**Minutes**

**Agenda Item 1 Welcome, apologies and conflicts of interest**

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 welcomed the new representatives from TPI Federation of Australia and the Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans' Association Ltd and thanked Pat McCabe and Ian Lindgren for their dedicated service.

DVA Update – Secretary Alison Frame

Secretary Frame updated members on current departmental priorities:

* Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) staffing numbers to support processing veterans’ claims and the overall positive impact this has had
* DVAs technology integration challenges and the possible options and solutions
* Recent legislative changes aimed at simplifying and harmonising the veterans’ legislation framework
* Arrangements for the upcoming overseas Anzac Day Commemorations which includes selected veterans and their families who will join the delivery teams on the ground, for the first time

**Agenda Item 2 Action Items**

Members **NOTED** the 3 December 2024 ESORT Minutes were endorsed out of session on 23 January 2025.

Members **AGREED** to close Action Items 2024ESORT/A27, A28, A30, A31, A33, A36 and A38.

Members **NOTED** 2020ESORT/A27, 2024ESORT/ A14, A17, A29, A32, A34, A35 and A37 remain in progress.

# MEMBER SUBMISSIONS

Members **DISCUSSED** the importance of reciprocal information exchange between ESORT and DVA and **NOTED** concerns regarding the balance of information shared and the inclusion of significant agenda items from member submissions. Members **AGREED** to discuss, at the June 2025 meeting, member submissions that refer to matters that Defence have responsibility for and how to best respond.

Members **NOTED** that decisions regarding qualifying service are determined by Defence, with implications for veterans’ benefits and **AGREED** to extend an invitation to Defence representatives to discuss qualifying service issues at a future meeting.

**Agenda Item 3.1 Australia’s Involvement in the Vietnam War (Air Force Association)**

Members **NOTED** the member submission from the Air Force Association seeking Ex-Service Organisation Round Table (ESORT) members’ support in recognising Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War through to 1975 by adding this date to the National Vietnam Memorial in Anzac Parade, Canberra.

Members **NOTED** DVA formally recognises the dates of Australian Involvement in the Vietnam War as spanning from 2 July 1962 to 29 April 1975.

Members **AGREED** for DVA to forward the member submission to the National Capital Authority with a letter of support and DVA’s formal recognition of Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War up until 1975.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the Saluting Their Service Grants Program (STS Program), could be a possible source of funding for the National Capital Authority should they agree to amend the date on the memorial.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| **2025ESORT/A01** | DVA to forward the member submission on Australia’s Involvement in the Vietnam war, with a letter of support and DVA’s formal recognition to the National Capital Authority. | Veteran Experience and Transition |

**Agenda Item 3.2 Measuring the success of the Wellbeing Hubs (Returned and Services League of Australia)**

Members **NOTED** the member submission from the Returned and Services League of Australia regarding measuring the success of the Wellbeing Hubs. Members **NOTED** the engagement of La Trobe University to conduct an evaluation of the Veterans’ and Families’ Hubs (Hubs) program and **NOTED** the evaluation will focus on two of the initial six hubs – Nowra and Darwin – selected based on their differing demographics, service types, post-service nature, and service providers.

Members **DISCUSSED** the comprehensive service delivery model of the Wellbeing Hubs. Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** that service delivery models are tailored to local veteran community needs at each hub and **NOTED** the evaluation framework will adopt a community centred approach, assess user expectations and satisfaction levels, examine stakeholder perspectives and identify potential barriers to access.

Members **DISCUSSED** challenges faced by some hubs in fulfilling obligations and the potential need for additional support and **NOTED** the relationship between sustainable funding for hubs and the proposed veteran wellbeing agency.

Members **DISCUSSED** opportunities for collaboration between hubs and ESOs, noting challenges related to geographic footprint and **DISCUSSED** hub longevity, consistency of service delivery, and community perceptions of veteran support initiatives. Members **NOTED** ongoing efforts to balance unique community needs with consistent service delivery across hubs.

Members **AGREED** the evaluation findings will inform the broader national hubs network and **NOTED** the evaluation timeline, with completion scheduled for late 2025.

Members **NOTED** the invitation for an ESORT representative on the Evaluation Advisory Group.

