

Women Veterans

POLICY FORUM



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Women Veterans

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Veterans' Affairs acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of Australia and their continuing spiritual and cultural connection to land, sea and community.

Acknowledgement of Service

We respect and give thanks to all who have served in the Australian Defence Force and their families. We acknowledge the unique nature of military service and the sacrifice demanded of all who commit to defend our nation. We undertake to preserve the memory and deeds of all who have served and promise to welcome, embrace and support all military veterans as respected and valued members of our community.

For what they have done, this we will do.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Women Veterans Policy Forum founded in a solutions-focussed co-design approach that recognises women veterans as the experts of their needs and collaborators on designing improvements and solutions.

This year the Forum took place on Ngunnawal and Ngambri country in Canberra on the 5th and 6th of March. In addition to gathering feedback on planned enhancements to the DVA website, there were 3 key topics explored:

- Establishing a new agency focussed on veteran wellbeing,
- Establishing an ex-service organisation peak body; and
- Development of DVA's inaugural Women Veterans Strategy

After two days of sessions exploring these topics, at the end of the Forum participants presented a summary of their recommendations on these topics to senior representatives from DVA and the ADF, pictured below.



From left to right: Alison Frame – DVA Secretary, Chantelle Stratford PSM - First Assistant Secretary Women Veterans' Strategy, Alison McLaren – Deputy Secretary Veteran Family and Stakeholder Experience, Kaarin Kooij - Director-General Joint Transition Authority, Gwen Cherne - Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, Paula Goodwin – First Assistant Secretary Ministerial Engagement and Communications, Mark Brewer – Deputy President Veteran Experience and Transition, Teena Blewitt PSM – Deputy Secretary Wellbeing Agency and Peak Body Task Force, Kahlil Fegan – Repatriation Commissioner.

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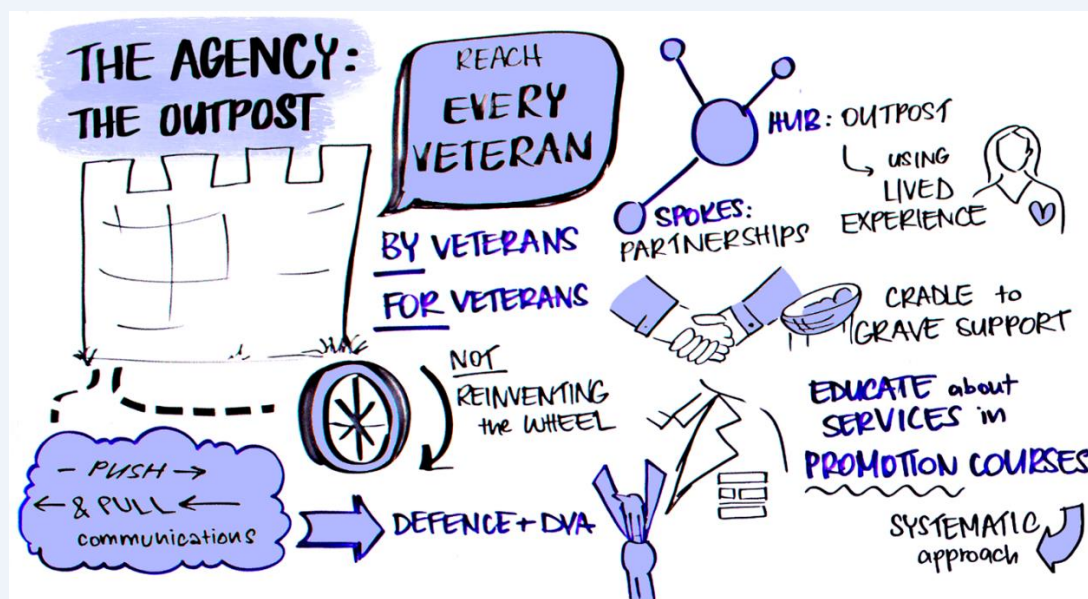
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Establishing a new agency focussed on veteran wellbeing

Recommendation 87 of *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide* is to establish a new agency to focus on veteran wellbeing. The Government response is 'Agree-in-principle'. The 2025 *Women Veterans Policy Forum* was the first engagement opportunity to gather veteran insights on this topic.

