



Australian Government

# **Australian Government Response** to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

December 2024

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## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We recognise and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of Australia and their continuing spiritual and cultural connection to land, sea and community.

## Acknowledgement of Service

We respect and give thanks to all who have served in our defence force and their families.

We acknowledge the unique nature of military service and the sacrifice demanded of all who commit to defend our nation.

We undertake to preserve the memory and deeds of all who have served and promise to welcome, embrace, and support all military veterans as respected and valued members of our community.

For what they have done, this we will do.

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## About this document

Enquiries about this publication should be directed to Department of Defence, Russell Offices, Canberra ACT 2600.

This publication is available online at [defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries](https://defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries)

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## Department of Veterans' Affairs contact details

**Telephone:** 1800 VETERAN (1800 838 372)

The telephone enquiries service is available between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. A call back can be requested through the DVA website or through MyService.

**Mail:** Department of Veterans' Affairs,  
GPO Box 9998, Brisbane QLD 4001

**Website:** [dva.gov.au](https://dva.gov.au)

**Social media:** [dva.gov.au/about/media/social-media](https://dva.gov.au/about/media/social-media)

Information on other ways to contact DVA, including media and provider enquiries, is available at [dva.gov.au/contact](https://dva.gov.au/contact).



**Australian Government**

**Australian Government Response**  
to the Final Report of the Royal Commission  
into Defence and Veteran Suicide

## **Content Warning**

This publication contains information about suicide and suicidality and lived experiences that may be distressing to readers.

**Support is always available.** We encourage those affected to seek help and support, information on support services is provided on the next page to help find the right avenue for you.

Always call 000 for support in an emergency.

# Support Services

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## **Open Arms—Veterans & Families Counselling**

**1800 011 046 | [www.OpenArms.gov.au](http://www.OpenArms.gov.au)**

A national service that provides free mental health and wellbeing support to anyone who has served at least one day of continuous fulltime service in the ADF and their immediate families. Open Arms is available 24/7 call 1800 011 046 or go to [www.OpenArms.gov.au](http://www.OpenArms.gov.au)

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## **Safe Zone Support**

**1800 142 072**

A free and anonymous counselling line for all current and ex-serving ADF personnel, veterans and their families. Safe Zone is hosted by Open Arms but is a separate service. Safe Zone is available 24/7 call 1800 142 072

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## **Lifeline**

**13 11 14 | [www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat](http://www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat)**

A national support service providing all Australians experiencing emotional distress with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. Lifeline's nightly text line can also be reached at 0477 13 11 14, or you can chat via the Lifeline Crisis Online Chat Service - [www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat](http://www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat)

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## **1800RESPECT**

**1800 737 732 | Text 0458 737 732**

Australia's national counselling, information and support service for anyone affected by domestic, family and sexual violence. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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## **Beyond Blue**

**1300 224 636**

An organisation that provides a free online and telephone helpline for people with depression, anxiety or other mental health issues. You can talk to trained mental health professionals who can give you support and advice. Beyond Blue can also help you find mental health services near you.

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## **Kids Helpline**

**1800 55 1800 | [kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)**

Australia's only free (even from a mobile), confidential online and phone counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25. Kids Helpline is available anytime (24/7) and for any reason, via phone or web chat at [www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au)

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## **Additional support available through Defence and DVA**

The following additional support and services are available for ADF members and their families. Further information can also be found on the Defence wellbeing and support webpage - [www.defence.gov.au/defence-wellbeing-support](http://www.defence.gov.au/defence-wellbeing-support).

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## **Defence Member and Family Support**

**1800 624 608**

The first point of call 24/7 for Defence families seeking support, information or connection with their community.

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## **Defence All-hours Support Line (ASL)**

**1800 628 036**

A 24/7 confidential service triaging access to medical, psychology and social work services.

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## **Defence's Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office**

**1800 SEMPRO**

A 24/7 confidential phone service for those affected by sexual misconduct at home or work. 1800 736 776 | +61 2 6127 1759 (International)

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## **DVA Get Support**

**[www.dva.gov.au/get-support](http://www.dva.gov.au/get-support)**

Additional support available through DVA can be found at the DVA Get Support webpage.

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# Reader's Guide

This is the Australian Government's comprehensive response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, designed to deliver sustainable systemic reform.

The Royal Commission's Final Report comprised of seven volumes and made 122 recommendations.

This document responds to all 122 recommendations.

Guide to key sections of this document

- **Foreword:** Introduction to the Australian Government Response provided by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, the Hon. Richard Marles MP and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister for Defence Personnel, the Hon. Matt Keogh MP.
- **Australian Government policy statement** provides an overview of key aspects of the Government's response.
- **Response Overview** provides a table summary of the Australian Government's Response to the recommendations made in the Final Report. This section includes information on the response position language and definitions.
- **Australian Government Response to Recommendations** provides detail on the Government's responses to the 122 recommendations of the Royal Commission Final Report.
- **Annex A** provides an overview of actions taken to date to improve the experience of service for ADF members and veterans.
- **Annex B** provides an overview of the progress of the Government's response to the Interim recommendations.

The Royal Commission reported on key issues in Volumes dealing with:

- **Volume 1:** Recommendations and the fundamentals
- **Volume 2:** Serving the nation, and Defence culture and leadership
- **Volume 3:** Military sexual violence, unacceptable behaviour and military justice
- **Volume 4:** Health care for serving and ex-serving members
- **Volume 5:** Transition, DVA and support for ex-serving members
- **Volume 6:** Families, data and research, and establishing a new entity

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# About the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

On 8 July 2021, then Governor-General, His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd), established the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. The Royal Commission was to inquire into the systemic issues and risk factors relevant to suicide and suicide behaviours of current and former serving ADF members.

The Government appointed Mr Nick Kaldas APM, the Hon James Douglas KC, and Dr Peggy Brown AO as the Royal Commissioners.

Over more than three years, the Royal Commissioners undertook the most significant and comprehensive inquiry conducted into suicide and suicidality in the Defence and veteran communities including:

- 12 public hearings over more than 100 days, hearing evidence from more than 340 witnesses;
- 897 private one-on-one sessions with people with lived experience of suicide, suicidality or military service; and
- 5,865 submissions from current and former serving ADF members, and their family members, advocates, ex-service organisations and service providers, and other organisations.

The Royal Commissioners delivered an Interim Report on 11 August 2022. The Government responded to the Interim Report on 26 September 2022, agreeing to nine recommendations, agreeing-in-principle to one, noting two and indicating one had already been implemented by removing the Average Staffing Level Cap for all agencies. The Government has also introduced into Parliament legislation which simplifies entitlements for veterans and their families, implementing all the agreed recommendations of the Interim Report.

The Royal Commission delivered its Final Report on 9 September 2024, which the Government tabled in Parliament on the same day.

Since the start of the Royal Commission in July 2021, the Government has supported and advanced the work of the Royal Commission, including by:

- responding to 1,220 notices to give or produce issued to 23 Commonwealth agencies:
  - 584 notices to produce, providing 256,761 documents.
  - 636 notices to give, including notices to give statements.
- supporting over 206 Commonwealth witness appearances
- assisting the Royal Commissioners with visits to 27 Defence bases
- facilitated meetings with personnel in roundtables and informal sessions.

# Foreword

The death by suicide of any Australian, including our veterans and current serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members, is a tragedy.

Australia has lost more serving and former serving personnel to suicide over the last 20 years than through operations in Afghanistan and Iraq over the same period.

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (the Royal Commission) was the most significant and comprehensive inquiry conducted into suicide and suicidality in the Defence and veteran communities.

We thank all those who bravely told their story and came forward to give evidence to the Royal Commission. Their courage has made an enormous difference.

We also thank the Commissioners for their work.

Harrowing evidence given before the Royal Commission laid bare cultural problems within the ADF, Department of Defence (Defence) and identified deficiencies in the administration of support schemes within the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). It was clear there was an urgent need for change.

The evidence heard throughout the Royal Commission and its Final Report highlight the need for systemic reform. This will not be a simple task.

This Australian Government Response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission sets out real, meaningful and enduring reform.

The Government has agreed or agreed-in-principle to the overwhelming majority of the Royal Commission's recommendations: agreeing or agreeing-in-principle to 104 recommendations, noting 17 recommendations for further consideration and one recommendation is not supported in part.

Consistent with a key recommendation of the Royal Commission, the Government will establish a new statutory entity to oversee enduring and systemic reform. It will provide independent oversight and evidence-based advice to improve suicide prevention and drive better outcomes for serving and ex-serving ADF personnel. As an independent statutory body, its work will be ongoing. An interim head will be appointed to work across government towards the establishment of a legislated oversight body by September 2025.

The Government has also directed DVA to co-design, alongside the veteran community, a new DVA agency focused on wellbeing and Ex-Service Organisation peak body. The Government has committed the necessary funding to ensure that these are consulted and co-designed with Defence and veteran communities and families to ensure they meet their needs.

The work to implement some of the other agreed recommendations has already begun. These reforms will be rolled out together with the implementation of the National Defence Strategy to ensure that Defence's most important asset – its people – receive the support and services they deserve.

