



Minutes

Agenda Item 1 Welcome, apologies and conflicts of interest

Meeting Chaired by A/g Secretary, Andrew Kefford PSM.

The Chair opened the meeting, welcoming attendees, noting membership changes and representation arrangements for the meeting, as well as apologies received. Details are listed at **Annexure A**. No conflicts of interest were declared.

The Ode was recited, and members acknowledged the service and sacrifice of all veterans and families.

The Chair **ACKNOWLEDGED** MAJGEN Wade Stothart DSC AM CSC, thanking him for his contribution to the Ex-Service Organisation Round Table (ESORT). Members **NOTED** MAJGEN Stothart DSC AM CSC will no longer be a Department of Defence representative at ESORT in 2025.

Members **NOTED** the resignation of Ian Lindgren, Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans' Association, and commended his efforts during his tenure.

DVA update – Acting Secretary Andrew Kefford PSM

The Chair provided an update on claims processing. Members **NOTED** in the first half of the 2024-25 financial year, DVA received 25,542 claims, marking a 37.1 per cent increase compared to the previous year. Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** that DVA processed 24,780 determinations during the same period, reflecting a 6.7 per cent increase from the prior year.

The Chair advised as of 30 September 2024, over half of the claims on hand had been received in the last 200 days, with approximately one-third received in the last 100 days.

The Chair spoke to DVA's 2023-24 Veteran Wellbeing Grants Program, noting more than \$3.7 million has been allocated to community organisations, with 69 grants awarded to support veteran health and wellbeing initiatives. Members **NOTED** applications for the current round of funding for the Veteran Wellbeing Grants Program will close on 17 December 2024, with eligible organisations able to apply for grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the recognition of Australia's top veteran employers at the Prime Minister's National Veteran Employment Awards on 26 November 2024.

Members **NOTED** the opportunity for Australians planning to honour the fallen at the 2025 Anzac Day Dawn Services in Türkiye or France to register for free attendance passes.

The Chair **ACKNOWLEDGED** the contributions of Private Richard Norden, who was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for Australia for his bravery during the Vietnam War.

Members **DISCUSSED** fee for service advocacy models and **NOTED** a summary of actions being taken by DVA to address anomalies will be provided. Members were **ADVISED** that FRAUD.TIPOFF@dva.gov.au can be used to advise the Department of concerns from the veteran community.

Government's response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

Members **DISCUSSED** the Government's response as a significant reform blueprint aimed at improving veteran support and wellbeing, beyond just addressing suicide and suicidality and **RECOGNISED** the importance of engagement and partnerships in implementing the Government's response and emphasised the need for comprehensive consultation with ESORT members in the New Year.

Members **NOTED** the update regarding the Government's response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the Government has accepted the majority of the Royal Commission's 122 recommendations, agreeing in principle to 104 and noting 17 recommendations.

Members **RECOGNISED** the establishment of a new statutory entity, the Defence and Veterans Services Commission, to provide independent oversight and enhance suicide prevention efforts for serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel.

Members **NOTED** a Taskforce will be formed within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to leverage the expertise of external experts and across Government to implement the Royal Commission Recommendations and **NOTED** DVA will adopt a co-design approach to establish a new agency focused on veteran wellbeing, in collaboration with the veteran community.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** DVA's commitment to continue consultation with Defence and veteran communities in the development of a national Ex-Service Organisation (ESO) peak body.

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A27	Provide members with a summary of actions being taken to address concerns and anomalies with Fee for Service Advocacy providers.	Policy & Programs
2024ESORT/A28	Presentation on the 'Government Response to Royal Commission's Final Report' to be distributed to members.	Secretariat
2024ESORT/A29	DVA to provide members a table of Royal Commission Recommendations (Interim and Final), noting ownership, Government position and status of implementation.	Royal Commission Response Team

Agenda Item 2 Action Items

Members **NOTED** the 27 August 2024 ESORT Minutes were endorsed out of session on 12 September 2024.

Members **AGREED** to close Action Items 2022ESORT/36, 2023ESORT/A47, 2024ESORT/A02, A07, A11, A12, A16, A18, A19, A20, A21, A22, A23, A24, A25 and A26.

Members **NOTED** 2020ESORT/27, 2024ESORT/A14 and A17 remain in progress.

The Chair **NOTED** Action item 2024ESORT/36 will be addressed as part of the consultation process for the establishment of the Wellbeing Agency and members **AGREED** to close this action item.

MEMBER SUBMISSIONS

Agenda Item 3.1 Standardisation and consistency in the delegate's decision-making process (Legacy Australia)

Members **NOTED** the member submission from Legacy Australia regarding standardisation and consistency in the Delegate's decision-making process.