Key takeaways from the session are:

- Separation and transition planning needs to start from enlistment, with ongoing communication throughout service
- A major barrier to success is the existing stigma around accessing supports, and discharge type. To reach the people the Agency is intended to support, destigmatising must be an early focus.
- One-size-fits-all is not an effective approach. The diversity of the veteran community and their experiences requires an individualised approach to wellbeing supports.
- Ease of access –veterans 'take a leap' to access support and must be met with a 'no-wrong door' policy
- Individual case support with a single-point-of-contact navigator is the ideal
- Clarity and transparency matters – participants suggested an online portal where veterans can access their case details, point of contact, service provider information and how things are tracking.
- There's an opportunity to evaluate the existing wellbeing service ecosystem to analyse service demographics as well as the quality and consistency of the veteran experience
- Rural, regional and remote communities can't be an afterthought – they should be involved in co-designing the agency and this should be done face-to-face
- Ongoing co-design with a diversity of perspectives is needed; including First Nations, LGBTQ+, and women veterans.
- Don't reinvent the wheel – look to similar approaches internationally, as well as existing supports that are working well. Avoid 'endless discovery' by focussing on specifics.
- Use a spiral approach by testing and failing early, to adapt and improve sooner.
- Digital-led programs have lots of benefits, but not all veterans are digitally literate. Make sure there are options for other ways to engage.



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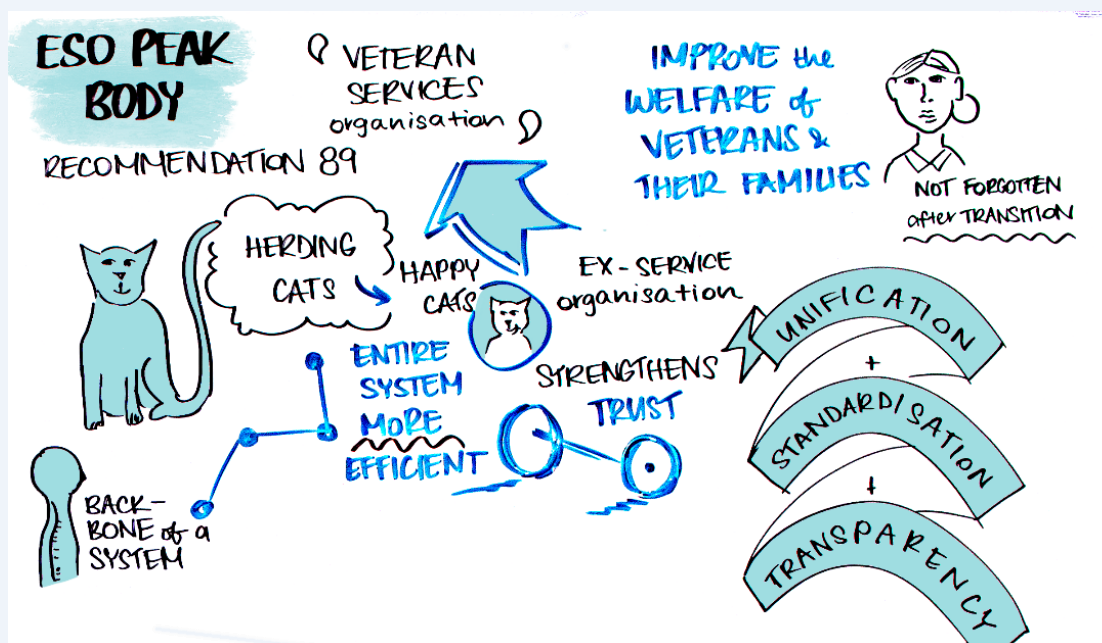
Establishing an Ex-Service Organisation (ESO) Peak Body

Recommendation 89 of the *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide* is to establish a national Peak Body for ex-service organisations. The Australian Government, in consultation with ex-service organisations (ESOs), should establish a national Peak Body for ESOs following a co-design process.

