**Minutes**

**Agenda Item 1 Minister’s Address**

Attendees list is at Annexure A. The Minister welcomed ESORT members to the first meeting of the year and thanked them for their ongoing commitment to raising important issues in the Veteran Community. Minister Gee outlined his areas of focus for 2022, including the Royal Commission and addressing the claims backlog, including implementing the recommendations from the McKinsey review. The Minister also spoke to the potential impacts of the Douglas Decision, assuring members that any potential legislative ammendments will be reviewed to ensure no negative impacts for affected veterans.

When queried on the timeframe to release the McKinsey Report, the Minister confirmed that while his office was still working through the recommendations, it was his intention to release the Report after the Budget. Members were directed to the summary of the McKinsey appearance before the Royal Commission for an indication of what is contained in the Report.

The Minister then outlined some of his recent engagements including chairing the Veterans’ Wellbeing Taskforce and attending commemorative activities marking the 80th Anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin and the Fall of Singapore. Ms Pat McCabe, ***TPI Federation***, sought a meeting with the Minister to discuss the Government response to the Senate Inquiry into the TPI Payment (Special Rate of Disability Pension).

**Chair Welcome and Strategic Update**

The Chair thanked the Minister for his update and added her welcome to ESORT Members. The Chair welcomed Mr Eric Easterbrook, ***Legacy Australia Inc***, to his first meeting as Chairman of Legacy Australia Inc and expressed her concern for anyone effected by the Queensland floods.

The Chair reaffirmed her commitment to consultation with ESORT, noting that she has chaired over 20 sessions, both formal and informal, over the past two years. The Department is busy addressing the claims backlog and appearing as witness to the Royal Commission currently, and as such there may be instances where the Deputy President may have to Chair meetings. The Chair then outlined DVA’s three main priorities: addressing the claims backlog; responding to the Royal Commission; and ensuring that staff wellbeing is maintained. The Chair acknowledged that the claims backlog is unacceptable and explained that while DVA has recruited more staff to the address the issue, training on the complexities of the three Acts can take up to six months. Transformation across the Department continues through the Veteran Centric Reform program, which includes an annual Gateway Review and ANAO audit.

Mr Kel Ryan, ***Defence Force Welfare Association***, enquired to the number of APS staff and contractors that have been hired. The Chair undertook to share the Department’s response to a similar question posed by the Royal Commission with members.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT1** | Secretariat to circulate the Ministers’ second reading transcript of the *Enhanced Family Support Bill 2022*to ESORT members. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT2** | Secretariat to facilitate a meeting between the Minister and Ms Pat McCabe, TPI Federation, to discuss the Senate Inquiry into the TPI Payment (Special Rate of Disability Pension) | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT3** | Secretariat to convene an out of session ESORT meeting to discuss the recommendations of the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal Inquiry report into recognition for members and families of ADF members killed, wounded or injured in or as a result of service. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT4** | Secretariat to circulate a breakdown of the current APS staff and labour hire numbers, as provided to the Royal Commission. | Secretariat |

**Agenda Item 2 Advocacy**

Ms Veronica Hancock, First Assistant Secretary, Veteran Family Policy Division and Ms Alison Hale, Assistant Secretary, Community Policy addressed the two member submissions on advocacy.

**Response to Member Submission – Implications of UNSW Study**

Ms Hale invited Mr Max Ball, ***Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia***, to talk through his submission addressing the issue of advocate policy. Ms Hale then invited comments on the submission. The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith, ***Australian Special Air Service Association***, Mr Kel Ryan, ***Defence Force Welfare Association***, Mr Eric Easterbrook, ***Legacy Australia Inc***, GPCAPT Cark Schiller, ***Air Force Association***, Mr Mike von Berg, ***Royal Australian Regiment Corporation***, Mr William Roberts, ***Vietnam Veterans’ Federation of Australia***, and Ms Rhondda Vanzella, ***Australia War Widows Inc***, voiced their support of the ***VVAA*** paper.

Discussion themes included the lack of visibility and data around paid and volunteer advocates, the complex environment resulting in disengagement with the claims process, and a lack of knowledge among younger veterans.

Mr Kel Ryan, ***DFWA***, suggested that ESORT members could draft a 20 year roadmap of advocacy to tackle funding issues, training programs and regulation in a well-considered manner. Members agreed that getting bogged down on the specifics of a proposal would not be beneficial at the moment as there are too many stakeholders to consider.