To ensure this reform package is implemented in the most effective and efficient manner, the Government will establish a Taskforce in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, which will draw in expertise from across Government as well as external experts to consider detailed implementation for agree-in-principle and noted recommendations.

In August 2022, the Interim Report of the Royal Commission was delivered to the Government, and we took swift action on all of its recommendations. We have also resourced more than 500 additional DVA staff to help eliminate the backlog of unallocated cases identified by the Royal Commission and improve the timeliness of claims decision making and access to supports.

The implementation of the Government's response will see the most comprehensive reform to the systems, processes and culture supporting Defence personnel and veterans ever undertaken in Australia.

Whilst this is a large and complex task, these reforms will ensure that those who pursue a career in the ADF have a safe and inclusive workplace and are supported from the time they join, throughout transition and in life after service.

We called for the Royal Commission in Opposition and we supported it in Government.

Now is the time to deliver lasting reform.



**The Hon. Richard Marles MP**

Deputy Prime Minister  
Minister for Defence



**The Hon. Matt Keogh MP**

Minister for Veterans' Affairs  
Minister for Defence Personnel

# Timeline of Events

## 2021

July - Governor-General announced the establishment of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

July - Defence established the Defence Taskforce to support the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

November - Ceremonial Hearing and Hearing Block 1 - Brisbane

## 2022

February - Hearing Block 2 - Sydney

March - Hearing Block 3 - Sydney

April - Hearing Block 4 - Canberra

June - Hearing Block 5 - Townsville

August - Hearing Block 6 - Hobart

August - Release of the Royal Commission's Interim Report

September - Government responded to the Interim Report of the Royal Commission

September - Defence introduced the fit and proper person test

September - DVA commenced publishing claims processing statistics to improve transparency

October - Hearing Block 7 - Darwin

October - Fulfilling Interim Recommendations 2 and 4, the Government's first Budget included \$233.9 million to engage **500 new frontline staff** at DVA to eliminate the compensation claims backlog, delivering a key election commitment

October - **Re recommendation 1 of the Interim report:** Minister for Veterans' Affairs commenced initial consultation on reforming veterans legislation

October - \$9.5m budget investment to the development of legislation reform pathway and implementation of interim report recommendations

November - Hearing Block 8 - Wagga Wagga

## 2023

June - Established the Chief of Personnel to centralise ADF personnel management into a single integrated system. Major General Natasha Fox, AM, CSC, appointed as the inaugural Chief of Personnel

July - Defence established the Mental Health and Wellbeing Branch

July - Hearing Block 10 - Adelaide

July - Released the first Veteran Transition Strategy

August - Hearing Block 11 - Melbourne

October - Expanded Veterans' and Families Hubs network across Australia – opened the Caboolture Hub

October - Released the Defence Work Health and Safety Strategy 2023-2028

November - Released the Defence Culture Strategy: *Defence Culture Blueprint Program 2023*

## 2024

## 2025

February - Delivering Interim Report Recommendation 2, DVA cleared the backlog of unallocated Initial Liability (IL), Incapacity, and Permanent Impairment claims identified by the Royal Commission ahead of schedule

**June - Royal Commission released the Lived Experience report *'Shining a Light – Stories of Trauma and Tragedy, Hope and Healing'***

July - Delivering Interim Recommendation 1, Minister for Veterans' Affairs introduced the *Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024* to Parliament

July - Provisional Access to Medical Treatment Program extended for two years to pay for veterans' medical treatment while their claim is being processed

August - Veteran, Family and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy launched

**August - Ceremonial Closing of the Royal Commission**

**September - Released the Final Report of the Royal Commission**

November - Released the Defence Workforce Plan 2024-2034

December - Release of the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for public consultation

December - Release of the Defence and Veterans Family Wellbeing Strategy and Action Plan

**December - Government responds to the Final Report of the Royal Commission**

Establish an interim oversight entity to provide advice on the establishment of a new oversight entity, including legislation required

Consult and co-design a wellbeing agency for veterans and the national peak body for ex-service organisations

Defence and DVA commence plans of action to start implementation of recommendations

Establish a new statutory oversight entity by September 2025

## Work already underway

The Government has acted to table the report and release a full response as quickly as possible. The implementation of this response is a significant body of work that will take time to fully achieve the institutional reform the Royal Commission calls for and that the families of those lost to suicide have consistently sought. This reform package will build on the work already completed in response to the Interim Report, and work underway to respond to what we have heard through the three years of the Royal Commission.

As the Royal Commission progressed, the Government began implementing substantive change in Defence and DVA. It was clear from the lived experience of those heard from that the challenges faced were current, as well as historic. There was no time to waste.

The Government is working to improve the experience of ADF members and veterans. This includes:

- Fully funding the Government’s response to the Royal Commission’s Interim Report, including \$233.9 million to engage 500 new frontline staff at DVA to eliminate the compensation claims backlog, delivering on a key election commitment made by the Government.
- Investing \$254.1 million over four years to modernise and sustain DVA’s ageing IT systems to ensure more timely payments and better access to services for veterans and families.
- Appointing in June 2023 the first three star Chief of Personnel who reports directly to the Chief of the Defence Force to drive systemic reform across the ADF.

Ensuring positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes for all Defence people, including current and former serving ADF personnel, their families and communities, is the right thing to do. It will enhance performance and support Defence in achieving its workforce growth and optimisation priorities.

The Government recognises Defence and veteran families make enormous sacrifices to support their loved ones’ service, seen through the distressing testimony given by family members at the Royal Commission. Significant work is underway to ensure Defence communicates with members and their families in a trauma-informed way, and that families have access to the right information at the right time in their family’s service journey.

Defence has also commenced a range of work to build a strong data literate workforce, and adopt a more disciplined and deliberate approach to how data is collected, stored, analysed and applied in decision-making processes.

The Government introduced amendments to the *Fair Work Act* to strengthen protections for employees who have been, or are being, subjected to family and domestic violence from discrimination in the workplace.

Defence has placed a greater focus on psychosocial risks on personnel. Defence has specifically developed adequate resources and training to effectively identify and manage psychosocial hazards aimed at both employees and supervisors.

The full span of reforms already delivered to the systems, policies and processes of Defence and DVA is detailed in Annex A to this Response.



# Government Response Overview

## Response position language and definitions

Response	Position Definition
<b>Agree</b>	Support the recommendation.
<b>Agreed-in-principle</b>	Support the overarching policy intent, with the approach to implementation to be further considered.
<b>Note</b>	Used for recommendations where additional work and consideration is needed to respond. This may be due to a need to consider the outcome of related inquiries or to enable further consultation and engagement to inform a response.
<b>Does not support</b>	Used for recommendations the Australian Government has considered and decided not to implement at this time.

### Volume 1: Recommendations and the fundamentals

**Recommendation 1:** Improve the capacity of future royal commissions to undertake their inquiries **Note**

### Volume 2: Serving the nation, and Defence culture and leadership

**Recommendation 2:** Improve outcomes and access to support for recruits in *ab initio* training **Agree**

**Recommendation 3:** Build the capability of career managers **Agree**

**Recommendation 4:** Mitigate the adverse impacts of the posting cycle **Agree**

**Recommendation 5:** Support all serving members to decompress, rest and reintegrate, especially after high-risk experiences **Agree**

**Recommendation 6:** Improve the procedural fairness of the military employment classification system **Agree**

**Recommendation 7:** Increase employment opportunities within the ADF for members who cannot be deployed **Agree**

**Recommendation 8:** Maximise workforce retention by addressing factors that contribute to voluntary separation **Agree**

**Recommendation 9:** Improve organisational culture and leadership accountability to increase member wellbeing and safety **Agree**

**Recommendation 10:** Develop service-specific action plans to implement Defence Respect@Work Framework **Agree-in-principle**

**Recommendation 11:** Assess ADF leaders based on upward feedback and performance against culture, health and wellbeing targets **Agree**

**Recommendation 12:** Consider emotional intelligence and performance against wellbeing targets in selecting leaders to promote **Agree**

**Recommendation 13:** Co-design a new doctrine recognising that operational readiness depends on a healthy workforce **Agree**

### Volume 3: Military sexual violence, unacceptable behaviour and military justice

<b>Recommendation 14:</b> Understand the prevalence and effects of military sexual trauma and improve responses to support victims	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 15:</b> Clarify definitions and processes related to sexual offences	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 16:</b> Evaluate training on managing sexual misconduct and make it mandatory for all leaders	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 17:</b> Prioritise the prevention of sexual misconduct in the ADF	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 18:</b> Strengthen workplace protections during sexual misconduct investigations	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 19:</b> Protect victims of sexual misconduct from disadvantage over the course of their careers	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 20:</b> Amend the legislation related to sentencing perpetrators of military sexual offences	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 21:</b> Implement a 'presumption' of discharge for ADF members found to have engaged in certain forms of sexual misconduct	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 22:</b> Adopt a policy of mandatory discharge for ADF members convicted of sexual and related offences	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 23:</b> Record convictions of sexual offences in ADF records and civilian criminal records	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 24:</b> Annually publish anonymised data on outcomes of all incidents of sexual misconduct	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 25:</b> Conduct a formal inquiry into military sexual violence in the ADF	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 26:</b> Foster a strong culture of reporting unacceptable behaviour	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 27:</b> Evaluate outcomes to ensure that Defence has addressed the intent behind recommendations	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 28:</b> Coordinate governance, assurance and policy functions of the military justice system	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 29:</b> Establish a new role to improve training and communication on conducting inquiries	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 30:</b> Prioritise the Inspector-General's inquiry into the weaponisation of the administrative system	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 31:</b> Consider how mental health may contribute to poor conduct before recommending administrative termination	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 32:</b> When requested, conduct a merits review when a member's service is terminated for the reason 'retention-not-in-service-interest'	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 33:</b> Seek to understand whether/how involvement in military justice processes contributes to adverse outcomes	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 34:</b> Prioritise the review into the regulations governing court martial panels	<b>Agree</b>