Key takeaways from the session are:

- Women veteran representation is essential for the Peak Body – and the needs of women veterans a key consideration.
- Representation should not be limited to the high-profile organisations e.g. RSL
- Diversity (including gender/service/demographics) should be reflected in the composition of the Peak Body
- Clear, regular and transparent communication from/to the Peak Body is essential to ensure that the community is informed and their needs/issues represented.
- Government funding and support for the Peak Body would be required
- Peak Body needs to be regulated with an enforced 'code of conduct' and accountability requirements.
- Peak Body would support greater accountability across the ESO sector
- The following were ranked as the top 3 most important functions for a Peak Body
 - ✓ Policy and advocacy
 - ✓ Training and education for ESOs
 - ✓ Promote collaboration among ESOs

"When Australians know that a Peak Body oversees veteran services organisations, it strengthens the public's trust in the services offered and the organisations that provide them."



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DVA's inaugural Women Veterans Strategy

Developing a Women Veterans Strategy presents an opportunity to build on the foundations of the national gender equality strategy, *Working for Women*, and to acknowledge and address the socio-economic, health, and wellbeing needs of women veterans in Australia.



INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Context

The Women Veterans Policy Forum was established in 2016 to provide a platform for women veterans to raise issues directly with the Australian Government and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), and to create new channels of communication between DVA and the veteran community.

For the 2025 event, an open expression of interest (EOI) process was conducted. Promoted on social media and through established networks in the veteran community, the EOI garnered considerable interest across the veteran community. Of the 42 women veterans who attended the Forum, 48% were new to the event. Considered selection of participants helps to ensure the Forum remains representative of the diverse Australian veteran community and includes participants who can contribute in a fast-paced and solutions-focused collaborative design environment.

Participants

Participants were drawn from across Australia, with every state and territory represented.

The youngest participant was in her 20s and at the other end of the spectrum, the most senior participant was in her 80s.

There were First Nations women, LGBTQ+ women, neurodivergent women; as well as women with disabilities, with service dogs, and using mobility aids.

7% of participants were from remote locations, with the remainder split evenly between metropolitan and regional areas.

Style of Engagement

The Forum is founded in a co-design approach that recognises women veterans as the experts of their needs and collaborators on designing improvements and solutions.

Co-design is anchored in valuing lived experience and creating an inclusive space for different opinions, perspectives and ideas to be explored in a respectful and solutions-focussed environment.

This report

This report provides a high-level overview of the feedback and ideas shared, including de-identified and verbatim quotes captured through notetaking and video recording.

Direct quotes from Forum participants are denoted by the use of quotation marks and italics. The remaining content serves as a condensed representation of the diverse ideas and discussions that took place during the event.

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Secretary's Address

A key element of the Forum is the opportunity for participants to hear from and raise questions with senior people in the DVA and veterans' landscape. The DVA Secretary, Ms Alison Frame, formally addressed this event.



A summary of the address was captured by visual scribe Zoe Mylordis.

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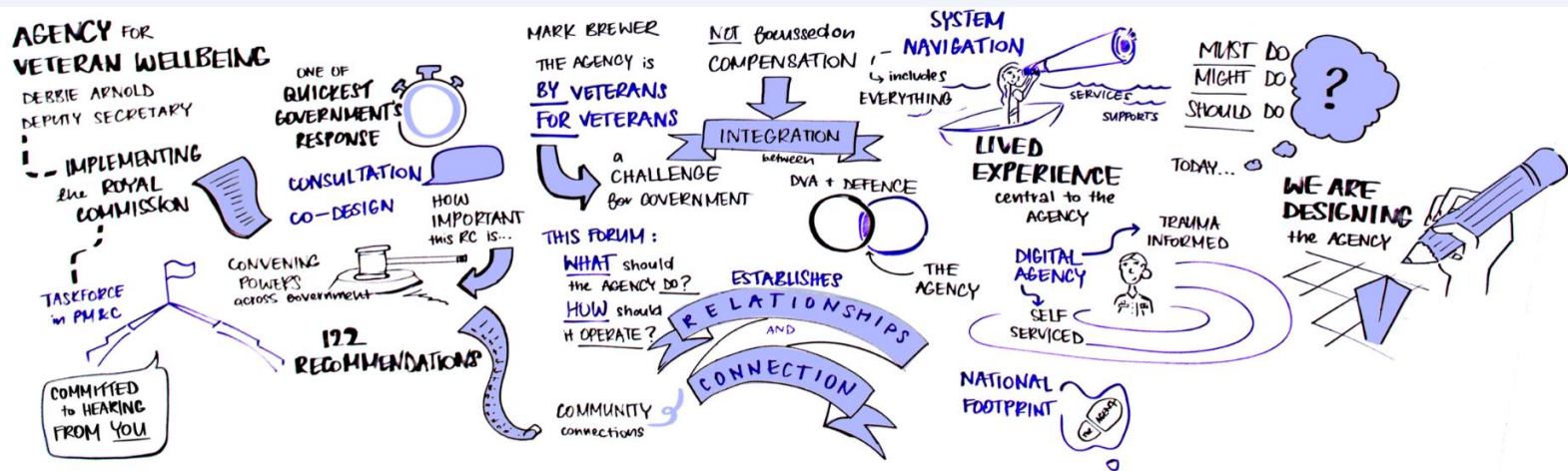
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ESTABLISHING AN AGENCY FOCUSED ON VETERAN WELLBEING

