



Australian Government

**Update on Implementation of Interim Report
of the Royal Commission into Defence and
Veteran Suicide**

as at 30 June 2023

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Recommendation 1: Simplify and harmonise veteran compensation and rehabilitation legislation

The Australian Government should develop and implement legislation to simplify and harmonise the framework for veterans' compensation, rehabilitation and other entitlements. To this end:

- (1) By no later than 23 December 2022, the Australian Government should:
 - (a) accept or reject recommendations made by the Productivity Commission in its report.
- (2) A Better Way to Support Veterans, that relate to reforming the legislative framework
 - (a) if it rejects Productivity Commission recommendations 8.1, 8.4, 13.1, 14.1 and 19.1, adopt alternatives that will achieve similar or better levels of harmonisation and simplification of the legislative framework, and
 - (b) identify and decide all other policy questions relevant to designing a harmonised and simplified legislative framework.
- (3) By no later than 22 December 2023, the Australian Government should complete drafting of the legislation.
- (4) By no later than early 2024, the Australian Government should present to the Parliament, and seek passage of, its Bill for the proposed framework.
- (5) If the legislation is passed, the Australian Government should, by no later than 1 July 2024, begin the process of implementing and transitioning to the new legislative framework.
- (6) If the legislation is passed, the Australian Government should ensure that, by no later than 1 July 2025, the new legislation has fully commenced and is fully operational. (This does not preclude setting later deadlines for any choices that might need to be made by veterans.)
- (7) The Australian Government should allocate to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), the Office of Parliamentary Counsel and other relevant agencies adequate resources to design, prepare, draft and implement the proposed legislation within the timeframes above, and to administer the new legislation once it has commenced. The allocation of these resources to DVA should not be offset by reductions in other resourcing of DVA.

Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government will develop a pathway for simplification and harmonisation of veteran compensation and rehabilitation legislation on the basis of this recommendation, noting that funding will be considered in the context of budget processes and fiscal constraints. The timing of implementation will be informed by what is required for necessary consultation and the passage of legislation.

Status: In progress

Preliminary consultation was undertaken in 2022 about recommendations made by the Productivity Commission and the Royal Commission in relation to legislative reform, which confirmed that there is support for simplification and harmonisation of veterans' legislation.

The Australian Government has invested \$9.5 million over two years to create a pathway for legislation improvement to address the longstanding complexities in the veteran support system.

On 16 February 2023, the commencement of public consultation on the Veteran's Legislation Reform Pathway was announced by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Matt Keogh MP, with the release of the Veterans' Legislation Reform Consultation Pathway (<https://www.dva.gov.au/about/accessing-information/what-can-i-access/corporate-information-access/reporting/reviews>). The pathway proposes a future model whereby all future claims are considered under one piece of legislation, an improved *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004*, rather than the current tri-Act framework. This will create a simpler system that makes it easier for veterans and families to understand their entitlements and receive the support they need, when they need it. The Pathway also set out which of the remaining recommendations of the Productivity Commission would be implemented.

Every member of the veteran community, including ex-service organisations has had the chance to provide their views about the proposal.

The public consultation process took place between 16 February 2023 and 12 May 2023. By the end of the process, the Department received 246 formal submissions from stakeholders across the veteran community. In addition, 17 face to face meetings were conducted with 266 attendees and 6 webinars were held with 300 individuals logging on.

The Government is now considering the information gathered in the consultation process, and will make a decision on legislative reform in the Budget context.

Recommendation 2: Eliminate the claims backlog

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should eliminate the backlog of claims under the *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986* (Cth), the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation (Defence-related Claims) Act 1988* (Cth) and the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (Cth) by 31 March 2024. To this end:

- (1) DVA should accurately advise the Australian Government on the resourcing that it needs to eliminate the claims backlog by 31 March 2024.
- (2) The Australian Government should provide DVA with the resources it needs to eliminate the claims backlog by 31 March 2024. The allocation of these resources to DVA should not be offset by reductions in other resourcing of DVA.
- (3) Leading up to 31 March 2024, DVA should undertake regular monitoring of claims and other data, to check whether the elimination of the backlog is on track.
- (4) Leading up to 31 March 2024, the Australian Government and DVA should implement corrective action(s) if the elimination of the backlog is not on track. DVA should monitor the effectiveness of corrective actions taken.
- (5) DVA should routinely, publicly and meaningfully report on its progress in reducing the claims backlog and claim processing times.
- (6) DVA should ensure that efforts to reduce the backlog do not reduce the quality of decisions made about claims, and do not adversely affect veterans' experiences of the claims process.

Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government recognises that the current claims backlog is unacceptable and that is why it committed at the last election to employing 500 additional DVA staff to tackle this backlog. Recruiting these staff is already underway.

Eliminating the claims backlog is a priority and will be closely monitored and routinely reported. Reducing claim processing times is also a priority, along with maintaining the quality of claims decision making. Work in addition to the employing of 500 additional staff is already underway as well as looking at what further work can be done to improve claims processing, including implementing relevant recommendations from McKinsey & Company (see response to Recommendation 3 below).

DVA has advised the Government that based on the current rate and projected rates of claims being lodged, the employment of these additional staff over the next two years will enable it to remove the backlog of claims by 31 December 2023, without adversely affecting the quality of decisions or the experience of veterans in having their claims processed. Any necessary corrective actions will be undertaken to ensure elimination of the backlog remains on track and are eliminated by 31 March 2024 at the latest.

Status: In progress

The Australian Government has invested \$233.9 million over four years for 500 additional frontline Australian Public Service (APS) staff to address the claims backlog. Recruitment activity since July 2022 has resulted in an increase as at 30 June 2023 of 364.6 full-time equivalent claims processing staff within DVA, with recruitment continuing.

In the 2023-23 Budget, the Government provided \$64.1 million in 2023-23 to retain over 480 DVA staff to help address the claims backlog in the timeframe specified by the Royal Commission and support downstream client services.

As at 30 June 2022, Client Benefits Division had 390 full time equivalent (FTE) staff in compensation claims processing roles. This had increased to 754.6 FTE staff as at 30 June 2023. With current recruitment and engagement activities, it is expected that DVA will have recruited the additional 500 staff working on compensation claims processing by October 2023.

As at 30 June 2023, more than 90 percent of the claims in the backlog as at 15 May 2022 had either been finalised or were being processed, with 3,759 remaining unallocated. The total claims backlog had reduced from 41,799 on 31 May 2022 as published by the Royal Commission's Interim Report to 32,153 as at 30 June 2023.

The total claims backlog continues to reduce and based on current projections the initial liability portion of the total backlog will be cleared by December 2023, as agreed by the Australian Government. The permanent impairment portion of the total backlog is more challenging and may take a few months longer than March 2024 to clear. All efforts are being made to accelerate processing of permanent impairment claims. It is expected that from March 2024 any outstanding claims in the Permanent Impairment backlog will have resulted from Initial Liability decisions made only 90 days or less prior to the lodgement of Permanent Impairment, and will be, in the most part, claims from current serving ADF Personnel who are already in receipt of treatment and income.

DVA will regularly update the Demand Driven Funding Model (DDFM) to identify any changes in projected timeframes for eliminating the backlog.

In line with Recommendation 2(4), DVA is implementing corrective actions to accelerate processing of permanent impairment claims. These include:

- Secondment of staff from Services Australia to undertake a claims support role of assisting in getting claims to a decision-ready state. 55 staff commenced in May 2023.
- Use of overtime for experienced claims processing staff. Processes continue to identify other trained staff in DVA.
- Engagement of a national recruitment provider to undertake recruitment of claims processing staff across the country, working with local recruitment providers where appropriate.
- A review of medical forms and guidelines on medical report requirements, which has already resulted in a reduced number of forms with work ongoing to reduce the number further.
- Exploring further opportunity regarding the provision of medical reports expeditiously for claims processing purposes, subject to Government consideration.