<b>Recommendation 35:</b> Determine whether support mechanisms for members involved with military justice processes are effective	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 36:</b> Trial a model outside the chain of command for supporting members involved in military justice processes	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 37:</b> Develop a charter of minimum standards for all members involved in military justice processes	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 38:</b> Improve governance processes related to accountability and continuous improvement	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 39:</b> Address risk factors for suicide and suicidality and report on progress as part of enterprise-level risk management	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 40:</b> Improve governance mechanisms from the unit level to the enterprise level	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 41:</b> Build project-management capability so that reform initiatives are successful	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 42:</b> Ensure that future Inspectors-General of the ADF will not have served in the ADF	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 43:</b> Allow the IGADF to make recruitment decisions for the staffing of their office	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 44:</b> Ensure that staff of the office of the IGADF have the necessary skills, expertise and qualifications	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 45:</b> Improve transparency and accountability of the IGADF by increasing their reporting requirements	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 46:</b> Ensure staff of the IGADF are trained in trauma-informed practice	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 47:</b> The IGADF to inquire into all deaths of serving members unless suicide can be excluded as the cause of death	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 48:</b> When a member dies by suicide, appoint a legal officer to represent the interests of the deceased and support the next of kin	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 49:</b> Minimise disclosure restrictions of IGADF inquiry reports and ensure they are fair and understood by the next of kin	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 50:</b> Amend the scope of the IGADF's role to inquire into suicide deaths of former ADF members	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 51:</b> The IGADF to regularly review inquiries into suicide deaths to determine common themes	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 52:</b> Conduct a merits review when a member's service is involuntarily terminated and they submit a redress of grievance complaint	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 53:</b> Give members 21 days to make a complaint after being notified of a decision to terminate their service	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 54:</b> Improve the frequency of military justice-related audits conducted by the IGADF	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 55:</b> Conduct an audit into Defence workplace health and safety risk management	<b>Agree</b>

<b>Recommendation 56:</b> Improve guidance and understanding of Defence's 'if in doubt, notify' policy	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 57:</b> Comcare to regularly review ADF determinations of 'service nexus' for suicide attempts and suspected deaths by suicide	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 58:</b> Give Comcare access to the National Veterans' Data Asset	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 59:</b> Defence to participate in Comcare's Psychosocial Proactive Inspection Program	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 60:</b> Improve strategies for harm prevention and early intervention by sharing quality data with Comcare	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Volume 4: Health care for serving and ex-serving members</b>	
<b>Recommendation 61:</b> Establish a brain injury program	<b>Agree-in-principle</b>
<b>Recommendation 62:</b> Establish a research translation centre for Defence and veteran health care	<b>Agree-in-principle</b>
<b>Recommendation 63:</b> Reduce stigma and remove structural and cultural barriers to help seeking	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 64:</b> Establish an enterprise-wide program to monitor and prevent physical and psychological injury	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 65:</b> Improve access to, timeliness and quality of mental health screening and use the data effectively	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 66:</b> Where possible, support injured members to be rehabilitated at work, within their home unit	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 67:</b> Align Defence's clinical governance framework with the national model framework	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 68:</b> Strike the right balance between upholding confidentiality and disclosing information when a member is in distress	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 69:</b> Improve suicide-prevention training so it is practical, tailored, informed by lived experience and delivered in person	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 70:</b> Revise protocols for responding to suicidal crisis to be in line with clinical best practice	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 71:</b> Increase DVA fee schedule so it is aligned with that of the National Disability Insurance Scheme	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 72:</b> Expand and strengthen healthcare services for veterans	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 73:</b> Improve military cultural competency in health professions working with veterans	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 74:</b> Clarify the application of the Privacy Act to veterans to determine whether amendments are necessary	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 75:</b> Conduct an independent review of Open Arms and publish the report	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 76:</b> Develop a postvention framework with experts and those with lived experience of suicide bereavement	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 77:</b> Develop a suite of postvention resources in collaboration with stakeholders	<b>Agree</b>

<b>Recommendation 78:</b> Prevent, minimise and treat moral injury	Agree-in-principle
<b>Volume 5: Transition, DVA and support for ex-serving members</b>	
<b>Recommendation 79:</b> Ensure that respect for and recognition of service are embedded throughout Defence and DVA	Agree
<b>Recommendation 80:</b> DVA to take responsibility for supporting members to transition out of the ADF	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 81:</b> DVA to fund a program to support members' wellbeing during transition to civilian life	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 82:</b> Establish a consistent, locally responsive policy on ex-serving members' access to bases	Agree
<b>Recommendation 83 (a) and (b):</b> Increase opportunities for members to gain civilian qualifications from Defence training and education	Agree
<b>Recommendation 83 (c):</b> 'fill the gap' between Defence and civilian training	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 84:</b> Issue separating members with a reference that states their skills, experience and capabilities	Agree
<b>Recommendation 85:</b> Develop employment pathways for ex-serving members in public sector agencies	Agree
<b>Recommendation 86:</b> Ongoing funding for Veterans' and Families' Hubs	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 87:</b> Establish a new agency to focus on veteran wellbeing	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 88:</b> Develop a national funding agreement on veterans' wellbeing	Note
<b>Recommendation 89:</b> Establish a national peak body for ex-service organisations	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 90 (a):</b> Remove the service differential for permanent impairment compensation	Does not support
<b>Recommendation 90 (b):</b> Expand mental health support to all reserve personnel	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 91:</b> Implement combined benefits processing for all initial liability and permanent impairment claims	Agree
<b>Recommendation 92:</b> Review claims to DVA associated with physical and sexual abuse	Agree
<b>Recommendation 93:</b> Fund the Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Program on an ongoing and national basis	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 94:</b> Improve timeliness and reporting on information-sharing between Defence and DVA for claims processing	Agree
<b>Recommendation 95:</b> Support the expanded application of 'presumptive liability'	Agree
<b>Recommendation 96:</b> Ongoing funding for Provisional Access to Medical Treatment	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 97:</b> Consider giving the Veteran Payment to more veterans with physical health conditions	Agree-in-principle

<b>Recommendation 98:</b> Strengthen DVA performance targets for claims processing timeframes, and improve transparency	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 99:</b> Improve compensation advocacy by funding professional, paid advocates	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 100:</b> Improve the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of the Department of Veterans' Affairs rehabilitation program	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 101 (a):</b> Enable veterans to choose their rehabilitation provider and to self-manage their budget for approved household assistance on an opt-in basis	Note
<b>Recommendation 101 (b):</b> Reimburse veterans for travel costs to see their preferred healthcare providers	Agree
<b>Volume 6: Families, data and research, and establishing a new entity</b>	
<b>Recommendation 102:</b> Implement and improve upon the Defence Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Family and Domestic Violence	Agree
<b>Recommendation 103:</b> Improve the support, communication and services provided to Defence families	Agree
<b>Recommendation 104:</b> Improve the profile, resourcing and impact of the Defence Family Advocate	Agree
<b>Recommendation 105:</b> Improve coordination with coroners and the National Coronial Information System	Note
<b>Recommendation 106:</b> Establish a suicide database of serving and ex-serving members	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 107:</b> Establish the National Veterans' Data Asset	Note
<b>Recommendation 108:</b> Ensure that all relevant jurisdictions and entities regularly provide data to the National Veterans' Data Asset	Note
<b>Recommendation 109:</b> Defence to report annually on its progress towards data maturity	Agree
<b>Recommendation 110:</b> Review Defence's data assets and address issues with their quality, management, integration and use	Note
<b>Recommendation 111:</b> Achieve a 'gold standard' rating for Defence datasets related to suicidality and suicide	Note
<b>Recommendation 112:</b> Include data on suicide and suicidality in the enterprise-wide Defence data catalogue	Agree
<b>Recommendation 113:</b> Ensure commanding officers access and use quality data for continuous improvement of wellbeing metrics	Note
<b>Recommendation 114:</b> Defence and DVA to prioritise research into veteran health and wellbeing, and publish their workplans	Agree
<b>Recommendation 115:</b> Defence and DVA to publish their research into veteran health and wellbeing	Agree
<b>Recommendation 116:</b> Improve the quality, evaluation, translation and sharing of research findings	Agree-in-principle
<b>Recommendation 117:</b> Establish an expert committee on veteran research	Agree