Recommendation 87 of the *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide* is to establish a new agency focussed on veteran wellbeing.

The recommendation outlined four key functions of the Agency:

1. Transition – building relationships and encouraging early access to supports.
2. System navigation – helping veterans navigate the wellbeing ecosystem
3. Improvement of referral pathways – integrating services, managing relationships; and
4. Co-design of wellbeing supports – working with veterans and ESOs on new programs and services.



Transition

Factors that impact the support needed during transition include:

- Type of transition (such as unplanned transition after maternity leave, involuntary discharge, medical discharge, voluntary discharge, etc)
- Time since discharge – those who transitioned recently have different needs to those that transitioned a while ago
- The difference between rank structures while serving
- Employment support and flexibility of choice for utilising training funds.

To connect veterans and families with support, the Agency needs to:

- Have strong referral pathways between transition centres
- Keep up to date with ESOs, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), Government organisations, and community groups
- Shift the narrative from the 'broken veteran' by sharing positive transition stories
- Educate proactively, perhaps via social media
- Ensure accessibility, especially when it comes to links, Hubs and MyGov
- Have a way for veterans to connect via phone

To encourage veterans to access supports, the Agency should focus on:

- Having peer-run support options
- Providing support to families
- Tapping into existing support networks
- Asking veterans what they want
- Promoting examples of success stories
- Ensuring that supports are flexible and easy to access

We heard:

Discharge planning:

'Discharge planning starts at the listener... because of the difference between the rank structures, types of transition, everyone will have a different transition pathway'

Continued, proactive education on transition:

'Not just at a transition seminar when you're thinking about discharging, but regularly throughout your career, whether it's one year, whether it's 20, whether it's 25 years, you are regularly given the education that is going on for transitions.'

Stigma associated with discharge

'We said 'reduce', and then we changed it to 'remove' the negative stigma associated with discharge. Discharge could be medical, could be voluntary, could be involuntary. So you need to look at the different types of transition and remove that negative stigma of retiring, medical discharge, or doing something different with your career.'

Changing the narrative

'Change the narrative of the 'broken veteran'. We just don't sell defence veterans enough to the non-government-type employers and businesses out there. We're not all broken.'

System Navigation

To get veterans to engage with the Agency:

- shifting the stigma about accessing supports is crucial
- provide information that is simple and clear, about how the process works
- reaching out needs to be easy with a 'no wrong door' policy – *in practice*. There should be a range of ways to engage, such as local walk-in locations spread across Australia, with a mobile support model for rural, regional and remote communities; as well as phonenumber access and an online chat function.

