MINUTES

# Attendees

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| Members | Attending |
| The Hon Andrew Gee MP | Minister Veterans’ Affairs and Defence Personnel |
| Ms Liz Cosson AM CSC (Chair) | President, Repatriation Commission and Chair, Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission (MRCC) |
| Ms Kate Pope PSM | Deputy President, Repatriation Commission and Member, MRCC |
| Mr Don Spinks AM | Repatriation Commissioner and Member, MRCC |
| Mr Stuart Smith AO DSC | Defence Engagement Commissioner |
| Ms Gwen Cherne | Veteran Family Advocate |
| MAJGEN Natasha Fox AM CSC | Member, MRCC |
| RADM Sarah Sharkey CSC | Member, MRCC |
| Mr William Roberts OAM | Vietnam Veterans’ Federation of Australia |
| Mr Ian Lindgren (Proxy) | Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans’ Association |
| The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith | Australian Special Air Service Association |
| Ms Sandi Laaksonen-Sherrin | Defence Families Australia |
| Mr Kel Ryan | Defence Force Welfare Association |
| MAJGEN Paul Irving AM PSM RFD (Retd) | Defence Reserves Association |
| Mr Michael von Berg MC OAM | Royal Australian Regiment Corporation |
| Mr Rick Cranna OAM | Legacy Australia Inc |
| Ms Pat McCabe OAM | TPI Federation Australia |
| Ms Narelle Bromhead OAM | Partners of Veterans Association of Australia Inc |
| GPCAPT Carl Schiller OAM CSM (Retd) | Air Force Association |
| Ms Rhondda Vanzella OAM | Australian War Widows Inc |
| Mr Max Ball | Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia |
| Mr David Manolas | Naval Association of Australia |
| **ESO Observers** | |
| Mr John King | Returned and Services League of Australia |
| Mr Roger Greene | Diamond Valley Vietnam Veterans |
| Mr Scott Warr | Legacy Australia Inc |
| Mr Eric Easterbrook | Legacy Australia Inc |
| **Presenters** | |
| Ms Veronica Hancock | First Assistant Secretary, Veterans’ Services Design |
| Mr Mark Garrity | First Assistant Secretary, Client Engagement and Support Services |
| Ms Alison Hale | Assistant Secretary, Community Policy Branch |
| Mr Simon Hill | Assistant Secretary, Policy Development Branch |
| Mr Mark Vuaran | A/g Assistant Secretary Royal Commission, Reviews and Inquiries Branch |
| Mr Wayne Perry | Assistant Secretary, Provider Engagement and Management Branch |
| **DVA Observers** | |
| Mr Mark Kalleske | A/g Assistant Secretary, Client Programs Branch |
| Ms Megan Downie | Director, Veterans Home Care and Transp Programs |
| Ms Danielle Cunningham | Director, Advocacy Policy Section |
| Ms Vivienne McNally | Director, Veteran Community Development Section |
| **Other Attendees** | |
| Ms Vicki Rundle PSM | Deputy Secretary, Veteran and Family Services |
| Ms Liane Pettitt | Assistant Secretary, Parliamentary and Governance Branch |
| Ms Belinda Bastiaans | Director, Governance and Ministerial Events |
| **Apologies** | |
| Mr Robert Woods | Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans’ Association |
| Ms Sue Weston PSM | Member, MRCC |
| Prof. Jenny Firman | Chief Health Officer |
| **Secretariat** | |
| Ms Tiki Stephens | Secretariat Officer |
| Mr Lachlan Dunk | Secretariat Officer |
| Ms Melinda Kershaw | Secretariat Officer |
| Ms Victoria Anthony | Secretariat Officer |

# Secretary Welcome and Update

The Chair acknowledged traditional custodians and those who have served, along with their families, and welcomed members and official observers. The following apologies were noted:

Ms Sue Weston, Comcare, MRCC

Professor Jenny Firman, Department of Veterans Affairs

Mr Robert Wood, Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans’ Association

And the following Proxies and observers were welcomed:

Mr Roger Greene - Diamond Valley Vietnam Veterans

Mr Scott Warr – Legacy Australia

CDRE Paul Kinghorne – Member MRCC

The Chair updated members on the current priorities of the Department:

### Claims

The Chair noted the work to address the claims processing backlog, specifically the claims diagnostics review currently being undertaken by McKinsey & Co. ESORT members who participated in an earlier discussion were acknowledged for their contribution.

### Royal Commission

Members were advised that the Royal Commission will conduct its ceremonial hearing in Brisbane on 26 November 2021, before commencing public hearings from 29 November 2021. The Commission will then adjourn until February 2022, from which point it is expected that Commonwealth officials will be called to appear as witnesses.

The Chair advised that the Department is currently responding to several Notices, and noted the impact on departmental staff. It was further noted that this is likely to continue for a significant period of time.

### Wellbeing

The Chair noted the critical role of advocates, and how they will continue to complement the wellbeing centres that have been established to provide ongoing support services to veterans and their families. It was further noted that the Department will continue to evolve its processes in order to best support the delivery of wellbeing initiatives for both veterans and their families.

# Shaping the Future – Future Consultative Framework

Repatriation Commissioner, Mr Don Spinks AM and National Consultative Framework (NCF) Working Group (WG) Chair GPCAPT Carl Schiller OAM CSM (Retd) addressed this item. Mr Spinks opened the discussion by noting that the results of the most recent three-yearly review of the NCF indicated the current structure no longer supported the intent of the NCF.

Members noted the purpose of the Working Group was to consider the future composition of the NCF and propose potential alternative forum structures and roles, and provide three options. The majority of Working Group agreed that three options were not necessary, submitting one proposed structure with a communications focus (rather than governance) for ESORT consideration. The submission identified a range of issues and noted a level of confusion regarding ESORT’s position as a body facilitating engagement on behalf the Department.

The Chair thanked the working group members and advised that a brief will be provided to the Minister outlining the future proposed direction of the NCF and composition of ESORT. It was noted that the final decision on any future consultation model resides with the Minister.

# Advocacy Update

Deputy President Ms Kate Pope and Assistant Secretary Community Policy Branch, Ms Alison Hale addressed this item. Ms Pope noted the critical role that advocates have in the provision of appropriate support to veterans and their families.

Ms Hale advised members that the Department is working through Advocacy Training and Development Program (ATDP) governance change transition details with a short-term WG. It was noted that while the ATDP’s Strategic Governance Board (SGB) and Capability Framework Management Group (CFMG) have been dissolved, work is continuing with stakeholders to ensure the ATDP is able to continue delivering the program’s assessment activities. This has allowed the program to help candidates limited by COVID-related travel and other restrictions to complete their training to be able to deliver advocacy services for their ESOs. Ms Hale further clarified the existing policy on voluntary work for veterans, advising that those undertaking an advocacy role through an ESO under the direction of a for-profit organisation, are still considered to be undertaking voluntary rather than paid work.

Ms Hale advised members that as an Australian Skills Quality Association (ASQA) accredited course, the ADTP’s *Course in Military Advocacy* requires reaccreditation by April 2022. Workshops conducted during September 2021 highlighted an ongoing need for the course, and recommended minor enhancements to training delivery modalities. It was noted that the continued support of ESORT would assist with the reaccreditation process, and if endorsed, this information would be communicated to the department’s contracted Registered Training Organisation (RTO).

Members were updated in relation to the development of service standards for claims advocacy as part of the 2021-22 Budget initiative to provide Support for Veterans’ Advocacy Services. The service standards set a minimum that the department expects of ESOs who offer claims advocacy services. The service standards will be incorporated into the 2022-23 BEST Grant Opportunity Guidelines and will be made publicly available. Members were advised that measurement against the standards will include providing feedback to ESOs on whether they are meeting the standards and consideration of what additional support or training is required from the department to meet the standards. Members were advised that ESORT Working Group Grants contributors participated in development of, and agreed to, the service standards. Member’s expressed concern that while the development of the standards is a positive step, further consultation is required with members of ESOs who are advocates. An extension of four to six weeks was accepted, and it was agreed that returns would be required by early January 2022.

It was noted that the research project commissioned by the department regarding the current and future capacity of the advocate workforce has been completed, and the project insights will assist in planning and supporting future advocacy services.

