



Submission – Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy exposure draft 2024-2029

Introduction

The Queensland Mental Health Commission (the Commission) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2029 (the Strategy) exposure draft.

The Commission is an independent statutory agency established under the *Queensland Mental Health Commission Act 2013* (the Act) to drive ongoing reform towards a more integrated, evidence-based and recovery-orientated mental health, alcohol and other drugs (AOD) and suicide prevention system in Queensland.

One of the Commission's primary functions is to develop a whole of government strategic plan to improve the mental health and wellbeing of Queenslanders, particularly people living with mental illness, problematic AOD use and those affected by suicide. The current strategic plan is *Shifting minds: The Queensland Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs, and Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan 2023–2028* (*Shifting minds*). *Shifting minds* is complemented by 3 sub-plans:

- *Achieving balance: The Queensland Alcohol and Other Drugs Plan 2022–2027* (*Achieving balance*)
- *Every life: The Queensland Suicide Prevention Plan 2019–2029* (*Every life*)
- *The Queensland Trauma Strategy 2024-2029* (*Trauma Strategy*).

The Strategy lays the foundation to empower and support the Defence and veteran community to access appropriate services and enhance their mental health and wellbeing. The Commission particularly welcomes the Strategy's focus on addressing the social determinants of mental health and wellbeing, including through prevention and early intervention at key transition points like the transition to post-service civilian life.

The Commission broadly supports the Strategy's vision and goals proposed, which align with the *Every life* and *Shifting minds* Plans.

The Commission offers the below comments and feedback that may strengthen the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs' (DVA) commitment to addressing the findings of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (the Royal Commission). This is a submission from the Commission as an independent statutory body and does not represent the views of the Queensland Government

Enhance suicide prevention initiatives

The Commission supports the intent of 'Goal 5: Prioritise suicide prevention initiatives' and the Strategy's focus on de-stigmatising suicidal distress, thoughts and/or behaviours and supporting access to appropriate care and support.

The Commission suggests there could be more clarity on how suicide prevention initiatives will be implemented in practice, with consideration being given to developing a specific suicide prevention plan for the Defence and veteran community. The Royal Commission clearly identified that members of the Defence and veteran community are disproportionately impacted by suicide, with some groups being at particular risk. Notably, the Final Report found:

- Ex-serving men who have served in the permanent forces are 42% more likely to die by suicide than other Australian men.
- Serving men in permanent service are 30% more likely to die by suicide than unemployed Australian men.
- Ex-serving women are at a higher risk regardless of service type, with ex-permanent or reserve-only women being more than twice as likely to die by suicide than other Australian women.

These figures, and the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission more broadly, emphasise that targeted responses to address suicidality in the Defence and veteran community are required. A comprehensive approach to suicide prevention must focus on the whole population, but also address the unique needs of specific groups through tailored approaches and interventions.

Effectively reducing suicide takes strong collaboration and leadership across all Defence and veteran organisations, other agencies and the broader community. A dedicated suicide prevention plan would strengthen collective efforts, joint initiatives and partnerships across sectors and organisations, and build the evidence of what works to prevent suicide in the Defence and veteran community.

Embed trauma-informed approaches

The Royal Commission's Final Report highlights the profound impact of trauma on the Defence and veteran community, including trauma arising from military service, moral injury, military sexual violence, justice processes, bullying, and institutional abuse. Trauma can have lasting effects on a person's mental health and wellbeing, particularly when compounded by system-related trauma experienced through institutional interactions.

Currently, the draft Strategy does not acknowledge the impact of trauma on the Defence and veteran community, or the need for trauma-informed practice and approaches to support optimal mental health and wellbeing during a person's service or employment, or transition to civilian life and beyond. Embedding trauma-informed principles across all 6 goals of the Strategy is essential to ensure policies, services, and support systems recognise, respond to, and mitigate trauma. A trauma-informed approach moves beyond 'What is wrong with you?' to 'What do you need to feel safe?' and ensures services promote psychological safety, trust, and empowerment. Integrating these principles will enhance the Strategy's ability to support Defence personnel and veterans throughout their service and transition to civilian life.

Diversity and inclusion

The draft Strategy lacks recognition of the diversity within the Defence and veteran community, including the specific needs of First Nations peoples, LGBTQIA+ people, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, people with disabilities, and neurodivergent individuals. Defence's own cultural transformation strategies, such as the *Defence Culture Strategy and Blueprint Program (2023)*¹, highlight the value of a diverse and inclusive workforce in enhancing operational capability and effectiveness.