Once a veteran engages with the Agency, it's important to:

- identify vulnerable members early to get them accessing supports quickly
- ensure the process and information feels simple and clear – if it's too complex or overwhelming they'll disengage.
- provide individual/family case navigation with an assigned point of contact
- educate the veteran and family on the available supports and the process
- explain timeframes and manage expectations

Supports should:

- be individualised – not one-size-fits-all, with a multidisciplinary wrap around approach
- include peer-based options that are separate to ESOs and RSLs
- include face to face options where possible

Challenges flagged by participants included:

- shifting the existing stigma around accessing support and the 'broken veteran' narrative
- providing individualised supports to a diverse veteran community with varying factors such as digital literacy, access to technology, cognitive function, mobility and location.
- Finding a way to simplify navigation of a complex system
- Providing support that balances privacy and inclusion of families in the process

We heard:

Individual case navigation:

'It's important to acknowledge that it's not always the veteran that's actually going to want the support. It might actually be the family or co-parenting or whatever that diverse family network looks like for that person and ensuring that everyone's needs are assessed on the individual level.'

A 'no-wrong-door' policy:

'It doesn't matter what they walk through the door for whether it's homelessness supports, anything they really need, they can be pointed in the right direction and that also this could be at any point in time in their transition.'

Early intervention:

'One of our key recommendations is around identification of vulnerable members and engaging early with adequate and additional supports, picking up earlier that those people will need additional help. Some people are able to navigate the system alone, others need additional help.'

Referral pathways

The ideal referral experience for women veterans should be:

- Timely and helpful – ‘no further harm’
- Credible, trusted, safe and secure
- Trauma-informed with choice and agency
- Warm, non-judgemental and compassionate - ‘don’t forget the human in the loop’
- Transparent and accountable – ‘if you can’t support, identify fast and re-refer’

The Agency can set the foundations for this to be a reality through:

- Keeping the veteran as the priority – veteran-centric care
- Data governance and trust through transparency
- Broad stakeholder engagement that includes regional areas, is trauma-informed and inclusive
- Accessibility – multiple means of communication
- Embedding trauma-informed approaches as a key principle
- Leveraging existing networks to spread the word and encourage cross-referrals
- Developing a certification or ‘badging’ process to signpost quality and compliance

Potential challenges include:

- Developing referral pathways with options – not just referring to the same place where people have had a poor experience in the past
- Ensuring access to services that are holistic, and inclusive of women-specific support needs
- Rebuilding trust and credibility
- Getting a clear understanding of which existing services are delivering the expected standards of care, and where this can be improved

We heard:

Consistency:

‘This is really about making sure that there’s consistency across the referral pathway, that it’s fair, it’s transparent and it’s informed and veterans are informed. The Agency could set the foundations for this to be a reality by making sure they follow best practise, have a consolidated list of services, and make sure that it is inclusive for those in big regions and small remote areas as well. So it needs to be a referral pathway that’s accessible, transparent, accountable and puts a veteran first.’

Experiences vary

‘Not all veterans are the same - we’ve all had different lived experience from being non-deployed, deployed, and so on, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. So understanding that veterans have very different lived experience.’

Accessibility for all

‘Not all veterans are digitally savvy. So a digital service, while it sounds really good, it needs to be more flexible - a one-fit solution is not a positive solution.’

Co-design

The Agency can identify wellbeing needs and services by:

- Employing veterans with lived experiences of 'successful' transitions, and overcoming obstacles
- Supporting Agency employees who haven't served to understand veteran experiences
- Including currently serving members as well as veterans in co-design
- Widely disseminating publication of co-design findings and recommendations
- Utilising Forums, questionnaires and broader wellbeing research to inform service design; and
- Involving ESOs, VSOs and commercial service providers in the process.

To drive innovation in the wellbeing service system, the Agency should:

- Reuse what out's there already – we don't need to start from scratch
 - Refer to Nordic countries, as well as the UK and Canada
 - Partner with academia and translating research into action
- Use a spiral development approach to roll out fast, fail early and adjust.
- Listen and engage with the communities they serve.

Programs and supports best delivered by veterans and ESO communities themselves are:

- Peer to peer support programs (ESOs)
- Social connection programs
- Physical/sporting activities – knowledge of physical limits

We heard:

Learn from others:

'We don't have to invent everything ourselves. We should be drawing lessons from international experience and use a spiral development approach to test and fail fast - so we can adjust and deliver programs. 80% now is better than 100% never.'

