**MINUTES**

The Chair welcomed members to the first Operational Working Party (OWP) meeting of 2020.

The Chair noted apologies from

* Mr John McNeill, Australian Veterans Alliance
* Mr John King, Returned Services League of Australia (RSL); and
* Mr Allan Thomas, Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans’ Association

And welcomed

* Ms Renee Mills as proxy for Mr King; and
* Mr Ray Kemp representing the Navy Association of Australia after the sad news of the passing of member Mr Terry Meehan, who will be sadly missed as his contributions and support were much appreciated.

The Chair advised members that due to COVID -19, the meetings will take place via teleconference until the restrictions are lifted. As a result the agenda has been split into two meetings, with the second meeting on Thursday, 23 April 2020. The Chair also explained the protocols and that due to the current environment we will continue with shorter teleconference meetings.

# Agenda Item 1. Opening Remarks

The Chair opened the meeting with welcome to country and acknowledged all who are serving and those who have served in the Australian Defence Force.

# Agenda Item 2. Minutes and Actions Arising

The minutes of the 21 November 2019 meeting were accepted as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

Members agreed that the following actions can be closed: 50, 55, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 70 and 72.

Members agreed that the following actions would remain open or in progress: 37, 64 and 68.

**Agenda Item 3. Strategic Update - Priorities for 2020**

**3a. COVID-19 Update**

The Chair provided an update on COVID-19 pandemic and explained the Government stimulus package, he also provided information on how the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) is responding to this crisis by limiting contact and abiding by the distancing rules, DVA are pausing face-to-face contact at Veteran Access Network (VAN) offices and operating by phone contact, most staff are working from home and advised further information on the pandemic can we found on the DVA Website as this is being regularly updated. He also reminded members to make sure their details were up to date on MyService (especially bank account details) and to remind their cohorts.

A few members raised concerns over transition seminars and the On Base Advisory Service (OBAS) operations. The Chair informed members that transition services will run as smoothly as possible as some OBAS services were still operating and that transition requests have slowed down.

Ms Pat McCabe raised concerns over supermarket issues recognising Veteran cards (cards) in relation to veterans entering stores during the vulnerable customer opening hours. Members also made comments about supermarkets not recognising cards when shopping on-line and some supermarkets have problems with the different card colours in consideration to their benefits.

Ms McCabe advised she contacted Coles and Woolworths, Coles advised they don’t have anything in place for the cards and indicated it was a legal issue with DVA. DVA stated there is no legal issues and asked Ms McCabe to forward the email advice and they will investigate. Woolworths have recognised the problem and have rectified this issue.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/73 | DVA to investigate supermarket home delivery support for Veterans. | Rachael Goddard |

# 3b. National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention and Veteran Family Advocate

The Deputy Chair informed the members on the appointment process of the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide. They will have similar powers to a Royal Commission and make findings and recommendation to the Government. Public reporting will be delivered through an Annual Veteran and Defence Suicide Death Report to Parliament.

The Independent Review of Past Suicides, will be undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care will undertake the review with an Interim Report to be delivered to the Government within 12 months and a Final Report in 18 months.

Members were updated on the selection process for the Veteran Family Advocate (VFA), advising this will begin shortly. This role will be similar to the Commissioner of the Repatriation Commission.

The VFA will engage directly with Families and use their perspectives when policy decisions need to be implemented.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/74 | Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care - how is the health system responding and supporting mental health and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) oversight.  Website link to be provided to members. | VSD  Carly Partridge |

# 3c. Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing

The members were briefed on status of the Veteran Mental Health and wellbeing Action Plan (Action Plan) from the Deputy Chair, DVA received many excellent and thoughtful ideas and suggestions which have been included in a draft plan and has been distributed to a range of stakeholders with academic, clinical and service-delivery expertise for review and feedback. This has included:

* + the Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Veterans’ Mental Health;
  + the Veterans Ministerial Council;
  + the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists;
  + the Australian Psychological Society;
  + the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners;
  + the Australian Medical Association; and
  + attendees from the Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Summit convened by Minister Chester  
     in June 2019.