Members **NOTED** supporting evidence for each case is different, and cases which appear to be similar may have different outcomes due to individual circumstances. Members **NOTED** DVA encourages Advocates who disagree with a decision to discuss their concerns with the Delegate in the first instance. Advocates can raise their concerns with the Delegate's manager where required.

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A30	Claims in review statistics to be provided to members out of session.	Client Benefits

Agenda Item 3.2 Combined Wellbeing, Compensation Level 1 Competency Qualification (Vietnam Veterans' Federation of Australia)

Members **NOTED** the member submission from the Vietnam Veterans' Federation of Australia and the concerns raised regarding advocacy reform.

Members **NOTED** the Department's commitment to supporting the development of the proposed Institute for Veterans' Advocates. Members acknowledged the importance of the Institute in providing leadership, setting competency standards, and offering guidance to the advocacy sector and **AGREED** that the Institute would play a crucial role in accrediting and registering advocates while recognising prior learning.

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A31	Refer Member Submission to Advocacy Institute Board for consideration, particularly with respect to development of Wellbeing Advocate course.	Client Benefits

Agenda Item 3.3 Review the relationship between the War Widows Pension and the Age/Service Pension (Legacy Australia)

Members **NOTED** the submission from Legacy Australia expressing concerns about the rate of the War Widow(er)'s pension compared to the Age Pension.

Members **NOTED** the information provided on the War Widow(er)'s pension and its relationship with the Age Pension under the *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986* (VEA) and **NOTED** the War Widow(er)'s pension is expected to grow at a greater rate than the Age Pension.

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A32	Advice to be provided to members out of session on the pension supplement indexation.	Policy
2024ESORT/A33	DVA to convey to Government, ESORT request that Government considers amending indexation of Pension Supplement against better of PBCPI or MTAW, as opposed to just CPI.	Policy

Agenda Item 3.4 Blast Wave Injuries in Military Training (Legacy Australia)

Members **NOTED** the member submission from Legacy Australia concerning the blast wave injuries related to military training and action.

Members **NOTED** the Department's is engaging with research providers to conduct a literature review to stay informed of emerging research on repetitive low-level blast over exposure (rLLB) and mild traumatic brain injuries (mTBI). Members also noted DVA's commitment to refer any research identified in the literature review as high priority, or which provides significant evidence of a causal relationship between rLLB and neurocognitive conditions, will be referred to the Repatriation Medical Authority (RMA).

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A34	Members to be provided copy of internal DVA factsheet being developed to assist determination of Military Training Blast Wave Injury.	Policy

Agenda Item 3.5 Cessation of DVA funding for APOD (Australian War Widows)

Members **NOTED** the member submission from the Australian War Widows regarding the Cessation of DVA funding for the Australian Partners of Defence (APOD).

Members **NOTED** the work DVA undertook with APOD over five years to provide Australian businesses a coordinated pathway to demonstrate their support of the Covenant.

Members **NOTED** the ongoing funding or delivery of a business benefits program is not core Government or Departmental business and **NOTED** the Veteran Card and the Covenant Lapel Pin provide a mechanism for veterans to signal their veteran status in the community when they are not wearing their service uniforms or medals.

Agenda Item 3.6 SRDP/TPI Veterans Medical Certificate Requirements under MRCA (TPI Federation of Australia)

Members **NOTED** the member submission from the TPI Federation of Australia requesting clarification of medical certificate requirements for SRDP/TPI Veterans under the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA).

Members **NOTED** the policy in relation to medical certification requirements for those in receipt of MRCA SRDP and incapacity payments.

Members **NOTED** this is a long-standing DVA policy that has not recently changed; however, the Department is looking to provide further clarification and education to delegates to ensure consistency.

Members **NOTED** where members become aware of cases where SRDP eligible clients are being asked to provide ongoing medical certificates they can raise this with DVA to allow further investigation of the individual matter.

The following member submissions have previously been raised or discussed in other National Consultation Framework (NCF) Forums. Summaries of those previous discussions were provided to members for information.

MATTERS DISCUSSED PREVIOUSLY

The Chair noted the following Member Submissions had been discussed either previously at ESORT, or in other National Consultation Framework Forums. Members were provided the opportunity to raise any further information regarding these Submissions, and the Chair undertook to provide Members with summaries of previous discussions.

Agenda Item 3.7 DVA Grant-in-Aid (TPI Federation of Australia)

No further discussion.

Agenda Item 3.8 Terminology used in the Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024 for 'Wholly Dependent Partner' (Partners of Veterans Association of Australia Inc, Australian War Widows Inc and TPI Federation of Australia)

Members discussed this in further detail at item 4.1.

Agenda Item 3.9 Requirement for Specialist Referral for MRI (Australian War Widows and TPI Federation of Australia)

No further discussion.

Agenda Item 3.10 Public Hospital \$70+ Day Daily Fee Following 35 Days Hospitalisation (Australian War Widows and TPI Federation of Australia)

No further discussion.