ESO-led delivery:

'ESOs and Veteran support organisations should be leading on the delivery of well-being programs. We don't think DVA should be leading this, particularly peer-to-peer well-being programs, including those designed specifically for women vets. And for God sakes, no macrame.'

Differences in experiences, misconceptions:

'The opportunities for everybody at the end of their military career looks completely different. I transitioned as a digger. Doesn't mean I don't know how to lead a team. But people will have that perception, you're just a digger.'

Increased awareness and dissemination of initiatives:

'It's all well and good to say you did this (Forum). If we're not aware, we're gonna come at you for it.'

Different communication styles:

'I appreciate that most public servants are probably civilians, so they need to have that background knowledge of understanding of that language barrier you're likely to encounter with a veteran.'

ESTABLISHING AN EX-SERVICE ORGANISATION(ESO) PEAK BODY

Summary of key messages

Participants were divided into seven working groups to discuss their ideas for the peak body.

To summarise their discussions, each working group was asked: **“What are your 3 key messages for DVA about the ESO peak body?”**

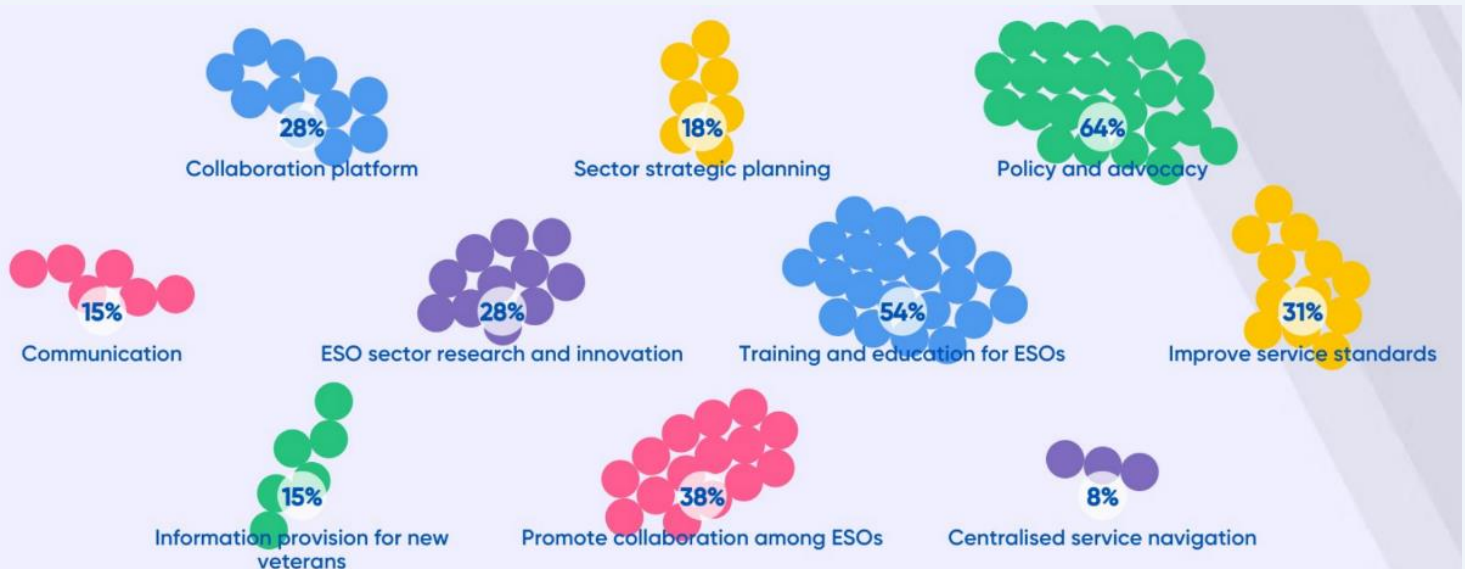
Working group 1
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Funding for ESOs to be more equitable 2. Better governance of ESOs. An avenue for complaint. Education and resourcing. Bylaws and constitution. 3. Diversity of ESOs and limited tenure (get rid of the old boys' club)
Working group 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accountability of ESOs with training, mission statements and feedback from consumers 2. Building positive relationships with ESO's 3. Governance of the ESO Peak Body
Working group 3
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unified voice for the advocacy to Government 2. Transparency and accountability around ESO performance 3. Tenure – must remain culturally and demographically relevant
Working group 4
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clear scope of practice (How is this body different from the Agency / Wellbeing hubs?) 2. Accountability – checks and balances, public monies, outcomes of growth, governance, data insights and code of conduct 3. The needs of the veteran community at the heart of all decisions
Working group 5
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Limited tenure – revolving committee 2. Open agenda / dialogue transparency in decision making 3. Sub-committee ESORT, one per jurisdiction feeding into national Peak Body with equal jurisdiction representation
Working group 6
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Should be independently funded (not ESO funded) to ensure it's not dominated by better or well-funded ESOs at the expense of others, thus holding them to account and not a talkfest of large ESO (include VSOs) 2. Incentive collaboration for the benefit of veterans (no businesses etc). E.g. grant programs 3. Increase professionalism of ESOs through education, regulation, transparency, governance and compliance
Working group 7
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transparency and governance are key. ESO -> ESO Peak Body -> Government 2. ESOs are to stay in their own lane – exploiting vulnerable veterans 3. The Peak Body and ESOs isn't about advocacy in relation to compensation (DVA)