As a final step in the consultation process, DVA consulted across government in the development of the Action Plan—with Ms Christine Morgan (National Suicide Prevention Adviser) and the National Suicide Prevention Taskforce, and the Departments of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Attorney-General, Defence and Health.

# 3d. Improved administration

The Chair provided an update on the Productivity Commission (PC) Report and advised this will be a standing agenda item. On 5 February 2020, the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, the Hon Darren Chester MP, stated that the Government is in the process of finalising its response to the PC and its recommendations and that it will be part of Budget considerations this year. The May budget has now been re-scheduled to October as a result of COVID-19. The final report makes 69 recommendations and 26 findings to be considered by the Government. It calls for the system of veteran support to focus on the lifetime wellbeing of veterans, and for significant reforms across structures, governance, legislation, policy, and service delivery. The proposed reforms encompass the whole system, not just DVA and the Department of Defence (Defence), but also other government agencies, ex-service organisations, and service providers with serving and ex-serving members and their families at the centre. This is a substantial report looking at a complex system.

# 3e. Respect and Recognition

The Chair provided an update on the Veterans Recognition Package (VRP), there has been a good uptake on the program, since the launch in November 2019, our partner the Australian Partners of Defence (APoD) has had over 43,500 Veteran Card holders join and over 300 additional businesses signing up to provide offers to veteran card holders. There have been a few technical issues but these are being sorted and worked through as they occur.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/75 | Provide statistics of take up of various offers taken up by Australian Partners of Defence (APOD). |  |
| 2020/76 | DVA to investigate APOD sending regular email reminders to veterans. |  |

# Agenda Item 4. Member Submissions – ASASA

**Veterans Moving Interstate**

Mr John Burrows noted the DVA response and expressed frustrations caused to Veterans when moving interstate regarding handing back aides and then reapplying for those aides in their new location. He also wondered if the process could be changed in relation to DVA Client Numbers and cards which he feels should be transferrable between States as currently Mr Burrows has two numbers (one for Victoria and one for Western Australia).

Mr Tim Evans, Assistant Secretary, Client Access and Rehabilitation Branch provided information to members regarding Rehabilitation Appliances Program (RAP) mobility aides should be taken with them if they can be portably moved. He also mentioned the importance of re-assessments when veterans change address ensuring that the veteran receives the appropriate aides/assistance.

This has been an ongoing issue and the Deputy Chair requested further questions to be circulated and dealt with off line.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/77 | DVA to check legislation requirements in Productivity Commission Report context regarding RAP items being taken interstate when Veterans' move interstate. | Tim Evans |
| 2020/78 | DVA to investigate National Codes - DVA Veteran gets a new code every time they move interstate. | Natasha Cole |

**Agenda Item 5. Member Submissions – Vietnam Veterans’ Federation of Australia (VVFA)**

# Delays in Claims Processing

Mr Bill Roberts, presented this submission seeking an update on the delay of claims processing and noted that although improvements had been made, there are still ongoing issues and will contact Ms Cole directly to try and resolve his concerns.

Members mentioned issues when contacting DVA on behalf of the clients as advocates details aren’t entered into the system until the claim has been processed causing unnecessary frustration for advocates and their clients.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/79 | DVA to provide members information regarding industry standards on weight bearing and tinnitus. | Natasha Cole |

**Agenda Item 6. Member Submissions – Royal Australian Regiment Corporation (RARC)**

**Provider Digital Access (PRODA)**

Mr Clem Russell, explained the submission and concerns regarding the Australian Tax Office decommissioning AUSKeys and that he has personally had significant difficulty when registering new clients claims on MyService. Mr Russell is also worried that the system might not be able to handle the amount of claims information and that it crashes and the claims will be lost.

Ms Cole and Ms Louise Gallagher provided information on DVA moving Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs) and providers to PRODA for authentication purposes. DVA have contacted ESO Portal Managers via phone and email to check if they understood the email sent on 27 February 2020 and are providing assistance to individuals in resolving these matters. There were a couple of issues discovered with the ESO Portal separate to the PRODA implementation which have been resolved.