<b>Recommendation 118 (a):</b> Continue the existing Census question on ADF service in 2026 and in future censuses	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Recommendation 118 (b):</b> Direct the ABS to include an additional question on year of separation for ex-serving members in the Census	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 119:</b> Improve understanding of veteran health by adding questions to Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys	<b>Agree-in-principle</b>
<b>Recommendation 120:</b> Increase funding for research into veteran health and wellbeing	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 121:</b> Enable research into the health and wellbeing of Defence families	<b>Note</b>
<b>Recommendation 122:</b> Establish a new statutory entity to oversee system reform across the whole Defence ecosystem	<b>Agree</b>

# Australian Government Response to Recommendations

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### Recommendation 1: Improve the capacity of future royal commissions to undertake their inquiries

To enable the efficient operation of future royal commissions:

- (a) the Australian Government should amend the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (Cth) so there are meaningful consequences for non-compliance with a compulsory notice
- (b) the Australian Government should undertake measures to ensure that royal commissions benefit from more independent representation in government, either by:
  - (i) setting up protocols that limit the engagement of the Royal Commissions Branch of the Attorney-General's Department with the Australian Government Solicitor (AGS), or
  - (ii) moving the Royal Commissions Branch to a separate agency, for example to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, or:
  - (iii) setting up a liaison person or team in the Attorney-General's Department, whose role is to deal with royal commissions only
- (c) the Australian Government should apply consistent and transparent arrangements to allow royal commissions timely access to material covered by public interest immunity, and consider legislative amendment to facilitate royal commissions' access to this material
- (d) The Attorney-General's Department should provide settled advice and options on the operation of public interest immunity, Parliamentary privilege and procedural fairness in the operation of royal commissions.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

This recommendation concerns the operation of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* and establishing royal commissions. As there is no royal commission currently operational, the position of 'note' reflects acknowledgement of the recommendation for consideration by Government in the future, should further royal commissions be established.

## Volume 2: Serving the nation, and Defence culture and leadership

### Recommendation 2: Improve outcomes and access to support for recruits in *ab initio* training

Defence should improve support for all recruits in *ab initio* training to build resilience and embed help-seeking behaviours. Developed in partnership with people with lived experience of service, the model of support should:

- (a) utilise mental health screening conducted during *ab initio* training (Recommendation 65) to identify and provide support to proactively meet recruits' needs
- (b) reduce barriers to accessing timely and appropriate care, including physical health, mental health, spiritual health, pastoral care and peer supports
- (c) ensure that changes to 'recruitment risk appetite' do not jeopardise members' mental and physical health, including for those who enter under reduced physical fitness standards, as waiver recipients or with higher psychological risk, including by:
  - (i) longitudinal tracking of health, wellbeing and safety outcomes for members from initial training and throughout their Australian Defence Force career
  - (ii) with members' consent, sharing insights about recruits' support needs obtained through recruitment processes to enable *ab initio* training institutions to offer relevant supports proactively
- (d) prioritise and promote postings at *ab initio* training institutions and ensure that instructors have the resourcing, capabilities and personal attributes necessary to lead and educate young people, including vulnerable individuals.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to develop a model of support to be provided to all recruits in *ab initio* training. The model will be informed by principles of resilience, help-seeking and lived experience of service.

The Government recognises new recruits are first exposed to Defence culture and develop their ethos and future behaviours at its initial training establishments, including Duntroon and the Australian Defence Force Academy. Defence needs to do the work to ensure they are safe environments for our Defence recruits.

Defence undertakes education and training tailored to the Australian Defence Force Academy, including on sexual misconduct prevention, response, reporting and support services available to Trainee Officers. Defence will commence a planned trial of Squadron Support Officers who will provide mentoring and support to junior Trainee Officers. Defence will design and develop a specific program on healthy relationships.

### **Recommendation 3: Build the capability of career managers**

Defence should build the capability of career managers to engage with and respond to member needs and preferences when making posting decisions, including by:

- (a) improving the ratio of career managers to members
- (b) upskilling career managers to engage with vulnerable individuals through training in trauma-informed approaches
- (c) providing the training, resourcing, data and guidance for career managers to identify and mitigate cumulative stressors experienced by members, including psychosocial risk such as exposure to unacceptable behaviour, when making posting decisions.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to build the capability of ADF career managers and acknowledges the importance of supportive and trauma-informed career managers in relation to the careers of ADF personnel.

The Government appointed the first three star Chief of Personnel in June 2023 with responsibility for increasing the effectiveness, efficiency and cohesiveness of personnel management to achieve a more integrated ADF.

Additionally, through future improvements of the Defence Human Resources Information System, career managers will have better access to a broader range of information for the selection and appointment of ADF personnel.

## Recommendation 4: Mitigate the adverse impacts of the posting cycle

Defence should take steps to mitigate the adverse impacts of the posting cycle on members and their families, including:

- (a) measures to reduce the frequency of relocation
- (b) improved supports for members and their families moving to a new location that target known stressors, such as housing, childcare and children's education, partner/spouse employment and community ties
- (c) measures to implement greater mobility across the Australian Defence Force and flexible working options
- (d) working with state and territory governments to ensure that children of Defence personnel can enrol in educational institutions without having a fixed address as a result of Defence-required relocations of the family.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** Defence should mitigate the adverse impacts of posting cycles on members and their families as a priority.

The Government will consider options to trial additional measures to reduce the adverse impacts of the posting cycle. This will build on the changes Defence has made in recent years to support members and families including enhancements to study and education assistance, family health benefits and leave arrangements including remote locality leave.

Examples of these recent initiatives include implementation of a five-year posting outlook which provides members and their families the confidence in finding suitable education, childcare and employment opportunities at their designated home base. In September 2024, Defence also began a trial to allow early confirmation of rental allowance which provides more certainty and housing options for personnel. Defence will continue this trial and subject to its assessment, look to roll it out on an ongoing basis.

Additionally, the Government will make necessary changes to ensure ADF personnel who are posted or deployed overseas (temporarily absent for up to three years), and their accompanying spouses, have consistent access to the Government's paid parental leave (PPL) scheme.

## Recommendation 5: Support all serving members to decompress, rest and reintegrate, especially after high-risk experiences

Defence should:

- (a) implement a clear and consistent framework for post-deployment supports for members and their families that addresses the psychosocial aspects of reintegration. This should include:
  - (i) an evidence-based approach to decompression and reintegration that allows for individual needs, informed by experience in comparable industries such as emergency services
  - (ii) training that addresses common issues that arise on entering and exiting operational activities, which may include grief, hypervigilance, sleep issues, excess alcohol use and aggression
  - (iii) with members' consent, a handover from their commanding officer on deployment to their commanding officer at home that identifies stressors experienced by the member on deployment
- (b) implement a structured and comprehensive approach to respite across the Australian Defence Force (ADF) that is not limited to 'arduous deployments' and that addresses fatigue across the workforce
- (c) analyse data collected on high-risk experiences, including deployments, to derive lessons for improved risk and fatigue management across the organisation and build a better understanding of the future physical and mental health needs of ADF members and veterans.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** all members should be supported to decompress, rest and reintegrate, especially after high-risk experiences.

Defence established a Mental Health and Wellbeing Branch in July 2023 to focus and strengthen Defence's approach to preventative mental health and wellbeing in response to issues being identified through the Royal Commission. The Branch is focused on supporting and optimising the capability of ADF personnel both pre and post deployment. The Branch will review and update Defence's Respite Policy to ensure it addresses the issues raised.

## Recommendation 6: Improve the procedural fairness of the military employment classification system

Defence should ensure members are treated fairly when making decisions about their fitness to be employed or deployed by the Australian Defence Force. To achieve this, Defence should:

- (a) publish a guidance direction for decision-makers in the military employment classification system on the requirements of procedural fairness
- (b) ensure members may review all relevant documents before a decision is made about their military employment classification and have an opportunity to make direct representations to the decision-maker, including at Military Employment Classification Review Board meetings.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to improve procedural fairness of the military employment classification scheme by publishing guidance for decision-makers and providing members with appropriate opportunities to review relevant documents.

The Government is committed to making the Military Employment Classification system simpler, more transparent and easier to navigate, and work is already underway. The outcomes of a recent internal examination of processes for the Military Employment Classification Review Board system, including improving the transparency of decision-making, will be implemented to provide greater procedural fairness for ADF personnel.

## **Recommendation 7: Increase employment opportunities within the Australian Defence Force for members who cannot be deployed**

Defence should implement measures to increase employment opportunities within the Australian Defence Force (ADF) for members who are no longer able to be deployed due to illness or injury. Measures should include:

- (a) systematic identification, within Defence workforce planning and other policies, of roles that may be suitable and should be considered for members who cannot deploy
- (b) a commitment to maximising opportunities for continuing employment of ADF members who are no longer able to be deployed due to illness or injury, including by minimising reliance on external service providers and contractors
- (c) processes to measure and monitor the number of members who can and cannot be deployed, and how changes in this ratio impact on, and are illustrative of, the wellbeing of members.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to increase employment opportunities for members who are unable to deploy.