Since 23 September 2022, DVA has published statistics on claims processing on its website at <https://www.dva.gov.au/claim-processing>. The aim is to improve understanding of the claims process, assist in managing expectations and reduce the need for clients to call DVA for information on claims processing times.

DVA is continuing to refine the webpage to ensure the transparency, clarity and consistency of the information.

As per Recommendation 2(6) DVA is ensuring that the efforts to reduce the backlog do not reduce the quality of decisions made about claims and do not adversely affect veterans' experience of the claims process. The Compensation Quality Assurance Program continues to monitor the quality of decision making, and identifies areas for improvement. The MRCA PI Quality Project has been established to address specific trends and issues which have been identified as having the most impact on the quality of MRCA PI cases.

Recommendation 3: Improve the administration of the claims system

The Australian Government should improve the administration of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) claims system by 1 July 2024. The changes pursued should aim to improve veterans' experience of the claims system, remove complexity from the system and enhance efficiency in claims processing. To this end:

DVA, having taken account of the advice received from McKinsey & Company and other relevant sources, should advise the Australian Government about potential measures it could include within a program of work aimed at improving the administration of the claims system.

- (1) The Australian Government and DVA should decide upon the improvement measures to be undertaken within the program of work.
- (2) The Australian Government should provide DVA, and any other relevant agencies, with the resources needed to implement the agreed program of work. The allocation of these resources to DVA should not be offset by reductions in other resourcing of DVA.
- (3) The Australian Government should seek passage of any legislative amendments required to implement the agreed program of work.
- (4) DVA, and any other relevant agencies, should implement the program of work by 1 July 2024.
- (5) DVA should publicly report on progress towards implementing the program of work on a quarterly basis.
- (6) DVA should publicly report on the expected benefit of each measure included within the program of work, and, once implemented, report on the degree to which each benefit has been realised.

Australian Government Response

The Government agrees to this recommendation.

The Government recognises that some veterans and families do not have a good experience accessing support they deserve.

The Government will consider ways to improve the veterans' experience of the claims system, remove complexity and enhance efficiency in supporting veterans and families navigating the veteran support system.

Measures to improve the claims system will be considered by Government, along with any necessary legislative amendments.

The Government notes that work is already underway in response to this recommendation, taking into account the recommendations of McKinsey & Company's claims process diagnostic to improve the administration of the claims system.

The overall benefits of the implementation of the work program will be demonstrated in the efficiencies reported as noted in the response to Recommendation 2 above.

Status: In progress

Improvements progressed under Recommendation 3 will implement a number of the 11 priority initiatives from the diagnostic review of the DVA's claims processing system completed by McKinsey & Company in December 2021.

As at 30 June 2023, two priority initiatives have been completed, seven are progressing and two are not being progressed. The McKinsey report also identified 12 'in train initiatives' which were either being implemented by DVA or underway at the time of the McKinsey Report, and all are now complete.

DVA's program of work for Recommendation 3 is organised into three overarching streams:

- (1) Efficiency improvements such as claims screening teams that will reduce times taken to process claims
- (2) Improvements to the claims experience such as proactive communications with clients to support the transparency of the claims process
- (3) Preparing for the future by undertaking discovery processes for future ICT ecosystem, including ongoing improvements to the MyService portal.

DVA is undertaking detailed planning of these projects and the benefits they are expected to provide to veterans, families and DVA staff.

The immediate response to Recommendation 3 will seek to increase efficiency and transparency in claims processing by July 2024 while also preparing for the evolving needs and expectations of the future veteran community and preparing for the rapid implementation of legislative reform.

The 2023-24 Budget provided \$254.1 million over four years to maintain DVA's ICT systems and replace legacy systems that deliver payments to veterans, families and the service providers who deliver critical support and services to the veteran community. This investment builds on the \$87.0 million over two years, provided in the October 2022 Budget, to improve the administration of the claims processing system and modernise DVA's ICT environment.

Together these investments will enable DVA to work towards a modern, connected and sustainable ICT ecosystem that will support a simple, seamless and efficient veteran support system.