**Agenda Item 7. Member Submission – RARC**

**DVA / Defence Links Steering Committee (DLSC)**

Mr Russell explained the submission and provided additional information to members, he feels the Minutes from the DLSC meeting are not very clear and not getting filtered down to the appropriate people.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/80 | The Chair agreed that a regular report/minutes from Defence/DVA Links Steering Committee will be provided to OWP members. | Mark Cormack |

**7a. Update on the Prime Minister’s Veterans’ Employment Program**

The Prime Minister’s Veterans’ Employment Program (Program) was launched in 2016 to increase employment opportunities for veterans by raising awareness across industry of the unique skills and experience veterans can bring to the civilian workplace and has continued to evolve and mature.

The Program is actively working as Nominations for the 2020 Prime Minister’s Veterans’ Employment Awards have increased.

##### **7b. Defence and DVA Electronic Information Exchange (DDEIE) – DVA Implementation Roadmap**

Ms Cole, First Assistant Secretary, Clients’ Benefits Division, provided an update on the progress of the DDEIE project. This project is an important next step for Defence and DVA to streamline the transfer of relevant information to help deliver efficiencies, there will be no direct implications for our stakeholder in ex-service organisations, it will enable direct access to necessary information to support processing of claims and requests by veterans.

**7c. The Expansion of On Base Advisory Service (OBAS) as Part of the Phased Delivery of the Hub and Spoke Program**

Members noted there are inconsistency between OBAS assistance in a few different barracks which are not working well, communications between the advocate and delegate are non-existent and issues around advocates obtaining medical records for their clients. Members also asked who writes the reconsideration appeal if the claim gets rejected?

The Chair advised this topic will be discussed in further detail under agenda item 13.

**Agenda Item 8. Member Submission – VVAA**

**Combined Impairment Reports**

Mr Ken Foster provided a brief outline of the submission and asked why Guide to the Assessment of Rates of Veterans' Pensions (GARP) Tables are no longer shown in the Combined Impairment Reports Section.

Ms Cole, First Assistant Secretary, Clients’ Benefits Division, explained the reasons for changing the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA) Permanent Impairment (PI) determination letter and what is being done to address the veteran and advocate concerns with the changed arrangements. DVA recognises that clients/advocates should be informed of how a determination has been assessed and how any compensation payable has been calculated.

The Chair advised members that MyService is a work in progress and that he is happy for Mr Foster to work with the MyService Team to iron out issues and provide advice on helpful to advocates.

Members expressed their views on advocate details not being able to check on progress of claim as details aren’t included until its being processed, these details should be included earlier as the advocate can check on behalf of their client.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/81 | DVA to provide members with a copy of Commission decision package regarding weight bearing. | Mark Cormack/ Secretariat |
| 2020/82 | Issues when advocates call to check status of claims on behalf of Member and are not able to access information as advocates details haven’t been entered as this is done at the processing stage (should be included initially) as it takes a bit of pressure off the Member. | Natasha Cole |
| 2020/83 | DVA to contact Graeme Bland regarding locating DRCA legislation information. | Mark Cormack |

**Agenda Item 9. Member Submissions – Air Force Association (AFA)**

# DRCA Claims *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation (Defence-related claims) Act 1988* (DRCA) – concerns over coverage

Mr Graeme Bland explained this submission and advised the Chair that National President of AFA is currently in discussions with DVA Secretary. His main concerns are that Veterans’ that served between 1949 -1972 seem to have been forgotten, as DRCA claims being rejected, conflicting advice between the *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986* (VEA), DRCA and MRCA regarding doctors or specialist approval for toxic smoke inhalation by ADF Fire Fighters.

Ms Veronica Hancock, Assistant Secretary, Policy Development Branch introduced Dr Jude Van Konkelenberg, A/g Director and Mr Nicolas Brown, Assistant Director from Liability and Service Eligibility Section as observers to be available to answer any additional questions and noted that there were separate issues mentioned above to address.

Members and the Chair agreed the situation is very frustrating, as the 3 Acts (VEA, MRCA and DRCA) are very confusing and need to be aligned.

If the claim is made today, DVA is still able to assess the claim and accept the condition should it be service-related and treatment will be made available. However, should a condition be accepted and linked to a time period when a precursor Act would have been in operation, the sections require DVA to compensate for the condition in the same way that it would have been compensated under the precursor Act.