ADF personnel may be unable to deploy during the course of their career for a variety of reasons. Although some roles in the ADF do require deployment, many do not. Defence will maximise opportunities for ADF members who are no longer able to be deployed, including systematically identifying suitable roles for these members to continue their careers in the ADF.

## Recommendation 8: Maximise workforce retention by addressing factors that contribute to voluntary separation

In the next iteration of the Defence Strategic Workforce Plan (or its equivalent), Defence should specifically focus on outcomes-based retention initiatives. The plan should:

- (a) draw on service-specific workforce experience data, monthly workforce reporting and analysis of factors driving voluntary separation
- (b) address contributors to voluntary separation, including burnout, fatigue and psychosocial stress
- (c) establish targets, with accompanying performance measures, to enable evaluation of the effectiveness of retention initiatives.

The plan should inform the evolution of Defence's Employee Value Proposition and be implemented in alignment with the Defence Work Health and Safety Strategy.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** the next iteration of the Workforce Plan, due to be released in 2026 alongside the National Defence Strategy, will focus on outcomes-based retention initiatives.

The Government recently announced the 2024 Defence Workforce Plan, which drew on a range of Defence workforce experience data to understand the reasons people choose to stay and leave the ADF. The Workforce Plan included measures to address Defence's organisational culture, wellbeing and support to ADF members and their families. As part of this Plan, the Government committed to ensure that benefits to support member and family wellbeing are fit for purpose, and meet both member and capability needs.

The Government also committed to short-term measures to grow the ADF and reduce workforce concurrency pressures, including hollowness in the Defence Force. The Workforce Plan also included the expansion of the Continuation Bonus pilot to two separate bonus offerings to ADF personnel at two separate career decision points during their career. The first will be offered to eligible, permanent members at the end of their initial service obligation who have served a minimum of four years. The second will be offered to eligible, permanent members after a minimum of seven years of service. This expansion will encourage continuation of service and career progression to middle ranks in the Defence Force.



## Recommendation 9: Improve organisational culture and leadership accountability to increase member wellbeing and safety

The Chief of the Defence Force, Australian Defence Force (ADF) service chiefs and the Chief of Personnel should agree on a suite of ADF culture targets, supported by data-driven metrics. Targets should be outcomes-based and time-bound. At a minimum, targets should be developed for the following cultural priorities:

- (a) safety, health and wellbeing, with a focus on psychosocial safety
- (b) unacceptable behaviour and sexual misconduct, with a focus on removing barriers to reporting and improving complaints management
- (c) senior leadership accountability.

The annual culture report should be publicly available and report on each service's progress against culture targets, as well as ADF-wide results.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to improve Defence's organisational culture and leadership accountability to increase member wellbeing and safety.

The National Defence Strategy recognises that culture is fundamental to achieving the Defence mission and implementing the strategy. In addition to the overarching responsibility of the Chief of the Defence Force and the Secretary of Defence, each Service Chief and Group Head is accountable for the culture of their organisations. The Government will improve Defence's surveys and ensure it uses them to produce actionable insights, including an annual culture report.

The Government amended the *Defence Act 1903* so that it now includes provisions similar to those in the *Fair Work Act 2009* and to implement recommendations of the Respect@Work Report. These amendments will allow ADF personnel and APS employees to make reports outside of their chain of command to stop sexual harassment. This was an unprecedented amendment to include Defence Personnel as a group of people who have access to Fair Work provisions.

The Government remains committed to implementing recommendations from this report, to improve organisational culture and leadership accountability to increase member wellbeing and safety. This work will continue with urgency.

## **Recommendation 10: Develop service-specific action plans to implement the Defence Respect@Work Framework**

The Australian Human Rights Commission should undertake an independent assessment of the extent to which underlying drivers, risk and protective factors in the Defence Respect@Work Framework are present in each service, and recommend actions to address gaps and known risks.

Following these recommendations, Navy, Army and Air Force should develop service-specific action plans for the Defence Respect@Work Framework, including implementation timeframes, to be approved by the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Personnel.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation. The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) will work with Defence to assess the extent to which underlying drivers, risk and protective factors in the Defence Respect@Work Framework are present in each Service, allowing Defence to develop service-specific action plans for the Framework.

These new action plans will extend beyond the three Services to include all Groups in Defence and is an important next step to making this overarching Framework relevant to each Service. The Government is committed to AHRC independently assessing Defence's application of the Framework.

## Recommendation 11: Assess Australian Defence Force leaders based on upward feedback and performance against culture, health and wellbeing targets

Defence should amend the annual performance appraisals of Australian Defence Force (ADF) leaders (from the rank of Colonel to the rank of General, and equivalents) to include upward feedback from their direct reports, and assessment against outcomes-based targets related to culture, health and wellbeing.

At a minimum, Defence should develop outcomes-based targets for leaders for the following domains and metrics:

- (a) safety, health and wellbeing
  - (i) psychological safety climate, based on the new Values and Behaviours Survey metrics related to managers and commanders
- (b) gender equality
  - (i) difference in cultural reporting between men and women (KPI 11 metrics, *Women in the ADF Report*)
  - (ii) women feel equally included (KPI 13 Metrics, *Women in the ADF Report*)
- (c) reporting and management of unacceptable behaviour
  - (i) level of under-reporting of unacceptable behaviour and sexual misconduct (reported separately and disaggregated by gender)
  - (ii) satisfaction with management of unacceptable behaviour and sexual misconduct (reported separately and disaggregated by gender).

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** Defence will assess its ADF leaders based on upwards feedback and performance against culture, health and wellbeing targets.

Defence is developing an integrated workplace behaviours, culture and integrity reporting capability to be tested in early 2025. The integrated reporting capability will include reporting on sexual misconduct and unacceptable behaviour. The capability will draw on wider government integrity measures from the Australian Public Service Commission and will expand to include workplace surveys data.

## **Recommendation 12: Consider emotional intelligence and performance against wellbeing targets in selecting leaders to promote**

The Australian Defence Force should strengthen its leadership selection and promotion process by:

- (a) assessing a candidate's performance against culture, health and wellbeing targets (see Recommendation 11) as part of the 'fit and proper person' check for leadership and command selection and promotion
- (b) including psychometric testing, particularly emotional intelligence measurement, as part of the command selection framework, based on command-assessment programs in the United Kingdom and the United States.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to consider emotional intelligence and performance against wellbeing targets in selecting leaders to promote.

The Government will continue to strengthen the selection of ADF leaders. The introduction of the fit and proper person test has contributed to a greater focus on the culture of Defence's leaders when assessing their suitability for promotion and selection for command positions.

## Recommendation 13: Co-design a new doctrine recognising that operational readiness depends on a healthy workforce

Defence should convene a select panel to co-design a new doctrine on ‘people, capability and service’ with Australian Defence Force (ADF) members.

The doctrine should make it clear that Australia’s military capability and operational readiness depend on having a physically and mentally healthy workforce, where prevention, early intervention and recovery are not in opposition to values of service and sacrifice, but are essential for these values to be expressed in a sustainable way that serves our nation’s interest.

The select panel should:

- (a) consist of ex-serving members and represent experience at both the commissioned and non-commissioned officer ranks, across Navy, Army and Air Force
- (b) undertake a co-design process including representation from a broad range of age groups, ranks, bases and services, and maximise involvement of members who have experienced physical and mental health issues
- (c) present the new doctrine on ‘people, capability and service’ to the Chief of Personnel and the Chief of the Defence Force for endorsement by no later than December 2026
- (d) identify any other single-service or ADF cultural norms, symbols, systems, policies or processes identified by members or commanding officers as barriers to the prioritisation of member health and wellbeing, and suggest changes in a report to the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Personnel.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to co-design a new doctrine recognising that operational readiness depends on a healthy workforce. The new doctrine will be released in 2026 alongside the next iteration of the Workforce Plan and the National Defence Strategy.

The Government recognises that people are Defence’s most important asset. Defence must evolve its culture to underpin the significant reform required to deliver the National Defence Strategy, including supporting the physical and mental health and wellbeing of its workforce. Defence has continued to improve health services and support by expanding funds and services available under the ADF Family Health Benefit program from 1 July 2023. This included doubling the allowances per dependent per year, and expanding the services eligible for reimbursements to ADF personnel, to include improved access and support for healthy diets, physical activity and cancer screening.

## Volume 3: Military sexual violence, unacceptable behaviour and military justice

### Recommendation 14: Understand the prevalence and effects of military sexual trauma and improve responses to support victims

The Australian Government should commission independent research on the prevalence of military sexual trauma among serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members. This research should examine:

- (a) the link between sexual misconduct and suicide and suicidality, other impacts experienced during service, and specific needs of victims at the time of transition, and benchmark the ADF response with best practice approaches to inform recommendations for improvements
- (b) the terminology 'sexual misconduct' used by the ADF, compared to 'military sexual trauma and violence', and the impact of terminology on victims.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to research the prevalence and effects of military sexual trauma and improve responses to support victims, including use of appropriate terminology.