Ms Rhonnda Vanzella, ***AWW***, commented that regular updates from Defence would be beneficial for visability of how the transition process is evolving to meet current needs. The Chair noted that Defence membership of ESORT provides this opportunity.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT5** | Secretariat to distribute the Advocate Data Register to ESORT Members. | Secretariat |

**QA Program for ATDP**

Ms Alison Hale, Assistant Secretary, Community Policy spoke to the Member Submission on jointly establishing a quality assurance framework and set key performance indicators for advocacy training to measure the impact on veteran and family wellbeing from utilising advocacy services. There was broad support for the paper and Members agreed to convene a working group to produce a Statement of Principles to be used in establishing a quality assurance framework for the ATDP.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT6** | Secretariat to establish a working group to draft a Statement of Principles to inform a quality assurance framework for the Advocacy Development and Training Program. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT7** | Secretariat to circulate paper to ESORT Members on how Advocates receive points towards their grant application. | Secretariat |

**Agenda Item 3 Grants**

Mr Wayne Perry, Assistant Secretary, Provider Engagement & Management Branch, addressed member submissions on Wellbeing Grants, Grants in Aid and issues with the Grants Hub. Mr Perry acknowledged delays with the BEST Grants rollout, noting that the introduction of additional checks to minimise reporting errors had resulted in administrative delays within the Department. Mr Perry also acknowledged that internal administrative delays had impacted the disbursement of the 2022 Grants In Aid (GIA) program. Mr Perry assured members that measures are being implemented to minimise these delays for future funding rounds. The Chair also clarified that the Grants Hub is run by the Department of Social Services through a Whole Of Government initiative to harmonise the application process. She stressed that The Hub is contracted to assist with the application process, however; the recently announced Wellbeing Grants Program would be handled internally.

Mr Michael von Berg, ***Royal Australian Regiment Corporation***, inquired why the extension process on a grant application is so complex. Mr Perry acknowledged that work can be done to streamline this process, noting that not all grant submissions allow for deadline extensions. Mr Eric Easterbrook, ***Legacy Australia Inc***, queried how DVA will determine ESOs to approach for the ‘by invitation’ model for Grants In Aid, and what process is being implemented to address appeals by excluded ESOs. Mr Perry confirmed that organisations which have received a GIA in the last three years will be invited to apply. The eligibility to meet the national ESO criteria will be confirmed by DVA prior to the invitation. Discussion was also held over the definition of a National ESO, with Mr Kel Ryan, ***Defence Force Welfare Association***, raising that some ESOs are moving to a national database instead of State-based offices and that this may affect grant and funding applications.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT8** | Business area to investigate if requests for extension for grant aplications made through the Grant Hub can be streamlined. | Provider Engagement & Management Branch |

**Agenda Item 4 Report back – ESORT Multi-Act Working Group**

Ms Natasha Cole, First Assistant Secretary, Client Benefits Division, provided a summary of the issues that the Multi-Act Working Group have been discussing in their monthly meetings since March 2021. She reported that the Working Group will continue on a monthly basis in 2022.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT9** | Add Action Item 2021/A09 – *placement of a banner recommending claimants seek the services of an advocate on the MyService Website* to a future ESORT agenda. | Secretariat |

**Agenda Item 5 Veteran Employment Pathway Program**

Mr Roger Winzenberg, Assistant Secretary, People Services Branch, gave an overview of the Veteran Employment Pathway program, details of the pilot implementation and expressed his hope that this program will become APS wide in the future. The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith, ***Australian Special Air Service Association***, asked if the program is expanded to other agencies, would there be consideration for physical, mental and emotion disabilities. Mr Wizenberg suggested that DVA could be the coordinating agency for an APS wide rollout to this certified entry-level program. He also noted that there were considerations for a disability cohort. Mr Michael von Berg, ***Royal Australian Regiment Corporation***, asked the number of Veterans currently employed by DVA. Mr Wizenberg advised 5 per cent of DVA’s workforce are currently self-identifying veterans, noting the Departement’s stated workforce target of 7 per cent.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT10** | Circulate the Prime Minister’s Veteran Employment Program statistics on State and Territory employment statistics for Veterans. | Secretariat |

**Agenda Item 6 Response to Member Submission – Rename War Widows Pension**

Ms Veronica Hancock, First Assistant Secretary, Veteran Family Policy Division addressed the member submission on renaming the War Widows Pension, confirming that a proposal can be developed for the Minister’s consideration to rename the War Widows Pension to a more appropriate reflection of the compensation payment. DVA has not undertaken a study as yet to determine any unpredicted impacts, nor conducted an assessment of the costings, resources and IT infrastructure needed for the name change. Ms Hancock clarified that changing the name would not change the benefits received under the payment.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT11** | Business area to draft a preliminary review on changing the War Widows Pension name for the Secretary’s consideration. | Policy Development Branch |

**Agenda Item 7 Response to Member Submission – MRCA amendments and Non-Liability Pilot**

Ms Veronica Hancock, First Assistant Secretary, Veteran Family Policy Division and Mr Simon Hill, Assistant Secretary, Poliy Development Branch addressed the member submission on MRCA amendments and the Non-Liability Pilot. Ms Hancock assured Ms Pat McCabe, ***TPI Federation***, that the introduction of NDIS providers is to increase the option flexibility for clients to find providers and confirmed that it does not effect the payment rates.