# UPDATES ON DVA INIATIVES

**Agenda Item 4.1 DVA Website Enhancement Project**

Members were provided an overview of the structure of DVA’s new website and **NOTED** the Website Enhancement Project scope and key highlights. Members **DISCUSSED** the Website Enhancement Project next steps and delivery timeframes.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| **2025ESORT/A02** | Secretariat to share the ‘DVA Website Enhancement Project;’ PowerPoint presentation with members.  | Secretariat |

**Agenda Item 4.2 Claims Lodgement Support Model**

Members **NOTED** the progress of the roll-out of the Claims Lodgement Support Model and **NOTED** the ongoing consultations with states and territories.

Members **DISCUSSED** the strategic initiatives underway, including claims lodgement, the establishment of an advocacy institute, and the rollout of business process changes to improve claims processing efficiency.

Members **NOTED** the record number of lodgements and determination of claims in recent weeks and **DISCUSSED** the importance of streamlining processes to support the functioning of the advocacy institute.

Members **AGREED** on the need for transparency in claims processing, including publishing processing times.

Members **DISCUSSED** the importance of screening claims for vulnerability to ensure veterans are not disadvantaged by commercial advocacy practices and **AGREED** to continue offering assistance to those lodging claims on behalf of family members.

Members **NOTED** an update on the medical information for claims optimisation (MICRO) pilot, aimed at reducing unnecessary tests and streamlining decision-making processes.

Members **DISCUSSED** the role of accredited advocates and the advocacy institute in providing seamless support to veterans, emphasising the importance of trust and collaboration in achieving positive outcomes. Members **NOTED** the upcoming planning meeting to address operational and implementation plans for accrediting advocates and establishing a code of conduct. Members highlighted the importance of face-to-face training and ensuring input into training materials.

Members **AGREED** on the need for direct communication and media outreach to inform veterans who do not access email or social media, about available support and encourage them to seek advice from approved advocates and **AGREED** on Defence’s offer to support engagement and communication activities.

**Agenda Item 4.3 Update on the consultation and co-design process for the establishment of a new agency to focus on veteran wellbeing and an ESO peak body**

Members **NOTED** the appointment, for the next six months, of Teena Blewitt PSM as the lead overseeing the establishment of the Agency for Wellbeing and Peak Body Taskforce and **NOTED** the engagement of Professor Mark Evans to support the department’s consultation and co-design initiatives for the agency.

Members **NOTED** the consultation and co-design process for the establishment of a new agency to focus on veteran wellbeing and national peak body. Members **DISCUSSED** the government’s response to the Royal Commission’s final report, particularly the recommendations related to veteran support and agency design.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the engagement of external expertise and the inclusion of diverse inputs to inform the proposals for government consideration and **AGREED** on the importance of continued consultation and co-design forums to ensure comprehensive and effective outcomes for veteran services.

 Members **NOTED** that CEO Nick Booth from True Patriot Love Canada would be visiting Australia at the request of Secretary Frame and there will be an opportunity for engagement and to share perspectives whilst he is here in mid-May.

Members **DISCUSSED** the co-design process, highlighting the integration of international insights and the importance of diverse input from surveys and focus groups. Members **ACKNOWLEGED** the need for clear metrics to measure the agency’s success, focusing on veteran wellbeing and transition outcomes.

Members **DISCUSSED** the importance of avoiding duplication of existing services and ensuring the new agency acts as a connector and integrator.

Members **DISCUSSED** the role of the peak body and the importance of coordination within the sector to enhance veteran services and **AGREED** to continue exploring ways to refine and implement recommendations from the Royal Commission, ensuring alignment with government commitments.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| **2025ESORT/A03** | Circulate the Nous Report commissioned to provide options on the role of an ESO peak body to ESORT members for their information. | Secretariat and Agency for Wellbeing and Peak Body Taskforce |

**Agenda Item 4.4 Psychiatric Assistance Dog (PAD) Pilot**

Members **NOTED** the launch of the Public Access Information Card pilot initiative. Members **DISCUSSED** the consultation efforts with state and territory colleagues to enhance the recognition and acceptance of assistance dogs, including the development of identification patches and cards for supported dogs.

Members **NOTED** the positive impact of these initiatives on the acceptance of assistance dogs on public transport and **AGREED** on the importance of continued collaboration with states to improve recognition. Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the need to expand the pipeline supply of assistance dogs, acknowledging this is an ongoing challenge.