## Recommendation 15: Clarify definitions and processes related to sexual offences

Defence should amend its Complaints and Resolutions Manual to:

- (a) include definitions of sexual offences aligned with the *Crimes Act 1900* (ACT) sexual offence provisions, that clearly describe the types of behaviours and actions that constitute each offence
- (b) provide clear and explicit instructions that managers and commanders who receive a report of sexual misconduct should consult with the Joint Military Police Unit to determine whether the conduct constitutes an offence, before taking any further action.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to clarify definitions and processes related to sexual offences.

Proactive initiatives to prevent sexual misconduct create workplaces that are safer and more productive. All Defence personnel receive training to raise awareness of the issue of sexual misconduct and to help commanders, managers and teams to manage an incident if it should occur. In October 2024, Defence updated its guidance to clarify the need for Joint Military Police Unit to be consulted to determine whether an incident constitutes an offence. Defence will update its guidance to include definitions of sexual offences aligned with the *Crimes Act 1900*.

## **Recommendation 16: Evaluate training on managing sexual misconduct and make it mandatory for all leaders**

Defence should commission an independent evaluation of the Sexual Misconduct Incident Management Workshop as a matter of priority. Following any required improvements identified by this evaluation, sexual misconduct incident management training should be mandatory for all commanders and managers.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to evaluate training on managing sexual misconduct and make the training mandatory for all leaders.

There is no place for sexual misconduct in Defence. Mandatory sexual misconduct education seeks to equip Defence personnel with the understanding they need to prevent, respond to and report incidents of sexual misconduct.

Defence will evaluate its Sexual Misconduct Workshops and continue to develop its mandatory education on sexual misconduct for all Defence employees. Defence's mandatory training currently includes modules on which unacceptable behaviours constitute sexual misconduct, pathways for disclosing or reporting sexual misconduct, consent, and how to respond to disclosures. Enhancing and modernising Defence's established sexual misconduct education program ensures an enterprise-wide approach to sexual misconduct education.



## Recommendation 17: Prioritise the prevention of sexual misconduct in the Australian Defence Force

The Australian Defence Force should develop a comprehensive sexual misconduct prevention strategy that includes primary prevention and early intervention, as well as targeted behaviour change programs for perpetrators of sexual misconduct.

The strategy should be:

- (a) developed in partnership with the Australian Human Rights Commission and Our Watch, include specific actions for implementation, including timeframes, and be tailored to the ADF context
- (b) submitted to the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Personnel for endorsement, and published on the Defence website.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to prioritise the prevention of sexual misconduct in the ADF which will include the development of a comprehensive sexual misconduct prevention strategy.

The Government will invest in efforts aimed at sexual misconduct prevention in the ADF. A comprehensive sexual misconduct prevention strategy will unify Defence's approach to prevention, detection and response to sexual misconduct. The strategy will include a commitment from leadership to build awareness and seek to prevent sexual misconduct through early intervention and the management of complaints. Defence will develop the strategy and its policy on prevention of sexual misconduct to align with the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children (2022-32)*.

## Recommendation 18: Strengthen workplace protections during sexual misconduct investigations

The Australian Defence Force should develop a dedicated policy that applies when sexual misconduct incident investigations are underway in the administrative, disciplinary or civilian justice systems.

The policy should:

- (a) provide that the commanding officer must immediately apply one of the following interim actions to the alleged perpetrator, neither of which imply any finding of guilt or wrongdoing:
  - (i) amend their work arrangements to ensure no contact between the victim and the alleged perpetrator (depending on the nature of the work, this may require re-assignment to a different location), noting that the arrangement must not restrict the victim from accessing any common areas
  - (ii) allow suspension with pay
- (b) ensure that the commanding officer's decision must be informed by a comprehensive risk assessment of the safety, health and wellbeing of the victim, the alleged perpetrator and the broader workplace, with the reasons for the decision being recorded
- (c) ensure that interim actions are reviewed on a regular basis until the matter has been resolved through both the disciplinary (or criminal) and administrative systems.

The policy should not preclude the commanding officer from:

- (d) suspending an alleged perpetrator without pay (either in full or part), in accordance with the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* (Cth) and the Defence Force Regulation 2016
- (e) taking any additional interim actions as necessary.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to prioritise strengthening workplace protections during sexual misconduct investigations, including through a dedicated policy for when investigations are underway in the administrative, disciplinary or civilian justice systems.

This policy on workplace protections during sexual misconduct investigations will provide for the immediate amendment of work arrangements to ensure no contact between the victim and alleged perpetrator. The Government will make necessary legislative amendments to enable ADF members to be suspended with pay (while not precluding suspension without pay) with appropriate safeguards, when they are subject to an investigation or inquiry.

All workplaces should be safe, inclusive and free from harassment, discrimination and other unlawful behaviours. Defence has implemented Stop Sexual Harassment directions, which mirror those introduced by the Government's Respect@Work legislation. The Government also expanded the jurisdiction of the Fair Work commission to receive stop work applications from defence personnel if they have exhausted internal processes.

As an interim measure in November 2024, the Chief of the Defence Force issued an interim Directive '*Consideration of Suspension from Duty and Involuntary Separation of ADF Members Alleged to have Engaged in Serious Misconduct*' aimed at ensuring more consistent decision-making by setting out a process and providing guidance for the management of certain offences including sexual offences.

## Recommendation 19: Protect victims of sexual misconduct from disadvantage over the course of their careers

To ensure there are no inadvertent career consequences for victims of sexual misconduct and to support the safety of victims over the course of their careers, Defence should:

- (a) develop a neutral label to signify where a change in working hours, or a short-notice or out-of-cycle posting, has occurred to protect a member's health and wellbeing, in a way that protects individual privacy and clearly signals that no career penalty should apply. Similar amendments should be made to the military employment classification system and in guidance to promotions boards
- (b) report to the Minister for Defence Personnel by no later than 30 June 2025 on whether career management, human resources and Defence housing systems have been updated to ensure victims of sexual misconduct are not posted with their perpetrator/s over the course of their career.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** victims of sexual misconduct should be protected from disadvantage over the course of their careers.

The Government strengthened protections for employees who have been, or are being, subjected to family and domestic violence from discrimination in the workplace through amendments to the *Fair Work Act 2009* in 2023 and 2024. These were applied to Defence and the ADF.

The Government agrees that victims of sexual misconduct should not be posted with their perpetrator/s over the course of their career in the ADF where possible and appropriate. Defence will report to the Minister for Defence Personnel on how career management, human resources and Defence housing systems have been updated to ensure this.

## Recommendation 20: Amend the legislation related to sentencing perpetrators of military sexual offences

The Australian Government should amend Section 70 of the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* (Cth) to:

- (a) expressly require service tribunals to consider the impact of a sexual offence on the victim as a factor during sentencing, including a victim impact statement if one has been made, and allow the victim to read their statement aloud if they choose to do so, in a closed or open court
- (b) make it clear that if an offender is of higher rank than a victim, this should be considered an aggravating factor for the purpose of sentencing.

The Australian Defence Force Chief Judge Advocate should amend Practice Note 6 – Part IV Sentencing to require the prosecution counsel to invite victims to make a victim impact statement for consideration by the service tribunal during sentencing.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** the impact of a sexual offence on the victim, and the comparative ranks of the offender and victim, should be considered in sentencing.

The Government will seek to make necessary legislative amendments to achieve this, including to the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* (Cth). In September 2024, the Australian Defence Force Chief Judge Advocate amended Practice Note 6 – Part IV Sentencing to require the prosecution counsel to invite victims to make a victim impact statement for consideration by the service tribunal during sentencing.

## **Recommendation 21: Implement a 'presumption' of discharge for Australian Defence Force members found to have engaged in certain forms of sexual misconduct**

The Chief of the Defence Force should issue a directive providing for a presumption that anyone in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) who is found to have engaged in certain forms of sexual misconduct will be discharged.

- (a) The directive should apply to specified forms of sexual misconduct including, but not limited to, sexual harassment, sexual offences, related offences including intimate image abuse, stalking, and any other offence involving conduct of a sexual nature against an ADF member including prejudicial conduct, assault and obscene conduct.
- (b) The standard of proof is the balance of probabilities. For the directive to apply, there needs to be a finding, either by a criminal/disciplinary tribunal or administratively by command, substantiating that sexual misconduct has occurred. Where a sexual offence allegation has been made but has not proceeded to prosecution, or has been prosecuted but has not resulted in a conviction, the behaviour must be assessed on the balance of probabilities to determine whether the directive applies.
- (c) Procedural fairness should be afforded to the member before a decision on whether to retain or discharge them is made. The directive should provide guidance on factors to be taken into account by the decision-maker. The decision must be approved by the relevant service chief.
- (d) Discharge statistics related to decisions made under the directive should be provided annually to the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Personnel. Statistics should be disaggregated by service and be accompanied by an analysis of common themes, lessons learnt, and actions taken in response.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that subject to fair process the ADF will implement a presumption of discharge for members found to have engaged in serious sexual misconduct.

All Defence personnel have a responsibility to help create a safe and respectful workplace environment and culture free from sexual misconduct. This includes an understanding of what constitutes sexual misconduct, prompt and sensitive actioning of reports and managing incidents well when they occur.

Further work will be done to understand the legislative reform required to give effect to this recommendation.

