to place the welfare of our forces at the forefront of our thinking. But it is clear that further progress can and should be made. Transition from the frontline to civilian life can be difficult but it shouldn't have to be. With unemployment remaining at high levels across the country, it couldn't be a worse time for ex service personnel to look for work and, whilst career guidance is useful, unless there are jobs for people to go in to, it won't work. The MoD's own statistics on resettlement seem fairly positive, but stats don't always tell the whole story. People leaving the Forces don't just want to be forced into any job, they want choices and they may want an entirely different career. We know that everyone's experiences in the Forces are different, so we should make sure that people get the personalised advice and support that works for them and at the same time make the most of the very valuable skills that service personnel have. There are some excellent schemes and organisations working on resettlement out there. The Royal British Legion's Be Your Own Boss scheme, for example, gives former serving personnel support in trying to set up their own business. It gives people the extra initial support which can make the difference between success and failure. Heropreneurs and Soldier On! also do excellent work. We should encourage schemes like this and increase both availability and awareness. The MOD's interim report into the Armed Forces Covenant highlighted the importance of transition for the forces and their families. Transition for service personnel is important, but it's just as important for their families. Whether it be in housing, education or simply adapting to life outside the forces, the transition from what is considered the stability of an 'army life' to civilian life can be difficult and shouldn't be underestimated. Too often they are the forgotten ones. We need to bring them in to the process to make a system which works for them as well. Labour Friends of the Forces have launched a consultation on the resettlement programme and we want to hear from people with firsthand experience. Tell us what works and what doesn't and what can be done to make the resettlement process work better. Readers are invited to share their views on this issue on the Labour Friends of the Forces website: <http://labourfriendsoftheforces.org.uk/resettlement-consultation/>