Agenda Item 3.11

Removal of Public Hospital Veteran Liaison Officers (VLOs) (Australian War Widows and TPI Federation of Australia)

No further discussion.

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A35	DVA to reissue clarified guidance around requirement for SRDP/TPI eligible veterans to provide medical certificates.	Policy
2024ESORT/A36	Secretariat to provide Members summaries of discussions on Member Submissions addressed previously.	Secretariat

UPDATES ON DVA INITIATIVES

Agenda Item 4.1 Legislation Reform

Members **NOTED** the VETS Bill did not pass through the Senate as initially scheduled and remains in the Senate. Members **NOTED** the Bill is scheduled for consideration on Parliament's return in February 2024 and **ACKNOWLEDGED** the Government's proposed amendments concerning the statutory review requirement and appointment of payments related to children.

In light of the Government's proposed amendments, Members **DISCUSSED** the possibility of amending the use of terminology associated with 'Wholly Dependent Partner'. The Chair acknowledged concerns the terminology does not necessarily reflect contemporary values. Members **NOTED** further delay to the Bill's progress would be caused by revisions to terminology at this point. The Chair advised members there would be future opportunities to amend the Bill and requested the Veteran Family Advocate continue to canvass opinion and discussion on appropriate terminology.

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A37	Veteran Family Advocate to continue discussion with ESOs around use of 'Wholly Dependent Partner' and potential replacement language/definition for future review of Harmonisation Bill.	Policy / VFA

Agenda Item 4.2 Advocacy Update

Members **NOTED** the update on the ESORT Advocacy Governance Working Group proposal to establish the Institute of Veterans' Advocates, and **NOTED** the significant interest in the proposal, with 95 submissions received from various sources, including individual advocates and commercial providers. Members **NOTED** most submissions supported the concept of establishing the Institute.

Members **DISCUSSED** the need for a future meeting of the ESORT Advocacy Governance Working Group to address issues surrounding the registration of the Institute and the appointment of founding Directors.

No.	Action	Assigned to
2024ESORT/A38	ESORT to be provided nominations of proposed founding Directors to oversee establishment of the Institute of Veterans' Advocates for out-of-session consideration and endorsement.	Policy

Agenda Item 4.3 Update on the 2024 National Consultation Framework Review

Members **NOTED** the update on the progress of the 2024 National Consultation Framework (NCF) review and **NOTED** DVA will engage further on the next steps now that the Government's response to the Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans Suicide final report has been released.

Agenda Item 4.4 Update on Treatment Principles and Specialist Referral Requirements for Specific Procedures

Members **NOTED** the Treatment Principles provide the legislative framework for DVA's health arrangements and acknowledged the role of the Repatriation Commission and the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission in preparing Treatment Principles.

Members **RECOGNISED** the arrangements for the provision of treatment and associated responsibilities outlined in the VEA and MRCA Treatment Principles and **NOTED** that the treatment instruments and the Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (RPBS) are set to sunset on 1 April 2025.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the ongoing Thematic Review aimed at amending sunset dates and improving instrument relevance and **AGREED** on the importance of reducing duplication and enhancing efficiency in the provision of services to veterans.

Agenda Item 4.5 Claims Processing Update

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** DVA's significant milestones in claims processing for the Financial Year to Date (FYTD) 2024-35., noting the reduction in processing time for MRCA Initial Liability Claims and **NOTED** the finalisation of over 97 per cent of claims identified by the Royal Commission.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the increase in new claims received compared to the previous year and **AGREED** the ongoing need for process improvements to support veterans and their families.

Agenda Item 4.6 Sustainability of Veterans' and Families' Hubs operations

Members **DISCUSSED** the Royal Commission's recommendations concerning the sustainability and operational viability of the hubs (Recommendation 86) and **NOTED** that this recommendation was agreed in-principle by the Government.

Members **NOTED** financial sustainability over a minimum use period of 10 years is a mandatory condition to be addressed in the business prepared by the lead organisation when applying for the grant funding to establish a hub.

Agenda Item 4.7 Aged and Community Care Taskforce Update

Members **NOTED** the updates on activities from the Aged and Community Care Taskforce, including the release of two new information booklets for DVA clients and aged care providers.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the discussion regarding public consultation and communication related to the Aged Care Bill 2024, which has successfully passed through Parliament and **NOTED** that the Aged Care Bill will come into effect on 1 July 2025.

Members were **INFORMED** about recent clarification regarding palliative care and residential services, as well as insights from a recent Town Hall meeting held by the Taskforce.

Agenda Item 4.8 Update on the Handling of Personal Information Project

Members **NOTED** the update on the Handling of Personal Information (HOPI) project, aimed at enhancing DVA's practices regarding the collection, use, storage and disclosure of personal information and **ACKNOWLEDGED** the project's focus on establishing best practices and ensuring compliance with relevant requirements.