Members **NOTED** the program’s popularity and high subscription rates, indicating its success and importance to veterans. Members **DISCUSSED** discrepancies in funding and support for veterans with assistance dogs, particularly regarding coverage of veterinary expenses, and **AGREED** to clarify the criteria for support. Members **NOTED** the distinction between psychiatric assistance dogs, which are highly trained and supported by the program, and general assistance dogs.

**Agenda Item 4.5 Business Improvements**

Members **NOTED** the ongoing business reform activities that are improving rehabilitation, health, and transport services for veterans.

Members were encouraged to provide any feedback to PDD.REFORM.PROJECT@dva.gov.au.

**Agenda Item 4.6 Future of the Operational Working Party (OWP)**

Members **DISCUSSED** the original establishment of the Operational Working Party (OWP) and its subsequent overlap with the National Aged and Community Care Forum (NACCF) and the ESORT.

Members **CONSIDERED** the proposal to disband the OWP, noting that its responsibilities could be integrated into existing forums to streamline efforts. Members **AGREED** to consider a detailed proposal or paper to inform the decision-making process regarding the future of the OWP at a future meeting.

Members **RECOGNISED** the OWP’s significant role in simplifying DVA processes and facilitating feedback from ESOs and advocates, highlighting the need for continued dialogue and **DISCUSSED** the importance of maintaining advocate representation and practitioner expertise within the OWP to ensure effective collaboration with DVA experts.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| **2025ESORT/A05** | A paper to be developed for the next ESORT meeting, outlining the value and potential restructuring of the Operational Working Party  | OWP Chair |

**Agenda Item 6 Other Business**

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

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** the team responsible for managing travel and accommodation logistics, highlighting the adaptability and support provided by the staff.

Members **ACKNOWLEDGED** DVA for its outstanding progress and effective governance, acknowledging the positive impact of recent changes.

Members **RECOGNISED** the importance of the meeting communique as a valuable document for ongoing collaboration.

**THE FOLLOWING ITEMS WERE PROVIDED FOR INFORMATION AND WERE DISCUSSED BY EXCEPTION**

**Agenda Item 7 Legislation Reform Update**

Members **NOTED** the update on legislation reform was provided for information.

**Agenda Item 8 Advocacy Update and Claims Handling**

Members **NOTED** the update on the Institute of Veterans’ Advocates was provided for information.

**Agenda Item 9 Claims Processing Update**

Members **NOTED** the new standard claims processing update moving forward will be as per the paper circulated to members.

**Agenda Item 10 Aged and Community Care Update**

Members **NOTED** the important reforms delivered by the Aged Care and Community Care Taskforce and **NOTED** the taskforce has now been incorporated into the new Home and Community Branch.

Members **REQUESTED** the availability of hard copies of the Veteran’s guide to living in an aged care home (veterans’ guide) and the Guide for residential aged care teams supporting DVA clients (provider guide) which are accessible online.

Members **NOTED** that the production of hard copies is in process, with availability anticipated within the next one to two weeks and **REQUESTED** that copies be distributed to their local offices upon availability.

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| ***No.*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| **2025ESORT/A06** | Provide ESORT members with hard copies of the Veteran’s guide to living in an aged care home (veterans’ guide) and the Guide for residential aged care teams supporting DVA clients (provider guide) once available to local Deputy Commissioner offices.  | Program Delivery |

**Agenda Item 11 Veteran Hearing Services Framework Update**

Members **NOTED** the update on the Veteran Hearing Services Framework was provided for information.

**Agenda Item 12 Transport – Booked Car with Driver**

Members **NOTED** the simplified BCWD access criteria for VEA clients aged 79 years or younger and updated infographic was provided for information.

**Agenda Item 13 Update on Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Members **NOTED** the update on Artificial Intelligence (AI) was provided for information and NOTED that the DVA AI Transparency Statement was published to the DVA Website on 28 February 2025.

**Agenda Item 14 Joint Transition Authority Update**

Members **NOTED** the Joint Transition Authority’s update was provided for information.

**Agenda Item 15 Women Veterans’ Strategy**

Members **DISCUSSED** the progress of the Women Veterans’ Strategy, with an emphasis on its development and anticipated completion by 30 June 2025.