The Government is considering the recommendations of the Productivity Commission report and will release their response in due course. Any changes to DVA’s legislative framework will need to considered by Government in the Budget context.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/85 | Graeme Bland to send specific cases to Natasha Cole. | Natasha Cole |

# Agenda Item 10. Report Back: Australian Defence Force (ADF) Financial Counselling

Ms Veronica Hancock, Assistant Secretary, Policy Development, introduced Ms Wendy Cummings, Director, Benefits and Payments Policy Section to inform members on the progress and next steps regarding Financial Counselling.

At the 21 November 2019, OWP meeting, Mr Burrows raised the issue of the difficulty of accessing knowledgeable and skilled financial advisers, particularly for contemporary widows and seriously impaired veterans. A meeting was held in Canberra on 17 February 2020 between Mr and Mrs Burrows and DVA staff. The issues discussed were:

* complexity of the choices faced by WDPs and SRDP eligible clients at a time of significant psychological strain;
* inconsistent access to sufficiently expert financial advice;
* gap in the knowledge of advocates with regard to the MRCA benefits for dependants and seriously impaired veterans;
* poor communication between agencies;
* unhelpful communications methods with clients at a time of stress.

It was noted that various organisations offer financial literacy services including:

* Financial Information Service administered by Services Australia (SA);
* Financial Planning Services administered by Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation (CSC);
* moneysmart administered by the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC).

DVA staff have contacted SA, CSC, and ASIC representatives and are planning meetings in the near future.

Ms Cummings also noted a meeting was held on 12 March 2020 with Air Commodore Robert Brown.

A number of options were discussed in this initial contact. The meeting established the foundation for an ongoing cooperative relationship with ADF financial services.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/86 | DVA to provide updates on ADF Financial Services. | Veronica Hancock |

**Agenda item 11. Retrospective review of discharge classification**

Mr Clem Russell, RARC noted the paper and no additional comments were provided.

# Agenda Item 12. Report Back: Review of Lifestyle Rating Form

Ms Cole, First Assistant Secretary, Clients’ Benefits Division, advised members on the 23 March 2020 a member of the Procedural Support Team contacted Mr Russell to advise him that work had commenced and DVA would seek his input on draft material, Ms Cole thanked him for providing feedback and examples. DVA has a Letters Improvement Team that is working with business areas and incorporating comments and feedback to review and rewrite letters.

Members discussed the complexities of the Lifestyle Rating and the stress this causes to delegates and their clients this could potentially be harmful to clients with mental health issues. The process needs to made easier for delegates and clients as at the moment over complicating the process.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/87 | DVA to report back to members regarding the Better Letters program as required, when new information is available. | Natasha Cole |
| 2020/88 | DVA to check if there is an error with Integrated Support Hub (ISH), as information is not being automated. | Natasha Cole |

# Agenda Item 13. Report Back: Update on enhanced delivery of DVA services on ADF bases

Ms Tara Hatzismalis, Assistant Secretary, Client Channels Branch, Client Engagement and Support Services Division provided information on the status of the staged roll-out of Veteran Support Officer (VSO) services currently they are continuing as planned, as agreed to at the DLSC meeting in November 2019. The implementation schedule was agreed to by Defence, and DVA took it on board to continue the roll-out of additional support services to support ADF members and which is currently on track. Based on lessons lernt from The Special Operations Forces pilot and considering technological advances in recent years, DVA is providing a three-tiered service model.

* Tier 1: Wide reaching education and communications to encourage self-service through the MyService application.
* Tier 2: A client-based service enabling support ranging from light-touch assistance through to technical advice for moderately complex needs (a referral will be made to tier 3 if a client is at risk or has a complex case).
* Tier 3: A fully supported, case managed approach through the Triage and Connect client service framework.

DVA have recently conducted a week long training activity for new staff to ensure our services are consistent nationally and DVA will continue to implement the program, review observations and lessons as we progress, and adjust any operations as necessary in consultation with Defence through DLSC.

Members expressed a few frustrations as the advocates are trying to get best possible outcome for their clients and feel this is going to fail and they will have to pick up the pieces. Their concerns are:

* VSO’s not registering claims properly
* Clients should have an Advocate/support person/representative with them from the first consultation/interview.
* VSO’s knowledge of Statements of Principles (SoPs).
* VSO’s details should be noted or recorded, so advocates can be consulted if necessary.

Mr Don Spinks, Repatriation Commissioner, explained to members that a lot has changed since he transitioned from the ADF in 2018. He also advised members to attend Transition Seminars and reach out to VSO’s as they could gain valuable information.

Members also enquired to how they record their time for BEST Funding as there have been a few times when they have had brief contact with clients. Ms Hatzismalis advised to keep records and reports on the various types of assistance.

The Chair informed members that if they had any general enquires or required a VSO to contact them send an email to [VSO@dva.gov.au and](mailto:VSO@dva.gov.au%20and) it will be forwarded to the appropriate person.

# Agenda item 14. Other Business

**14a. Changes to the Referral Process - Legacy Australia**

The Deputy Chair asked Mr Bob Connor to provide background to members concerning an email he received from a physiotherapist regarding the changes to DVA’s referral system for allied health in late 2019 and asked if he had been contacted by anyone in the Veteran Services Design Division (VSD). Mr Connor said he had and they were going to provide a paper, he wanted to raise this matter to see if other members were receiving similar complaints or whether this was a one off incident. Members stated they hadn’t received any complaints from physiotherapists regarding the referral process.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/89 | Providers Forum update at a future meeting on Telehealth and what information OWP members can target to their memberships. | VSD |
| 2020/90 | DVA to provide an update of the review on Single Pathway Treatment at a future meeting. Who will the review talk to and how will the review be managed. | VSD |

**14b. Website feedback - ASASA**

Mr Burrows provided feedback regarding the Website, although there are some benefits, new users are finding it difficult to navigate to compensation information. Members agreed with Mr Burrows comments, adding that factsheets are difficult to locate, relevant references missing from factsheets, links to forms missing from the factsheets, past history not saving in Consolidated Library of Information and Knowledge (CLIK) and Peacekeepers and Cadets information missing or not included.

DVA advised members to send any concerns to the OWP Secretariat, for them to collate and forward to the appropriate business area.

Ms Cole, Deputy Chair, suggested providing instruction / steps for navigating the website and encouraged members to keep providing regular feedback.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/91 | Members to provide feedback on the new DVA website to the Secretariat. | Members |
| 2020/92 | DVA to provide instructions/steps for navigating the new Website. | Secretariat |

**14c. Telephony feedback - ASASA**

Mr Burrows explained how Western Australia suffers terribly with day light savings when trying to contact eastern offices of DVA and highlighted the out-dated telephone connections and responses when trying to contact staff and various parts DVA. Mr Burrows was very happy that DVA representative, Ms Maxine Berryman, contacted him and listened to his concerns and said she will look into these issues and see what she can do to resolve them.

**14d. DVA Delegates not including full contact details - ASASA**

Mr Burrows and members asked why DVA delegates full contact details including full name and position cannot be provided.

The Chair will consider the written advice and check the various legislation arrangements and advise member’s out-of-session.

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| ***Item*** | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to*** |
| 2020/93 | DVA to provide advice to members regarding issues in providing Delegates information. | Mark Cormack |

**Terms of Reference (TORs)**

The Chair asked members to review the OWP ToRs, as part of the National Consultation Framework (NCF) Review held every three years, the TORs are reviewed for each Forum of the NCF and will be discussed at the next meeting scheduled for Wednesday, 22 July 2020. The Chair asked members to consider how the OWP should be consulting with DVA and the veteran community.

# Meeting Closed

The Chair thanked all members for their attendance and participation asked members to continuing to provide submissions through the OWP Secretariat. The meeting on 15 April 2020 closed at 1.55pm and the meeting on 23 April 2020 closed at 1:45pm.

The next meeting is scheduled for **Wednesday, 22 July 2020** and will be held as a teleconference / video conference format, depending on the COVID-19 situation.

The Chair hoped members and their families continue to stay safe and healthy and reminded them to reach out to Open Arms if they or their members need support during this difficult time.