# Grants Strategy

A/g Assistant Secretary, Provider Engagement and Management Branch, Mr Wayne Perry addressed this item. Mr Perry updated members in relation to the four main grants programs offered by the department.

In relation to the Grants in Aid (GIA) program, members were advised that the department proposes to amend the GIA guidelines and implement a closed, non-competitive, by invitation program. Current member organisations of ESORT and all 23 current national ESOs that have applied and received GIA funding over the last three years will be invited to apply. Members also noted that the new guidelines will remove the requirement for organisations to have Australian Charities and Not-For-Profits Commission (ACNC) status. Members noted that the dollar value of the GIA has not been increased in several years.

Members were advised that the BEST Grant Opportunity Guidelines for 2022-23 have been endorsed by the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs. Mr Perry advised that while consultation on the formula for this round has commenced, the ESORT Grants Working Group has requested further information to share with advocates and members in considering the weightings of claim types. Noting the delay this would cause for the pending funding round, it was agreed that the current weightings would be maintained to allow time for the working group to consult and present their findings to ESORT for the following 2023-24 round.

Mr Perry addressed member’s concerns around financial accountability, advising that the new Guidelines now include service standards for claims advocacy. Ms Danielle Cunningham further advised that Part Two of the Budget Measure for service standards is aimed at the grants assurance function, and that Community Policy Branch is working with Provider Engagement and Management Branch to ensure alignment.

Members noted that the upcoming Supporting Younger Veterans (SYV) and Veteran and Community Grants (V&CG) 2021-22 rounds will be open shortly. Members noted the increase in the grant funding limits however commented that further increases are need to reflect growth in costs to service providers.

# Open Session & Other Business

The Chair opened the meeting to discuss other matters.

### Rent Assistance

Ms Pat McCabe, **TPI Federation Australia** requested an update regarding the progression of the DVA Rent Assistance Bill. Mr Simon Hill Assistant Secretary, Policy Development Branch advised members that the Bill was introduced into Parliament on Thursday 21 October 2021, further noting that the department is prepared for the implementation date of 1 January 2022. Should the legislation not pass this calendar year, a new implementation date will be requested from Government.

### Treatment Cycle

Ms Veronica Hancock, First Assistant Secretary Veteran and Family Policy Division advised that the report of the 12-week Allied Health Trial Review of treatment cycle arrangements being conducted by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has been impacted by changes to health service usage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Members were advised that the final report is expected to be provided shortly.

### State Education Boards

Mr Rick Cranna, **Legacy Australia Inc.**, advised that the State Education Boards had been abolished. Mr Luke Brown, Deputy Commissioner TAS advised members that the Commissions decided on 9 September 2021 to cease operation of the Veterans’ Children Education Schemes (VCES) and the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act Education and Training Scheme (MRCAETS) Education Boards. The decision not to renew the Boards in future years was informed by the consideration that the modern education system has superseded many of the supports which were previously the exclusive purview of the Education Boards.

It was emphasised that the change will not result in a diminution of services or support for students and their families, but will ensure a consistent and streamlined services provided directly by the Education Schemes staff, and allow students and families to work directly with DVA and contracted experts to obtain tailored support and benefits.

### ACNC – Working with vulnerable adults

This item was raised by Mr Ian Lindgren, **Australian Special Air Services Association**. All but two member organosations have safeguarding obligations under ACNC requirements. Members discussed that, to varying degrees, State jurisdictional requirements are legislated, but noted that not all define veterans and their families as individuals requiring safeguarding. It was recommended that ESORT adopt safeguarding as a standard. Ms Veronica Hancock, First Assistant Secretary Veteran and Family Policy Division, advised members that ESOs are responsible for advocates and ensuring they have all undertaken all relevant checks and clearances prior to working with vulnerable people.

### Booked Car with Driver (BCDW) Working Group (WG) Report Back

Mr Mark Garrity, A/g First Assistant Secretary, Client Engagement & Support Services Division addressed this item. Members were advised that the BCWD WG was reconvened on 6 October 2021 and broadly considered issues including Closest Practical Provider (CPP) requirements; Booked Car with Driver arrangements; the Aligned Transport Services (ATS) Review; and Financial Hardship Provisions. It was noted that transport services in general are under review, but that such arrangements are complex and further clarification is required. Mr Garrity noted that the WG is scheduled to meet again in December regarding the Aligned Transport Services (ATS) Review and potential changes to BCWD processes.