Members **NOTED** the importance of building confidence among veterans, families, researchers, and other stakeholders regarding DVA's handling of personal information and **RECOGNISED** the collaborative efforts with various government agencies to strengthen DVA's approach to personal information management.

Agenda Item 5 International Anzac Day and Domestic Commemorations in 2025

Members **NOTED** the update provided on the International Anzac Day and Domestic Commemorations to be held in 2025.

Agenda Item 6 Women Veterans' Strategy

Members **NOTED** the Department has initiated work on a Women Veterans' Strategy to address the unique challenges faced by women veterans in accessing support services and **ACKNOWLEDGED** the importance of incorporating insights from the Women Veterans' Policy Forum and the national gender equality strategy.

Members **NOTED** DVA's commitment to exploring ways to tailor and enhance its support mechanisms to better serve women veterans.

Agenda Item 7 ESORT Communique

Members were provided an opportunity to contribute to and endorse the ESORT Communique to be distributed following the meeting.

Agenda Item 8 Other Business

Members received a brief update from the Younger Veterans – Contemporary Needs Forum (YVF) representative.

Members **NOTED** the Christmas Reduced Activity Period and the RACGP News Article provided to members on the day.

Meeting closed: 4:00pm

ESORT Members	
Andrew Kefford PSM	Chair, A/g Secretary, Department of Veterans' Affairs
Mark Brewer AM CSC and Bar	A/g Deputy President, Repatriation Commission and MRCC Member
Kahlil Fegan DSC AM	Repatriation Commissioner and MRCC Member
Gwen Cherne	Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner and MRCC Member
COL Nathan Fraser	Department of Defence and MRCC Member <i>(proxy)</i>
AIRCDRE Kaarin Kooij CSC	DGJTA, Department of Defence and MRCC Member <i>(proxy)</i>
MAJGEN Greg Melick AO RFD SC	Returned and Services League of Australia
BRIG Michael Annett CSC	Defence Reserves Association
Wayne McNee (Legatee)	Legacy Australia Inc
Chris Lowis	Defence Force Welfare Association <i>(proxy)</i>
Chris Moss	Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans' Association <i>(proxy)</i>
David Manolas	Naval Association of Australia
Joe Iervasi	Air Force Association
Max Ball	Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia
Mike von Berg MC OAM	Royal Australian Regiment Corporation
William (Bill) Roberts OAM JP	Vietnam Veterans' Federation of Australia
Bev Benporath	The Partners of Veterans Association of Australia Inc
Charlotte Webb	Defence Families Australia
Jenny Gregory OAM	Australian War Widows Inc
Pat McCabe OAM	TPI Federation Australia
The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith	Australian Special Air Service Association
Other Attendees	
Alison McLaren	Deputy Secretary Veteran, Family and Stakeholder Experience
David Pullen	A/g Deputy Secretary, Policy and Programs
James Dallas	Younger Veterans – Contemporary Needs Forum (YVF) Representative
Presenters	
Alex Caroly	First Assistant Secretary, Research, Evaluation and Data
Chantelle Stratford PSM	First Assistant Secretary, Women Veterans' Strategy
Leanne Cameron	First Assistant Secretary, Aged and Community Care Taskforce
Tara Cavanagh	First Assistant Secretary, Client Benefits
Debbie Arnold	Assistant Secretary, Royal Commission Response Lead
Michael Harper	Assistant Secretary, VEA Compensation and Support
Cath Haffner	Assistant Secretary, Health and Wellbeing Policy
Simon Hill	Assistant Secretary, Legislative Reform
Moirra Campbell	Assistant Secretary, Privacy Assurance
Peter King	Claims Lodgement Assistant Program, Compensation Process and Payments
Observers	
Bob Hunter	The Australian Special Air Service Association
BRIG Phil Winter AM CSC ADC	Returned and Services League of Australia
Kirrily Magill	Assistant Secretary, Grants and Hubs

Paula Goodwin	First Assistant Secretary, Ministerial, Engagement and Communications
Amanda Conroy	Assistant Secretary Ministerial International and Stakeholder Relations Branch
Apologies	
Alison Frame	Chair, President, Repatriation Commission and Chair, Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission (MRCC)
MAJGEN Wade Stothart DSC AM CSC	MRCC Member, Department of Defence
Greg Vines	MRCC Member, Comcare
Amy Cooper	Soldier On
Del Gaudry CSC	Defence Force Welfare Association
RADM Sonya Bennett	MRCC Member, Department of Defence
Secretariat	
Morgan South	Assistant Director, International and Stakeholder Relations
Jessica Law	Secretariat Support Officer, International and Stakeholder Relations