Members **AGREED** on the importance of providing timely feedback on the strategy’s foundational questions to ensure its effective progression and **ACKNOWLEDGED** the Strategy’s success in generating interest and valuable feedback from various stakeholders. Members **DISCUSSED** the funding for the Strategy, noting that some initiatives will require a budget proposal.

Members **DISCUSSED** the need for more female advocates to support the increasing number of females veterans emphasising the importance of female representation in advocacy roles.

Members **DISCUSSED** opportunities for collaboration with the Australian Human Rights Commission on projects focused on the health and wellbeing of current female serving members.

**Meeting closed: 5:00pm**

**Annexure A**

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| **ESORT Members** |
| Alison Frame | Chair, Secretary, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, President, Repatriation Commission and Chair, Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission (MRCC)  |
| Mark Brewer AM CSC and Bar | Deputy President, Repatriation Commission and MRCC Member  |
| Kahlil Fegan DSC AM | Repatriation Commissioner and MRCC Member  |
| Gwen Cherne | Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, MRCC Member |
| MAJGEN Greg Melick AO RFD FANZCN SC | Returned and Services League of Australia |
| Del Gaudry CSC | Defence Force Welfare Association  |
| David Manolas | Naval Association of Australia |
| Max Ball | Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia Inc |
| BRIG Mike Annett CSC | Defence Reserves Association |
| Mike von Berg MC OAM | Royal Australian Regiment Corporation  |
| Bill Roberts OAM JP | Vietnam Veterans’ Federation of Australia |
| Beverley Benporath | The Partners of Veterans Association of Australia Inc  |
| Charlotte Webb | Defence Families Australia |
| Jenny Gregory OAM | Australian War Widows Inc  |
| Scott Jeffrey  | TPI Federation Australia |
| The Hon Martin Hamilton-Smith | Australian Special Air Service Association  |
| Rod Henderson | Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans' Association Ltd |
| AIRCDRE Kaarin Kooij CSC | Department of Defence **(proxy)** |
| CDRE Katherine Tindall | Department of Defence **(proxy)** |
| Kristen Hayes-Charlton | Solider On **(proxy)** |
| Peter Colliver OAM | Air Force Association **(proxy)** |
| **Other Attendees**  |
| Andrew Kefford PSM | Deputy Secretary, Policy and Programs |
| Alison McLaren | Deputy Secretary Veteran, Family and Stakeholder Experience |
| Brenton Philp | Deputy Secretary, Chief Operating Officer  |
| **Presenters** |
| Teena Blewitt PSM | Deputy Secretary, Agency for Wellbeing and Peak Body Taskforce |
| Luke Brown | First Assistant Secretary, Policy |
| Anna Williams | Assistant Secretary, Health Programs and Services |
| Samantha Patuto | Assistant Secretary, Compensation Process and Payments |
| Ingrid Nagy | Assistant Secretary, Communications |
| Kirrily Magill | Assistant Secretary, Grants and Hubs |
| Professor Mark Evans | Consultant, Chief People Officer |
| **Observers** |
| BRIG Phil Winter AM CSC ADC | Returned and Services League of Australia |
| Chris Lowis | Defence Force Welfare Association  |
| Paula Goodwin | First Assistant Secretary, Ministerial Engagement and Communications |
| Sharon Mulligan  | A/g Assistant Secretary, Ministerial, International and Stakeholder Relations |
| Sarah Kennedy | Assistant Secretary, Commemorations |
| Dylan Kurtz | Assistant Secretary, Home and Community Care |
| **Apologies**  |
| Wayne McNee | Legacy Australia Inc  |
| Paul Singer CVO | Soldier On |
| Joe Iervasi AM CSC | Air Force Association |
| RADM Sonya Bennett AM | MRCC Member, Department of Defence |
| RADM Letitia van Stralen AM CSC RAN | Defence People Group |
| Michael Duke | MRCC Member, Comcare |
| James Dallas | Younger Veterans – Contemporary Needs Forum (YVF) Representative |
| **Secretariat** |
| Morgan South | Assistant Director, International and Stakeholder Relations |
| Jessica Law | Senior Secretariat Support Officer, International and Stakeholder Relations |