### Hearing Services Program

This item was raised by Mr Rick Cranna, **Legacy Australia Inc**., in the context of the *Report of the Independent Review of the Hearing Services Program* and upselling of hearing devices by some service providers. He noted consumer concerns of being convinced to purchase other services and technology, with a commensurate increase in costs. While acknowledging that audiology is an unregulated area, Mr Mark Garrity, A/g First Assistant Secretary Client Engagement & Support Services Division, noted that this is an issue where the department is continuing to engage with the Department of Health. He further advised that all contracted service providers are required to offer a fully subsidised hearing device option if considering a fitting, and clients can also choose to use the government subsidy to purchase a partially subsidised hearing device. Service providers’ use of finance arrangements require a hearing device quote be provided to all clients who are considering fully and partially subsidised hearing devices through the Hearing Services Program.

Members were reminded that individuals should contact the department prior to making a decision about partially subsidised devices to ensure a solution can be found that is suited to the needs of the individual.

# Minster’s Address to ESORT

Minister Gee thanked members for the work conducted by their respective organisations, noted members’ contributions to ESORT and also thanked them for continuing to make veterans’ needs heard and actioned.

The Minister updated members regarding the budget allocation for claims processing, and spoke about the McKinsey review and the plan for implementing claims processing enhancements to resolve the current backlog.

He noted the imminent commencement of public hearings for the Royal Commission, and welcomed the critical work it is undertaking while accepting that some of the evidence will be difficult to hear. He acknowledged the volume of positive work undertaken by the department and also Department of Defence as an offset.

The success of Veterans’ Health Week was acknowledged, with 730 events held around the nation. In closing his address to members, the Minister reflected that Remembrance Day 2021 would be 103rd year since the Armistice. In doing so, he noted that several communities around Australia continued to be impacted and therefore their commemoration activities would also be impacted.

# Royal Commission – impact on ESOs

This item was addressed by Mr Kel Ryan, Defence Force Welfare Association. Mr Ryan expressed concern that implementation of the 41 recommendations identified in the Interim National Commissioner Report has been delayed, causing frustration among ESOs. Minister Gee acknowledged that many other reports have highlighted similar issues, noting that a majority of the recommendations have been fully or partially implemented, and a number of positive outcomes that have been achieved off the back of significant investment in reform and new initiatives by the Government in recent years. He further noted that several associated issues, such as homelessness of veterans, are causal factors or contributors to mental health issues and suicide rates.

Mr Ryan noted that the Boss Report recommendations could be segued into the Royal Commission to ensure follow-up action, and commended the report to members.

# Definition of a veteran

This item was addressed by Mr Max Ball, Vietnam Veterans’ Association of Australia Inc, proposing the introduction of an additional definition for use by the Department, being “returned veteran”. This could be applied to any person who is entitled to wear the Returned from Active Service Badge.

Minister Gee expressed interest in canvassing further opinions regarding the definition. He noted hesitancy in relation to creating two classes of veteran given the potential for exacerbating mental health concerns among the cohort, but requested that it be re-considered.

# Incarcerated Veterans

Mr Michael von Berg MC OAM of the Royal Australian Regiment Corporation raised the issue of incarcerated veterans. Members were provided with an update into his research project work with Chris Tilley of Flinders University, to better understand the experiences of ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel in corrective services systems.

Mr von Berg noted that there are 3,200 veterans currently incarcerated, and emphasised that a poor transition out of corrections custody for these individuals would become a high risk factor for suicide, drug use, homelessness and other concerns.

Minister Gee requested to meet with Mr von Berg, ahead of the next National Federation Reform Council – Veterans’ Wellbeing Taskforce (VWT), whose Terms of Reference include veteran incarceration as an issue.

# Actions Arising and Meeting Close

The Chair advised that actions items and previous minutes would be resolved out of session. It was further noted that the Client Satisfaction Survey is pending, and requested that members complete the survey.

The Chair noted that this was the last meeting for Mr Rick Cranna OAM, and thanked him for his significant contributions to ESORT during his tenure on behalf of Legacy Australia Inc.

The meeting was closed at 19:15hrs.