The Modernisation program will deliver improvements to the experience for veterans and families interacting with the claims administration system while also improving the efficiency of the claims process.

Modernising DVA's ICT systems will help veterans and families navigate the claims process by:

- Providing greater transparency on the status of claims and services through MyService
- Making it simpler to lodge complete claims through MyService; and
- Streamlining complex medical forms.

The program of work will position the department to deliver further improvements to the claims administration system over time, enabling efficiency and agility to implement legislative change called for by the Royal Commission. Ongoing business changes are progressing in support of ICT and business processes. Additional resources provided to address the claims backlog will be supported with improvements that enable reduced manual processing and help staff to process claims more efficiently.

These improvements form part of DVA's broader approach to ensuring that the ICT ecosystem supports a simple, seamless and efficient veteran support system with the ability to adapt as the needs of veterans, families, providers and staff evolves.

To prepare for the evolving needs and expectations of the future veteran community and preparing for the rapid implementation of legislative reform DVA has commenced co-design with the veteran community about the future capabilities of MyService and the Ex-Service organisation (ESO) Portal which supports veterans, families and advocates to conduct their business with DVA.

In addition, DVA has developed a framework and process to assess the technical and business fitness of ICT applications to support DVA staff and the veteran community now and into the future. This framework is being used to inform the development of the Digital Resilience Roadmap (the Roadmap), which will set out an indicative plan for government consideration to modernise DVA's ICT over the next 10 years. It will provide a visual representation of the strategic approach to modernise our ICT ecosystem, guiding ICT decisions over the short, medium and long term as we transition to a more flexible and digital first organisation.

When finalised, the Roadmap will be periodically reviewed and updated in response to changes to DVA's internal or external environments.

Public reporting on progress towards implementing the program will commence by the end of August 2023, via the DVA website with updates provided quarterly under <https://www.dva.gov.au/claim-processing>.

Recommendation 4: The Department of Veterans' Affairs to provide advice on its funding needs

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should provide advice to the Australian Government about its funding needs. To this end:

- (1) By 31 March 2023, and at least twice per year thereafter, DVA should provide advice to the Australian Government about:
 - (a) its future departmental funding needs, and
 - (b) factors leading to uncertainty about DVA's future departmental funding needs.
- (2) The Australian Government should use this advice to inform the departmental funding it provides to DVA.
- (3) The Australian Government should provide any resources to DVA, and any other relevant agencies, to enable DVA to provide adequate advice regarding its future funding needs as specified above. The allocation of these resources to DVA should not be offset by reductions in other resourcing of DVA.

Australian Government Response

Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government recognises the importance of closely monitoring, reporting and responding to the changing needs of veterans and families.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs will provide advice in line with the Budget and Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) processes on resourcing requirements and factors leading to uncertainty in those requirements wherever possible, but also notes there may be a need for out-of-cycle considerations.

Status: In progress

The Australian Government is investing \$11.1 million over four years to expand and enhance the existing DVA Demand Driven Funding Model (DDFM) and to support its operations.

The expansion to the DDFM will improve the modelling capabilities to better forecast future demand for services and to support its operations. This includes expanding the DDFM to cover a broader range of service delivery areas and the development of predictive models as inputs into the DDFM.

Expansion includes scoping work to understand the drivers of demand-driven activities, identify data requirements for predictive models, and work necessary to design appropriate model development, testing functionality and validation.

This will result in a better understanding of the future support needs of veterans and their families to strengthen DVA's advice to Government. It will also provide the ability to regularly understand resourcing requirements and drivers (such as potential future backlogs and early intervention needs), and report more holistic outcomes to Government.