**Agenda Item 8 Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Program**

Dr Trish Bachelor, Deputy Chief Health Officer provided members a summary of the Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Program and explained that the trial has an emphasis on occupational medicine to help and improve the transition process. The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith, ***Australian Special Air Service Association***, inquired if the trial would be rolled out nation-wide if successful, and if there were plans to extend the scope to employ occupational physicians in the APS. Dr Bachelor applauded his thinking and acknowledged that the scope for the pilot program was concentrated, and there is potential to roll out nation-wide as an extension to the Veteran Employment Pathway program if the pilot is successful. It was confirmed that the logistical implementation of the pilot determined Duntroon as the location.

**Agenda Item 9 Other Business / For Information Papers**

**Response to Member Submission – DVA Website**

Mr Simon Geraghty, Director, Web Services and Design and Mr Nathan Madigan, Director, Content Hub Section addressed the submission from Mr Max Ball, ***Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia***, on DVA website navigation.

Mr Geraghty noted the diverse audience of the website and that data suggests the largest user groups are between 25-35 years old, and 55 years and older. Mr Madigan also added that balancing user-friendliness for the diverse audience is tough and specific feedback is most welcome on the website feedback channels.

**Other Business**

Mr Michael von Berg, ***Royal Australian Regiment Corporation***, raised that DVA should be promoting the Veteran Employment Pathway program to the community. Mr Erik Easterbrook, ***Legacy Australia Inc***, asked if there would be changes to align benefits as result of the Mutli-Act Working Group. The Chair confirmed that analysis has been undertaken and would be a proposal for Government.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| **2022A/ESORT12** | Business area to write to Mr Max Ball, Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia in response to his DVA Website paper. | Director, Web Services and Design |
| **2022A/ESORT13** | Secretariat to facilitate contact between Wellbeing Policy Branch and Ms Pat McCabe, TPI Federation, to discuss the NDIS Strategy. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT14** | Secretariat to ensure RPBS Cycle changes are communicated before the implementation date. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT15** | Include Joint Transition Authority update as a future agenda item. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT16** | Advise if the interim casuality list will become a permanent fixture in DVA. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT17** | Advise ESORT on the status of the Veterans Benefit Group of Australia. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT18** | Secretariat to distribute December 2021 meeting minutes. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT19** | Secretariat to facilitate contact between Veterans Home Care team and Ms Narelle Bromhead, Partners of Veterans Association of Australia Inc, to clarify on household services. | Secretariat |
| **2022A/ESORT20** | Secretariat to facilitate contact between Mr Willian Roberts, Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia and the relevant business area to discuss determination. | Secretariat |

**Meeting closed: 12.08pm**

**Annexure A**

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| **Attendees** | |
| The Hon Andrew Gee MP | Minister for Veterans’ Affairs |
| Mr Stuart Smith AO DSC | Deputy Secretary, Enabling Services & Commemorations Group |
| **ESORT Members** | |
| 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 MRCC Member |
| Mr Don Spinks AM | Repatriation Commissioner and MRCC Member |
| Ms Gwen Cherne | Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner |
| COL James Burns (Proxy) | MRCC, Department of Defence |
| GPCAPT Sandra Riley (Proxy) | MRCC, Department of Defence |
| Mr William Roberts OAM | Vietnam Veterans’ Federation of Australia |
| Mr Robert Woods JP | Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans’ Association |
| The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith | Australian Special Air Service Association |
| 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 |
| Mr Eric Easterbrook OAM | Legacy Australia Inc |
| Mr Phil Winter (Proxy) | Returned and Services League of Australia |
| Mr John King (Proxy) | Returned and Services League of Australia |
| **Presenters** | |
| Ms Veronica Hancock | First Assistant Secretary Veteran Family Policy Division (Item 2, 6, 7) |
| Ms Alison Hale | Assistant Secretary Community Policy (Item 2) |
| Mr Wayne Perry | Assistant Secretary Provider Engagement and Management Branch (Item 3) |
| Mr Roger Winzenberg | Assistant Secretary People Services Branch (Item 5) |
| Ms Natasha Cole | Assistant Secretary Clients Benefits Division (Item 4) |
| Mr Luke Brown | Deputy Commissioner Tasmania, Assistant Secretary Business Improvement & Quality Assurance Branch (Item 4) |
| Mr Simon Hill | Assistant Secretary Policy Development Branch (Item 6) |
| Dr Trish Batchelor | DVA Deputy Chief Health Officer (Item 8) |
| **Observers** | |
| Liane Pettitt | Assistant Secretary, Parliamentary & Governance |
| Jodi Farrell | Office Manager to the Secretary |
| Mr Glen Ferrarotto | Veteran Engagement Adviser |
| **Secretariat** | |
| Belinda Bastiaans | A/g Director, Governance & Ministerial Events |
| Tiki Stephens | Assistant Director, Governance & Ministerial Events |
| Kylie Robinson | Assistant Director, Governance & Ministerial Events |
| Tahl Kean | Graduate, Governance & Ministerial Events |
| **Apologies** | |
| Ms Sue Weston PSM | MRCC, ComCare |
| RADM Sarah Sharkey | MRCC, Department of Defence |
| BRIG Wade Stothart CSC | MRCC, Department of Defence |
| MAJGEN Greg Melick AO RFD SC | Returned & Services League of Australia |