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Key functions

When asked to select **the top 3 functions for the ESO Peak Body**, participants responded as follows:



Captured anonymously by Mentimeter online polling system.

Representation

Participants were asked to complete the following sentence:

"I'd feel represented by an ESO Peak Body if I could...."

Responses to this prompt have been summarised into the following themes:

- '.... see people like me represented and included at all levels. Not just the usual faces'
- '... have regular input and be genuinely listened to'
- '... trust in transparency, fairness, and accountability'
- '... be sure that the advocacy is informed by real experiences'
- '... see smaller and grassroots ESOs supported and uplifted'
- '... report issues, raise concerns and expect action'
- '... access information, services and opportunities easily'
- '... see diversity not just mentioned but embedded'

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DVA'S INAUGURAL WOMEN VETERANS STRATEGY

Background

Developing a Women Veterans Strategy presents an opportunity to build on the foundations of the national gender equality strategy, *Working for Women*, and to acknowledge and address the socio-economic, health, and wellbeing needs of women veterans in Australia.

The Department has established a new team to investigate where women veterans are missing out on vital supports, explore what more can be done at every point to address this, and improve their experience and outcomes during service, transition and beyond.

The Women Veterans Policy Forum was a key avenue to engage the women veteran community in the development of this strategy.

Chantelle Stratford PSM, First Assistant Secretary Women Veterans Strategy addressed the Forum, as illustrated below.



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Discussion paper feedback

An early draft copy of a discussion paper was shared with participants for their initial thoughts, and high level feedback.

Participants provided input on the areas of:

- Measuring progress and accountability
- Improving women's health and reducing the suicide rate
- Life course of serving women and women veterans
- Identity, and
- Gender-based violence

Needs map: wellbeing aspect X journey stage

Using DVA's wellbeing wheel as a framework, participants mapped out what wellbeing supports they needed most at different stages of their journey.



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FINAL COMMENTS

As day 2 drew to a close, attendees were invited to reflect on the Forum and share an insight about their experience.

'A highlight for me was connecting with amazing women from different lived experiences and seeing how many people from civilian fields who care and want to help us.'

'Women veterans uniting as sisters regardless of type of service, cultural differences etc.'

'I felt so comfortable in this group, I'd forgotten what belonging felt like.'

'This is the last time I'll be attending after all these years. The new blood is amazing and it's in such great hands.'

'Strong women cry, quiet achievers roar, we are vastly stronger together with a powerful chorus.'

'My experience in service matters and that together we can make and influence change.'

'People in DVA care about women veterans and want to make a difference. I just hope their work succeeds.'

'My voice matters and dialogue matters. Nothing about us without us and I feel heard.'



The Department of Veterans' Affairs would like to thank the participants of the 2025 Women Veteran Policy Forum for their generosity and candour in sharing their perspectives, ideas and feedback. Your contributions are greatly valued.

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