Recommendation 5: Remove the Department of Veterans' Affairs Average Staffing Level Cap

The Australian Government should remove, on a permanent basis, the application of the Average Staffing Level (ASL) cap policy on the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Australian Government Response

Consistent with its election commitment, the Government has removed the ASL cap across all government agencies, including the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Status: Implemented

Recommendation 6: Increase protections for persons engaging with this Royal Commission

The Australian Government should work closely with this Royal Commission to design urgently an amendment or series of legislative amendments that provide protections for persons who wish to provide relevant information to this Royal Commission, including the two following cohorts:

- (1) For serving ADF members disclosing sensitive personal information who are currently, and intend to remain, in service, similar protections to section 6OP of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (Cth) should be introduced.
- (2) For serving and ex-serving ADF members whose lived experience is intrinsically linked to security classified or operationally sensitive information, the defence available under the Criminal Code section 122.5(5) should be extended to cover information communicated to a Royal Commission. A defence to other secrecy offences will also be needed.

Australian Government Response

The Government agrees in-principle to this recommendation.

The Government will take forward suggested legislative reforms to the *Royal Commissions Act 1902*. The Government will consult the Royal Commission and other key stakeholders on drafting of the amendments.

The Government agrees serving and ex-serving ADF members should have protections to communicate information to the Royal Commission without breaching the general secrecy offences in the Criminal Code. To achieve this, the Government welcomes continued engagement with the Royal Commission in relation to the agreement referred to in Chapter 6.2 of the Interim Report.

Conclusion of this agreement will permit serving and ex serving ADF members to access existing defences, including paragraph 122.5(1)(b) of the Criminal Code.

The Government will also consider secrecy offences for future Royal Commissions as part of the Secrecy Provisions Review being undertaken by the Attorney-General's Department.

Status: In progress

An arrangement between the Royal Commission and the Secretary of Defence, Chief of the Defence Force and the Secretary of DVA was entered into on 18 October 2022. This arrangement allows for the disclosure of certain Commonwealth information (other than highly sensitive information) to the Royal Commission by current employees of Defence (including ADF members) and DVA, to be considered part of 'official duties' if those employees provide this information, and if it is disclosed in accordance with the arrangement. The Royal Commission publicly announced the 18 October 2022 arrangement through a [public fact sheet](#) published on 16 December 2022, and [media release](#) on 6 January 2023.

Further, The *Royal Commissions Amendment (Enhancing Engagement) Act 2023* commenced on 12 April 2023. It introduced a new section (6OQ) which applies limitations on the use and disclosure of information given by individuals to the Royal Commission about their experiences of suicide, suicidality, poor mental health and related systemic issues.

The Government consulted representatives from the Royal Commission, members of the Royal Commission's Stakeholder Reference Group, members of DVA's National Consultation

Framework and representatives from the Defence and Veterans Legal Service, in preparing the amendments.

The Attorney-General's Department has also provided the interim report of the Review of Secrecy Provisions to the Attorney-General on 31 January 2023. The interim report focused on whether any amendments to general and specific secrecy offences in Commonwealth legislation are necessary to adequately protect individuals who provide information to Royal Commissions balanced against other essential public interests. The interim report will inform the final report. The Review timetable has been extended from 30 June 2023 to 31 August 2023.

All current Royal Commissions were consulted on a short consultation paper that informed the interim report.

Recommendation 7: Provide exemption from parliamentary privilege

Where their terms of reference require an examination of government, Royal Commissions should be made exempt from section 16(3)(c) of the *Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987* (Cth)

Australian Government Response

The Government notes this recommendation.

The Government recognises the importance of Royal Commissions being able to thoroughly investigate, and provide recommendations in relation to their terms of reference and is committed to assisting Royal Commissions to conduct their inquiries.

The *Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987* provides important protections for freedom of speech in Parliament. Section 16 of the Act protects proceedings in Parliament from being questioned or impeached in a court or tribunal. Broadly, section 16(3)(c) prevents the drawing of inferences or conclusions from proceedings in Parliament, in any court or tribunal (which includes a Royal Commission).

The Government considers that Royal Commissions can carry out their functions without infringing section 16(3) (c).

Status: Noted by Government

The Attorney-General has written to Chair Kaldas, the Presiding Officers and the Chairs of the Privileges Committees and Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee to advise the Commonwealth will adopt the practice of identifying material that may concern proceedings in Parliament and leaving it to the Royal Commission to ensure it uses the material consistently with s 16(3) of the *Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987* (Cth).