First Nations peoples have a proud history of military service in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) that continues today², but their unique experiences and needs are not explicitly addressed in the draft Strategy. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) reports 3,159 (3.7 per cent) of currently serving ADF members, and 11,610 (2.3 per cent) of previously served, identify as having Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin.³ The *Pathway to Change: Evolving Defence Culture 2017-2022* framework⁴ and the *Next Generation Navy 2024-2027*⁵ initiative acknowledge the importance of tailored approaches for engaging and partnering with First Nations communities. The Strategy should recognise the diverse needs of First Nations service men and women by committing to collaborative, strengths-based approaches that honour the knowledge, traditions, and service experiences of First Nations peoples.

In line with the *Next Generation Navy 2024-2027*⁶ plan, 6 diversity reference groups have been established to ensure the Navy is fostering an environment where people from all genders, beliefs, backgrounds, and cultures feel valued and supported. The Navy does not operate in a vacuum—just as Australia is broad and diverse, so too must the Navy, and across all of Defence, continue to adapt to remain a reflection of our evolving national identity.

¹ Department of Defence. (2023). *Defence culture strategy, Defence culture blueprint program 2023*. Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-culture-strategy-defence-culture-blueprint-program-2023>

² Department of Veterans' Affairs. (n.d.). *Learning about Indigenous military service in Australia*. Australian Government. <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/classroom/teaching/indigenous-service>

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Service with the Australian Defence Force: Census*. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/service-australian-defence-force-census/latest-release>

⁴ Australian Government, Department of Defence. (2017). *Pathway to change: Evolving Defence culture 2017–2022*. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/pathway-change-evolving-defence-culture>

⁵ Australian Government, Department of Defence. (2024). *Next Generation Navy 2024-2027*. <https://www.defence.gov.au>

⁶ Australian Government, Department of Defence. (2024). *Next Generation Navy 2024-2027*. <https://www.defence.gov.au>

A truly inclusive Strategy must ensure all Defence personnel and veterans receive equitable support that reflects their diverse backgrounds and experiences. This requires explicit recognition of diversity and the development of targeted initiatives that foster inclusion, cultural safety, and accessibility within mental health and wellbeing supports and services.

Expanding the Mental Health and Wellbeing Continuum

The Commission commends the Strategy's emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and promoting mental health and wellbeing. Recognising that mental health and wellbeing are dynamic and influenced by multiple factors is critical, and we support the focus on self-agency and embedding wellbeing at the individual, organisational, and structural levels.

By prioritising the wellbeing of personnel and veterans, the Strategy acknowledges that physical, mental, and emotional health are essential to resilience and readiness. This approach reflects a strong commitment to sustained cultural change—akin to other Defence capabilities, wellbeing requires deliberate effort and investment, aligning with the *Defence Culture Strategy and Blueprint Program (2023)*⁷.

To further strengthen this approach, the Commission suggests incorporating the Dual Continuum of Mental Health and Wellbeing, which distinguishes mental health from mental illness.⁸ This model acknowledges that:

- People can experience poor mental health and wellbeing with or without a diagnosed mental illness.
- People can live with mental illness while still experiencing high levels of wellbeing.

By shifting the focus to wellbeing as an asset that can be cultivated, the Strategy can better support Defence personnel and veterans in flourishing across key wellbeing domains.

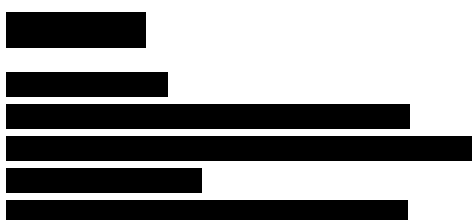
The Dual Continuum approach strengthens and aligns with the Strategy's 6 goals. By integrating the Dual Continuum of Mental Health and Wellbeing, the Strategy can take a more nuanced, strengths-based approach, recognising the diverse experiences of Defence personnel and veterans. The framework reinforces prevention, early intervention, and long-term resilience while ensuring wellbeing remains a central focus.

Strengthen monitoring and evaluation

The Commission welcomes the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Strategy and public reporting on its progress.

The draft Strategy does not make clear how or when action plans will be developed and departmental responsibility for this (e.g. the Department of Defence and/or DVA). Any action plan/s should be developed in partnership with people with lived experience of suicide and mental health challenges in the Defence and veteran community.

Further information on how the Strategy will be implemented, including the development and implementation of action plans, would enhance accountability and boost public confidence.



⁷ Department of Defence. (2023). *Defence culture strategy, Defence culture blueprint program 2023*. Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-culture-strategy-defence-culture-blueprint-program-2023>

⁸ Keyes, C. (2002). The mental health continuum: from languishing to flourishing in life. <http://midus.wisc.edu/findings/pdfs/56.pdf>.