## **Recommendation 22: Adopt a policy of mandatory discharge for Australian Defence Force members convicted of sexual and related offences**

Defence should adopt a policy of mandatory discharge for Australian Defence Force members convicted of sexual and related offences (including stalking and intimate image abuse) in the military and civilian criminal justice systems, subject to further legal advice on the legislative barriers, if any.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that the ADF will adopt a policy of mandatory discharge for ADF members convicted of sexual and related offences.

All Defence personnel have a responsibility to help create a safe and respectful workplace environment and culture free from sexual misconduct. This includes an understanding of what constitutes sexual misconduct, prompt and sensitive actioning of reports and managing incidents well when they occur.

Further work will be done to understand the legislative reform required to give effect to this recommendation.

## Recommendation 23: Record convictions of sexual offences in Australian Defence Force records and civilian criminal records

As a matter of urgency, the Australian Government should:

- (a) ensure the Australian Defence Force has a complete and reliable record of all serving members who have been convicted of sexual offences and related offences (including stalking and intimate image abuse) in civilian courts
- (b) work with state and territory governments to ensure that civilian criminal records include convictions of sexual offences and related offences (including stalking and intimate image abuse) made under the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* (Cth).

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** that the ADF will ensure it has a complete and reliable record of all serving members' convictions of serious crimes in civilian courts, and will record convictions of sexual offences and related offences made under the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* in civilian criminal records.

The Government notes that the Minister for Defence has recently agreed to the policy for reporting certain Service Convictions to an authority of the Commonwealth, or of a State or a Territory, for purposes connected with investigating, prosecuting or keeping records in relation to offences against laws of the Commonwealth, the State or the Territory. This policy ensures that Service Convictions that society would expect to appear on a criminal history record apply to members of the ADF, even once they leave the Defence Force.

The Attorney-General's Department and the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission have been working closely with Defence to integrate Service Convictions for serious offences into the National Police Reference System. This will enable Defence data to be made available for police reference checks.

## **Recommendation 24: Annually publish anonymised data on outcomes of all incidents of sexual misconduct**

Defence should publish data on administrative and disciplinary outcomes for all forms of sexual misconduct incidents. At a minimum, this data should:

- (a) be published on an annual basis, disaggregated by service
- (b) identify the nature and type of all sexual misconduct incidents, including:
  - (i) the nature and type of sexual offences and related offences, including intimate image abuse, stalking and relevant service offences that include sexual misconduct as an element
  - (ii) other forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment and sex discrimination
- (c) include demographic information of victims and perpetrators, including age, rank and gender.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to annually publish anonymised data on the administrative and disciplinary outcomes of all incidents and forms of sexual misconduct, which will be disaggregated by service and include the demographic information of victims and perpetrators.



## Recommendation 25: Conduct a formal inquiry into military sexual violence in the Australian Defence Force

The Australian Government should commission an external, independent, expert inquiry into military sexual violence in the Australian Defence Force (ADF), with a report that includes recommendations provided to the Minister for Defence, the Minister for Defence Personnel and the Attorney General, and made public.

The terms of reference for this inquiry should be developed in consultation with victims of sexual violence in the ADF (serving and ex-serving), and at a minimum should include:

- (a) the effectiveness of the military justice system compared to the civilian justice system in receiving, investigating and adjudicating on sexual and related offences. This should include an examination of the Joint Military Police Unit's investigative powers and capability to conduct sexual offence investigations; the referral of matters to civilian police; any barriers faced by civilian police investigating sexual offences on ADF bases; sentencing outcomes; recidivism rates; decisions not to prosecute and conviction rates
- (b) the underlying reasons for the reduction in actions (including making a report, and agreeing to reported matters being investigated) taken by victims of sexual violence, including the role of alcohol and other barriers, and the adequacy of ADF policies in addressing these
- (c) the effectiveness of anonymous reporting options including awareness, uptake and impact compared to alternative approaches (including but not limited to the approach taken in the United States).

The inquiry should have regard to all lived-experience testimony, statements, exhibits and published submissions made to this Royal Commission that are related to sexual violence in the ADF.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to commission an independent inquiry into military sexual violence in the ADF.

Sexual misconduct and unacceptable behaviour have no place in Defence. The rates of sexual violence being reported in the ADF are completely unacceptable.

Defence will support and participate in any formal inquiries conducted into military sexual violence in the ADF.

## Recommendation 26: Foster a strong culture of reporting unacceptable behaviour

Defence should foster a strong reporting culture to:

- (a) proactively identify at-risk locations, cohorts, ranks or roles where toxic subcultures are flourishing
- (b) implement risk mitigation strategies to address unacceptable behaviour directly in the locations, cohorts, ranks or roles identified
- (c) report publicly on identified hot spots of unacceptable behaviour and what actions have been taken to address unacceptable behaviour.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** that Defence will develop a stronger culture of reporting unacceptable behaviour, including taking action to identify where those behaviours are occurring, and implement risk mitigation strategies.

In addition to fostering a stronger reporting culture, Defence will improve its reporting capability in consultation with the APS Commission. This reporting capability will enable the integration of multiple sources of data, including complaints, to prevent, detect and respond to unacceptable behaviour. The first version of this capability will be available in late 2024.

## **Recommendation 27: Evaluate outcomes to ensure that Defence has addressed the intent behind recommendations**

Defence should evaluate the outcomes of actions taken to implement the recommendations made by the Commonwealth Ombudsman in its review *Does Defence handle unacceptable behaviour complaints effectively? Defending Fairness*, to ensure that the intent of the recommendations is achieved.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to evaluate Defence's implementation of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's 2023 review into its handling of unacceptable behaviour complaints.

In 2023, Defence accepted all the recommendations of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's review *'Defending Fairness - Does Defence handle unacceptable complaints effectively?'* A key recommendation of that report was to establish a specialised, centralised trained complaints unit with quality assurance at its core to ensure Defence's policies and procedures are applied consistently and to facilitate continuous improvement.

Defence will evaluate and report to the Government on the status of the implementation of the review's recommendations. Defence will prioritise the achievement of its intent, including the establishment of a specialised, centralised trained complaints unit.

## Recommendation 28: Coordinate governance, assurance and policy functions of the military justice system

Defence should establish a home for military justice governance, assurance and policy and provide sufficient resourcing to achieve the following functions:

- (a) monitor qualitative and quantitative data and analyse trends across the range of military justice processes and outcomes
- (b) prioritising strategies to improve military justice record-keeping and data input issues to remediate data quality and facilitate analysis
- (c) monitoring the effectiveness of implementation of recommendations from various military justice reviews (including Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force), including activity and impact evaluation
- (d) continue to define military justice metrics and align them with health and wellbeing metrics, and in so doing, to:
  - (i) identify and monitor risks of misuse and abuse of military justice processes
  - (ii) track complaints and trends related to termination, offence type and investigation outcomes
  - (iii) identify members who are repeatedly subject to military justice processes
  - (iv) identify officers who apply disproportionately high numbers of administrative sanctions
- (e) establish and implement effectiveness measures for military justice reforms / key actions on the Military Justice Steering Group action plan
- (f) review current-status reporting on initiatives in line with good-practice governance principles.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to effectively coordinate the governance, assurance and policy functions of the military justice system.

Defence will establish a new Military Justice System Assurance Branch in December 2024 to coordinate these functions.

## **Recommendation 29: Establish a new role to improve training and communication on conducting inquiries**

Defence should establish the Joint Workforce Capability Employment Manager as a priority, whose scope of work should include:

- (a) reviewing the effectiveness of training in how to conduct 'fact finds' and inquiries and ensuring that trauma-informed principles are embedded throughout the training
- (b) reviewing the effectiveness of policies and communication material related to 'fact finds' and inquiries.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** 'fact finds' and inquiries should be conducted in a trauma-informed manner, and agrees to review the effectiveness of existing approaches to training, policies and communication material accordingly.

The new Military Justice System Assurance Branch will include a Joint Workforce Capability Employment Manager to undertake these reviews.

### **Recommendation 30: Prioritise the Inspector-General's inquiry into the weaponisation of the administrative system**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should initiate an own-initiative inquiry into the weaponisation of the military justice administrative system by the end of 2024.

The inquiry should consider how to improve accountability of commanders who are found to misuse and abuse military justice processes. Measures to identify misuse and abuse may include monitoring trends in administrative sanctions and locations, cohorts, roles or ranks found to be associated with disproportionately high rates of sanctions.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should prioritise its own-initiative inquiry into the weaponisation of the administrative system.

## **Recommendation 31: Consider how mental health may contribute to poor conduct before recommending administrative termination**

That it be mandatory for Defence, when recommending administrative termination of a member under Section 24 (1) (c) of the Defence Regulation 2016 (Cth) 'retention-not-in-service-interest', to consider the member's current mental health and/or the role that mental health may have played in the behaviour that attracted administrative action.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence should consider how mental health may have contributed to poor conduct, including when considering viable alternatives to administrative termination.

As an interim measure in November 2024, the Chief of the Defence Force issued an interim Directive '*Consideration of Suspension from Duty and Involuntary Separation of ADF Members Alleged to have Engaged in Serious Misconduct*' that includes a requirement to consider the member's mental health and impact of that condition on their conduct.