Recommendation 8: Limit public interest immunity claims

The Australian Government should reform immediately policies and practices related to public interest immunity to limit claims to where there is a specific harm contemplated from disclosure to Royal Commissions. Where there is uncertainty about potential harm, mechanisms within the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (Cth) should be used to support the production of the document or information.

Australian Government Response

The Government notes this recommendation.

The Government agrees with the need for Royal Commissions to have access to the information they need to ensure their work is effective and efficient.

The Government also recognises the significant harm that public interest immunity (PII) is designed to guard against. For example, there is a strong and longstanding convention that deliberations and discussions within Cabinet remain confidential. This is to preserve and support the principle of collective responsibility, which is critical to our system of government.

The Government will improve policies and practices to streamline and introduce additional rigour around the use of PII claims in Royal Commissions. This will include clarifying the bases on which PII claims are made, and introducing additional requirements regarding the justification of claims.

Status: Noted by Government

The Attorney-General's Department is consulting with relevant Commonwealth departments to settle guidance material to assist agencies making PII claims over documents or information. Guidance material will be settled as soon as practicable.

Recommendation 9: Improve administrative release of information

The Australian Government should:

- (1) by March 2023, produce and publish administrative release guidelines to better support applicants to access information held by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and Defence, and
- (2) immediately prioritise use of administrative release and proactively work with applicants to facilitate access via this process, including following a request for information under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Cth)* and the *Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)* – but without delaying or restricting processes under either of these Acts.

Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government recognises how clear, published, department-wide, trauma-informed policies regarding the administrative release of information, consistent with Australian information law principles, would empower both applicants and decision makers.

The Government further recognises how such policies would enable the proactive use of administrative release for applications for information, whether made under or outside the Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Cth) and the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth).

The Government also recognises the importance of consultation on the means of information access, as well as education about processes, and will seek to do so consistently with its work on Recommendation 13 below.

Status: Implemented

Defence and DVA have worked closely to ensure alignment of the key principles and artefacts for implementing Recommendations 9-13, including a joint external communications plan across both Departments.

Following implementation in March 2023, Defence and DVA are actively seeking feedback to identify areas for improvement to enhance the experience of applicants when accessing information held by both departments.

Defence and DVA have developed aligned Administrative Access Guidelines based on the Office of the Information Access Commission's FOI Guidelines. The guidelines prioritise the administrative release of information and support business areas to provide a consistent and transparent approach to releasing information.

Administrative release processes complement, but do not delay or restrict, processes under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Cth)* or the *Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)*.

Defence and DVA's Administration Release Guidelines were produced and published in March 2023 and can be found here:

- www.defence.gov.au/about/accessing-information
- www.dva.gov.au/about/accessing-information

Recommendation 10: Co-design information to increase awareness of redactions for access requests

The Australian Government should engage with serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members and their families to complete by March 2023 co-design information to raise the awareness of redaction and how it might apply to information provided to applicants seeking information from Defence or the Department of Veterans' Affairs under all information access request mechanisms.

Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government, through Defence and DVA, will undertake co-design with serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members and families to raise awareness of redaction and how it applies to accessing information from Defence or DVA.

Defence and DVA have commenced work towards this recommendation.

Status: Implemented

Thirteen (13) co-design workshops, comprising of both face-to-face and virtual sessions, were undertaken nationally, engaging 96 individual veterans, serving members, family members and representatives.

The insights derived from the co-design workshops informed the development of tailored redaction guidelines that clearly outline how redactions may be applied to information access requests in Defence and DVA.

Defence and DVA produced aligned Redaction Guidelines and a range of supporting educational materials designed for applicants which were published in March 2023.

Recommendation 11: Embed trauma-informed practices for information access

Trauma-informed practices should be embedded in Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) interactions with individuals seeking information from either department. These trauma-informed practices should form part of ongoing training for relevant personnel in each department.

Where possible, there should be a single point of contact within each of Defence and DVA to provide continuity and consistency to applicants seeking information from within each agency.

Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government acknowledges that serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families may seek information at times of vulnerability or stress. The Government recognises that adopting a trauma-informed approach when interacting with a person seeking information, regardless of why that person is seeking information, provides an opportunity to better support current and former ADF members and their families.

The Government will leverage the work already undertaken by DVA through the Veteran Centric Reform program and the recent Defence improvements to information exchange practices, recognising that more needs to be done to ensure that a trauma-informed process is consistently applied across Defence and DVA.

The Government recognises the importance of the provision of a single point of contact for applicants and support to prepare and digest the information supplied as part of a trauma-informed process.

Status: Implemented

While the express requirements of Recommendation 11 have been implemented, embedding of trauma-informed practice is a continuous process.

Both Departments have established Information Access Units that provide centralised management of requests for information. The Defence Information Access Unit is the preferred and promoted avenue for accessing member records. The Defence Information Access Unit proactively engages with applications to facilitate access to records.

The Defence and DVA Information Access Units provide a single point of contact within Defence and DVA for continuity and consistency for applicants seeking information from within both departments.

Defence and DVA have taken a 'no wrong door' approach across departments for information access requests, including implementing the following:

- Warm handover telephone calls for clients calling 1800DEFENCE and 1800VETERAN, including direct transfers between departments.
- Warm handover processes for where documents received by one department require partial or full action by the other department.
- Alignment and enhancement of information architecture and content of both websites to make it easier and faster to access supports.

Defence and DVA have produced a single set of trauma-informed principles. Trauma-informed practices are applied in Defence interactions with individuals seeking information through the Defence Information Access Unit. Trauma-informed practices will form part of ongoing training for Information Access Unit personnel in Defence and DVA.

These principles are available to all staff to access and use them as appropriate. Ongoing training and monitoring of information release practices will enable assurance that trauma informed practices have been embedded.

Recommendation 12: Encourage up-to-date consent for information access

By March 2023, the Australian Government should increase the number of opportunities for serving or ex-serving ADF members to provide or amend their consent to disclose, information to family members or nominated representatives.

Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government, through Defence and DVA, will optimise and increase the opportunities available to serving and ex-serving ADF members to provide or change consent to Defence or DVA to provide their personal information to other persons.

Status: Implemented

A baselining exercise was conducted to review all current mechanisms across Defence and DVA for current and ex-serving members to provide or amend their consent to disclose personal information to family members or nominated representatives.

Both departments have identified immediate opportunities to provide or amend consent, for example within the transition process for separating members and families. A pro-active approach to consent for access to information will be taken to identify future opportunities that will build on initial improvements beyond March 2023, including an annual reminder for all members to review and update consent as required.

This will ensure both Defence and DVA continue to better support veterans and enhance their experience when accessing information held by both departments. This includes collaboration to improve the transition of data across departments as part of the life cycle.

These opportunities are supported by education materials and improved access mechanisms to increase awareness and make it easier for individuals to update or amend their consent to disclose information. Defence and DVA's Administrative Release Guidelines and Redaction Guidelines also include information on consent.

Recommendation 13: Co-design education on information access mechanisms

The Australian Government should engage with serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families in order to complete, by March 2023, co-designed education material on information access mechanisms used by Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). Educational material should be targeted to serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families.

Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government, through Defence and DVA, will co-design education material, targeted to serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families, to enhance their understanding of the information access mechanisms and the trauma-informed supports available to those accessing information.

Status: Implemented

Defence and DVA engaged with serving and ex-serving ADF members, their families and representatives to co-design educational material on information access. The education materials have been aligned between Defence and DVA where appropriate.

The materials, that include the Administrative Release Guidelines, were drafted using a user centric design approach to target the needs of serving and ex-serving ADF members, their families and representatives. Language is easily digestible and consistent 'how to' processes have been incorporated ensuring inclusivity of a diverse audience.

The educational materials were published in March 2023 and can be found here:

- www.defence.gov.au/about/accessing-information
- www.dva.gov.au/about/accessing-information