

Strategy Feedback.

**CQU SUBMISSION : DEFENCE AND VETERAN MENTAL
HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY 2024-2029**

Focusing on Regional Perspectives, Food, and Physical Activity.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2029 Exposure Draft. As an institution with expertise in health, wellbeing and regional community development, we commend the Department of Defence and Department of Veterans' Affairs for their collaborative approach in developing this important strategy.

We strongly support the strategy's vision that "Members of the Defence and veteran community are empowered and supported for optimal mental health and wellbeing during service or employment, during transition to civilian life and beyond." The focus on wellbeing factors across the Defence and veteran journey provides a comprehensive framework for addressing mental health needs at different life stages.

We particularly value the emphasis on prevention and early intervention (Goal 2), community connection (Goal 4), and using evidence and data to drive positive outcomes (Goal 6).

Based on our research expertise and experience working with Defence personnel and veteran communities, we would like to highlight three key areas that warrant further consideration and expansion within the strategy:

REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE CONTEXTS

The geographic distribution of our veteran communities requires specific attention in the strategy. Nearly half (45%) of previous service members reside in regional areas, and certain regional areas show concentrated populations of both current and previous ADF service members, particularly around Defence bases. Given these demographics and the well-documented challenges of accessing mental health support in regional locations, the strategy would benefit from explicitly addressing service delivery and support mechanisms across different geographical contexts:

- Including specific initiatives for improving mental health service access and delivery in regional, rural and remote areas
- Acknowledging the unique challenges and strengths of these communities
- Developing targeted approaches for veterans transitioning to regional communities
- Considering digital health solutions that address connectivity issues in remote areas

FOOD AND NUTRITIONAL WELLBEING

While the strategy presents a comprehensive approach to wellbeing factors, it notably omits the role of food, eating behaviours and diet in mental and physical health. We recommend:

- Explicitly including nutritional wellbeing within the wellbeing factors framework
- Providing education on the relationship between nutrition, brain function and mental health
- Considering the economic factors that influence dietary choices and eating behaviours, particularly during transition periods for families within a community

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, SPORT AND EXERCISE

Despite strong evidence linking movement to improved mental health outcomes, the strategy contains no specific mention of sport, exercise, or physical activity interventions. Given that movement has been demonstrated as an effective intervention for various mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety and PTSD in veteran populations, this represents a significant gap. We recommend:

- Incorporating movement as a key component of wellbeing promotion (Goal 1)
- Developing exercise and physical activity programmes specifically designed for the Defence and veteran community
- Encouraging community sports participation as part of community connection initiatives (Goal 4)
- Exploring adaptive movement programmes for injured personnel and veterans
- Supporting research into the efficacy of physical activity and exercise interventions for military-specific mental health challenges

Given CQUniversity's expertise in sport and exercise research, evidence-based low-cost physical activity promotion programmes (e.g. [10,000 Steps](#)) and the recently-launched [SPORT strategy](#), we are uniquely placed to provide support towards the successful implementation of the present exposure draft.

CONCLUSION

We believe that by addressing these additional factors, the strategy will be more comprehensive and effective in meeting the diverse needs of the Defence and veteran community. CQUniversity has significant research capabilities in these three areas and would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with Defence and DVA to develop evidence-based approaches that address these gaps. We commend the Departments for their commitment to mental health and wellbeing and look forward to supporting the implementation of this important strategy.

Approved and endorsed by:

