**Minutes**

**Agenda Item 1. Welcome**

The Chair welcomed members to the Operational Working Party (OWP) and acknowledged two new members Mr John Burrows, representing the Australian Special Air Service Association (ASASA) and Mr William Roberts OAM, representing Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia (VVFA). The Chair thanked Mr Peter Fitzpatrick AM who represented ASASA and Mr James Wain OAM who represented VVFA, for their valuable contribution to the OWP and the ex-service community.

Members were presented with a copy of the Repat Publication – a concise history of Repatriation in Australia. The ebook is available to download at:

<https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/publications/corporate/P03428.pdf>.

**Agenda Item 2. Minutes & Actions Arising**

The minutes of the 27 March 2018 meeting were endorsed as an agreed record of the meeting.

Members requested that minutes be provided in a timely manner after each meeting. The Chair agreed to make OWP meeting minutes available on the DVA website instead of providing meeting summaries for public dissemination. Members will have the opportunity to review and provide comment before the minutes are placed on the website. Minutes will still be formally endorsed at the meeting. The Chair reminded members the OWP is part of the National Consultation Framework and is a consultative forum, not a decision making body.

Members noted Action Item 9 (a paper to be developed on the policy of DVA engaging barristers from 1 January 2018, with the paper to address costs across jurisdictions and the availability of legal aid to veterans) and Action Item 25 (the prepared March 2018 OWP agenda item paper in relation to the AAT and appeal rates be provided to members) remain in progress.

Items 12, 15, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 26 were agreed to be closed.

**Agenda Item 3. Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) Rebranding Project**

Members were advised that the VVCS is being rebranded to ensure it remains relevant with younger veterans and their families. The new branding will no longer be an acronym and it clearly and quickly articulates the services provided. The new branding will be soft launched at the Invictus Games in October. Members were encouraged to discuss the re-brand with their members.

Members noted the update and supported the rebranding.

**Agenda Item 4. Productivity Commission Inquiry and Other Reviews Recommended by Senate Committee**

Members received an update on the progress of recommendations from current Portfolio reviews, including the Productivity Commission Inquiry, Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) audit of the efficiency of service delivery by DVA and Scoping Study of Veterans Advocacy and Support Services.

The Treasurer and the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs announced the Productivity Commission Inquiry on 28 March 2018. The Inquiry is being led by Mr Robert Fitzgerald AM and Mr Richard Spencer and will examine whether the system of compensation and rehabilitation for veterans is fit for purpose now and into the future. The Commission is expected to release a draft report by December 2018 and public hearings will be undertaken early 2019. The Commission will submit a final report to Government in late June 2019.

The commencement of the independent Scoping Study of Veterans Advocacy and Support Services was announced by the Minister on 16 April 2018. The study is being led by
Mr Robert Cornall AO, public submissions will be accepted until 31 July 2018.

A performance audit by the ANAO of the efficiency of service delivery by DVA has been undertaken, with the report being tabled at end of June 2018. Members noted the update.

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| ***Item***  | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| 27 | Update DVA Website with the link to the current Senate Inquiries listed on the Australian Parliament House Website. | Assistant Secretary Portfolio Reviews Taskforce  |

**Agenda Item 5. ADF Career Progression Working Group update**

Members were advised that DVA is consulting with Defence to understand how it makes a determination and to ensure consistency of determination decisions. This has included discussion on how a veteran’s career progression is calculated by Defence when considering compensation of allowances following incapacity and then discharge. A previous reform by Defence to move a significant number of allowances into an ADF member’s base salary was intended to address this issue. Defence has been provided with a copy of DVA’s proposal to achieve consistency of information and determinations.

Members noted the ongoing discussions.

**Agenda Item 6. Member submission – Communication Policy**

Mr Ken Foster, representing the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, explained that some veterans have reported they are still receiving hard copy mail, even though they are registered to receive DVA correspondence via electronic communications.

DVA advised that email is the preferred contact method with clients, however some forms such as the S137 Reports, are very large and cannot be received electronically. Clients registered with MyAccount who have indicated a preference for electronic communications will be sent correspondence electronically. Delegates should send decisions by email whenever an email address is provided. If a client or representative has not advised DVA of an email address, a hard copy will always be posted. Clients are invited to request paper hard copies if required, as DVA understands our clients communicate in many different ways. This has not changed as communication strategies have been revised. Members noted the discussion.

**Agenda Item 7. Member submission – ESO Portal on DVA website**

Mr Foster, representing the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, provided an example of using the ESO Portal and how he could not identify a *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation (Defence-related Claims) Act 1988* (DRCA) client.

DVA confirmed the ESO Portal provides information on all Acts including DRCA, *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA)and the *Veterans’ Entitlements Act 1986* (VEA) eligibility. However, an allocated DVA client file number is required to access the ESO Portal. Further work will be undertaken to ensure the allocated DVA client file number is included on lodgment letters. Members noted the discussion.

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| *Item*  | *Action* | *Assigned to*  |
| 28 | Further work to be undertaken to ensure an allocated DVA client file number is included on lodgment letters. | Director Business Systems Administration  |

**Agenda Item 8. Transformation Showcase**

The Showcase highlighted:

* a $110 million investment in the second year of the Transformation Program;
* expanding services for veterans and their families in partnership with Australia Post;
* the ongoing digitisation of client files, which continues to assist in reducing the time taken to process claims;
* the demonstration of new enhancements within the MyService platform; and
* DVA staff involvement in a Design Challenge to improve how DVA delivers services.

The success of the Department of Human Services (DHS) Mobile Service Centres was acknowledged as a very important partnership to provide access for veterans across regional Australia, to services and support from DHS and DVA.

Members were encouraged to access the prototype of the new DVA website (via [beta.dva.gov.au](http://beta.dva.gov.au)) in the coming months and provide feedback through the website link.

A MyService demonstration explored the simplified claims process for new MRCA and DRCA claims. Updates are continuously being incorporated into the system as feedback is provided by veterans and their families. The system also checks and identifies qualifying service on registration. MyService and MyAccount will be accessed via the myGov website this year.

Members noted the update.

**Agenda Item 9. Member submission – MRCA, Needs Assessment, Permanent Impairment**

Mr Foster, representing the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, raised that the needs assessment and permanent impairment process is causing delays in obtaining compensation. Mr Foster highlighted the need for an unpopulated needs assessment form for advocates to download for clients. The MyService lodgement process is streamlining decisions, however there seems to be inefficiencies at the initial stages that require further investigation.

Delegates will be assisted to frame more appropriate questions when seeking medical reviews from contracted medical advisors to ensure they are proactive in supplying the relevant medical advice. This will in turn alleviate Veterans’ Review Board appeals processes.

Members noted the discussion.

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| ***Item***  | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| 29 | Investigate a downloadable and unpopulated needs assessment form for advocates to download.  | First Assistant Secretary Clients’ Benefits Division |

**Agenda Item 10 Member submission – MRCA applying streamlining procedures**

Mr Clem Russell, representing the Royal Australian Regiment Corporation, raised that the streamlining procedures in the investigation of claims considered by the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission are not being consistently applied.

Members discussed barriers to streamlining procedures including the delay in medical records becoming available to DVA from the Department of Defence, delegates asking for additional information that is not required, and seeking further medical advice from medico-legal reviews (noting referral only occurs in 3% of claims).

Members noted that the involvement of case managers and the establishment of the contact point at claims@dva.gov.au have increased manageable outcomes for complex cases and been effective in assisting advocates with outstanding claims.

Members noted that the list of streamlined conditions has gradually expanded since 2007. They are now referred to as ‘decision ready’ conditions. Currently, there are 32 decision ready conditions under the MRCA and 8 decision ready conditions under the VEA. Straight through processing is based on a veteran’s service details (length of service and type of service) and whether the relevant Statements of Principles (SOP) factor is met. The policy is based on known levels of physical activity undertaken for basic and initial training and ongoing training levels required to maintain basic fitness standards. Streamlining and straight through processing do not apply to DRCA claims, as the rules for accepting liability claims are different to the MRCA and the VEA. In particular, the DRCA does not provide for the use of SOPs for decision making.

Members noted the issues raised during discussion.

**Agenda Item 11 Veterans Advocacy and Support Services Scoping Study**

Members were updated on the progress of the Study being led by Mr Robert Cornall AO. The aim of the Study is to determine the most suitable advocacy model for Australian veterans and their families. The Study will review options for a future advocacy model for veterans and review representation of veterans before the Veterans’ Review Board.

A Discussion Paper was released on 31 May 2018 and emailed to 96 individual ex-service organisations and to various ex-service committees encouraging them to circulate it among their members and to provide a submission. Submissions can be made online or by hardcopy and will be accepted until 31 July 2018 (although late submissions will also be accepted). The Study is expected to report to Government in December 2018.

Questionnaires are available to assist organisations or individuals in preparing a submission. One is for organisations and individuals (ESO members, advocates, and other organisations) and the other is for veterans and members of their families who want to share their personal experience. The questionnaires can be found at <https://www.dva.gov.au/consultation-and-grants/reviews/veterans-advocacy-and-support-services-scoping-study/questionnaires>.

Members noted the update and were encouraged to disseminate the information to their organisations.

**Agenda Item 12. Member submission – Military Firefighters**

Mr Graeme Bland, representing the Air Force Association, raised the importance of DVA delegates recognising the uniqueness of ADF Firefighter employment. Mr Bland highlighted that Military Firefighters have been actively lobbying to gain recognition of the hazards involved in their everyday duties. Inquiries have been held on the investigation of fire- fighting foam but further investigation needs to occur on: burnt chemicals; lack of adequate protective clothing and equipment; and effects of toxic smoke emitted from fire-pit burnoffs of chemicals, tyres, plastics, aviation fuels and benzene products.

DVA confirmed it has provided a dedicated focus on the firefighter group, commissioning six ADF Firefighter studies since 2012. The results of these studies has identified the limitations in sound medical scientific evidence to confirm expectations of higher rates of ill health within the firefighter group.

DVA encourages all serving and former ADF members (including firefighters) to submit claims for injuries or diseases which they consider are related to their service. The Chair encouraged members to consider the new non-liability health care process that is in place and inform possible claimants of its existence. The Chair also noted that the department is considering the outcomes of the current presumptive liability that is used in the civilian firefighter profession.

DVA is exploring ways to simplify claims processes for firefighters wherever possible and confirmed with members, DVA policy officers and delegates are available to review firefighter claims that have not previously been accepted.

DVA has been working to raise the profile of issues impacting ADF Firefighters through the Advocacy Training and Development Program (ATDP) network, ongoing meetings with representatives of the firefighter cohort and an article in the upcoming edition of the ATDP newsletter. Further information can be obtained from Factsheet HSV109 or online at [www.dva.gov.au/nlhc](http://www.dva.gov.au/nlhc).

Members noted the updated.

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| ***Item***  | ***Action*** | ***Assigned to***  |
| 30 | DVA to explore ways to simplify the claims process for firefighters wherever possible, through claims system reporting filters and building into the initial liability process to identify potential firefighter claimants.  | Assistant Secretary Primary Claims |

**Agenda Item 13 Other business**

Mr Clem Russell raised additional issues for the members to consider including Reservists and their eligibility for assistance.

The Chair concluded the meeting by thanking members for their contributions and time in advocating for their respective organisation, members and families.

The meeting closed at 4.00pm. The next meeting is scheduled for Friday 16 November 2018.