### **Recommendation 32: When requested, conduct a merits review when a member's service is terminated for the reason 'retention-not-in-service-interest'**

Defence should implement a merits-review process for involuntary separation under Section 24 (1) (c) of the Defence Regulation 2016 (Cth) 'retention-not-in-service-interest' through consultation and collaboration with the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal/ Administrative Review Tribunal.

- (a) Defence should introduce an enhanced merits-review process in the Redress of Grievance Directorate of the Inspector-General of the ADF.
- (b) The Australian Government should consider giving jurisdiction to a specialist division of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal/Administrative Review Tribunal to manage a fast-track method for conducting external merits reviews. It is proposed that an external merits review would only be considered after the independent merits review process of the Inspector-General of the ADF had been completed.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to introduce an enhanced merits review process, and to consider a 'fast-track' method for conducting external merits reviews.

Defence will work closely with the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force and the Attorney-General's Department to consider how this recommendation can be implemented.



### **Recommendation 33: Seek to understand whether/how involvement in military justice processes contributes to adverse outcomes**

Defence should undertake further research to better understand the stressors that are both associated with, and lead to, involvement in administrative and disciplinary processes, including:

- (a) identifying prevalence rates of suicide and suicidality for serving and ex-serving members who have been exposed to military justice administrative and disciplinary processes
- (b) exploring the connection between members' use of alcohol and other drugs as a numbing strategy to help them cope with trauma and service-related stressors, and involvement in administrative or disciplinary processes
- (c) identifying opportunities to intervene when members are engaging in maladaptive coping strategies before their behaviour leads to administrative or disciplinary action.

Based on the outcomes of this research, Defence should implement policies to support members involved with military justice processes and minimise the risk of adverse outcomes, including suicide and suicidality.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to undertake further research to understand how involvement in military justice processes may contribute to adverse outcomes, and, if they are found to contribute to adverse outcomes, to implement policies to appropriately support members.

This research will consider and build on a previous review by Defence of its health policies relating to members involved in the military justice system. That review resulted in updated guidance in June 2024 for Defence health staff in advising commanders and managers, and supporting members who are involved in the military justice process.

### **Recommendation 34: Prioritise the review into the regulations governing court martial panels**

Defence should prioritise the review of current provisions relating to court martial panels not being required to provide reasons for punishments being imposed.

Defence should document this in the 2024/25 Military Justice Steering Group workplan.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** Defence will prioritise the review of current regulations governing court martial panels and document them in the 2024/25 Military Justice Steering Group workplan.

### **Recommendation 35: Determine whether support mechanisms for members involved with military justice processes are effective**

Defence should evaluate the effectiveness of the key support mechanisms for those involved in military justice proceedings, including but not limited to:

- (a) support officers
- (b) individual welfare boards.

In its evaluation, Defence should consider members' experiences of the supports provided.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to evaluate the effectiveness of support mechanisms for members involved in military justice processes.

## Recommendation 36: Trial a model outside the chain of command for supporting members involved in military justice processes

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) should fund and pilot a model for automatic, opt-out referral to both legal and welfare support services for members engaged in certain military justice processes that is separate from the chain of command (for example, the Workplace Behaviour Adviser Network, the Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office, and the Employee Assistance Program).

In developing the pilot, the ADF should:

- (a) consider the role of individual welfare boards in the process
- (b) make it clear that once the referral is received, the relevant service would be responsible for initiating contact
- (c) consider thresholds for referral, and focus on increasing support for members exposed to factors known to contribute to higher risk of psychosocial harm, suicide and suicidality for example:
  - (i) those involved (both as victims and accused) in unacceptable behaviour complaints, sexual misconduct incidents, and disciplinary proceedings for offences under the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* (Cth)
  - (ii) those who are being considered for administrative termination.

The ADF should evaluate the pilot at its conclusion to assess the demand impacts and benefits in order to inform the decision for a broader roll-out.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to trial a model outside the chain of command for supporting members involved in military justice processes.

The ADF should fund and pilot a model for automatic, opt-out referral to both legal and welfare support services for members engaged in certain military justice processes that is separate from the chain of command (for example, the Workplace Behaviour Adviser Network, the Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office, and the Employee Assistance Program).

## Recommendation 37: Develop a charter of minimum standards for all members involved in military justice processes

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) should develop a charter of minimum standards for all members involved with or subject to disciplinary processes, or involved in matters handled by the Inspector-General of the ADF. It should include commitments to:

- (a) treating members with courtesy, compassion, dignity and respect, and consideration of their welfare needs
- (b) providing members with information that is clear and understandable about:
  - (i) the relevant military justice processes
  - (ii) the legal, welfare and victim-support services available to them
- (c) referring members to relevant support services
- (d) providing updates at key stages of the process, including explaining the outcomes at its conclusion
- (e) giving victims of unacceptable behaviour the opportunity to provide a victim impact statement to inform sentencing, where the accused has been found guilty.

The charter should also contain defined roles and responsibilities for meeting the minimum standards.

The charter should be publicly available and members may refer to these minimum standards via the existing appeals and complaints processes where they feel these standards have not been upheld.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to develop a charter of minimum standards for all members involved in military justice processes.

Defence has commenced development of this charter.

The charter will set minimum standards for all members involved with or subject to disciplinary processes, or involved in matters handled by the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.

## Recommendation 38: Improve governance processes related to accountability and continuous improvement

To improve accountability and continuous improvement regarding mental health and wellbeing outcomes, Defence should:

- (a) continue to work towards including health, wellbeing and safety measures in its Budget Paper performance measure, and ensure these measures cascade into future corporate plans
- (b) prioritise the development of the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework in partnership with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, for the joint Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2028, and set out what success would look like for that strategy in terms of outcomes in the short, medium and long term, against the wellbeing domains
- (c) continue to develop a clear performance logic, including the translation of performance measures from budget papers, the corporate plan, and the joint strategy into clear accountability measures for senior leaders in Defence
- (d) once the Enterprise Reform Program has been implemented, assess how improvements in the collection, sharing and use of data may better support performance measurement, in line with the Defence performance logic model.

Acknowledging the challenges in improving performance measurement, and the risk of unintended consequences, the Australian Government should assist Defence to build performance management experience and expertise at the unit, service and enterprise level by:

- (e) prioritising Defence in the broader Australian Public Service performance management capability uplift
- (f) prioritising Defence in the Australian Public Service Commission Capability Review program
- (g) supporting a coaching and mentoring program in areas (identified by Defence) that have responsibility for developing and implementing reforms in performance measurement.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** Defence should improve its governance processes related to accountability and continuous improvement regarding mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

Defence and DVA have commenced work on a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing.

## **Recommendation 39: Address risk factors for suicide and suicidality and report on progress as part of enterprise-level risk management**

Defence should address in-service risk factors for suicide and suicidality as part of the reporting processes related to enterprise risk management and the development of mental health and wellbeing strategy by:

- (a) identifying in-service risk factors to be reported (including, but not limited to, the risk factors for suicide and suicidality related to Australian Defence Force service identified in Chapter 1, Understanding suicide)
- (b) developing outcomes-based measures against these risk factors
- (c) developing risk controls and measures of control effectiveness.

Enterprise risk management must be informed by a contemporary assessment of hazards related to the health and wellbeing of Defence personnel and should inform delivery of the joint Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2028.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence will continue to address risk factors for suicide and suicidality, and report on progress as part of enterprise-level risk management and development of the mental health and wellbeing strategy, supported by two Action Plans.

Defence has created a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing Branch to focus and strengthen Defence's approach to preventive mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, which will be responsible for the implementation of this recommendation.

Defence and DVA are prioritising suicide prevention programs, including through the release of the draft Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for consultation by the end of 2024. The strategy will be reviewed by the Taskforce before finalisation in 2025.

## **Recommendation 40: Improve governance mechanisms from the unit level to the enterprise level**

In order to identify and address barriers to effective governance from the unit level to the enterprise level, Defence should:

- (a) review all internal and external governance reporting mechanisms
- (b) identify root causes of non-compliance with required reporting
- (c) identify duplicative reporting information and processes
- (d) draw on process-improvement methodologies (for example, Lean Thinking) to reduce the administrative burden of reporting and governance compliance across Defence
- (e) improve governance, performance-reporting and data literacy at the unit, service and enterprise level via training and/or embedding coaching.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence will improve its governance mechanisms, including identifying and addressing barriers to effective governance.



## Recommendation 41: Build project-management capability so that reform initiatives are successful

To build sustained capability to implement lasting policy changes, Defence should:

- (a) engage independent expertise to undertake a project management maturity assessment of the areas in Defence that will be responsible for implementing the recommendations of this Royal Commission
- (b) upon completion of the maturity assessment, develop a blueprint and implementation plan to deliver the improvements to those areas of project management capability that require an uplift
- (c) monitor the implementation of the capability uplift through to completion via a Tier 1 Committee.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** that Defence will assess and build its project management capacity, with a focus on areas directly responsible for implementing recommendations made by the Royal Commission.

## **Recommendation 42: Ensure that future Inspectors-General of the Australian Defence Force will not have served in the ADF**

The Australian Government should amend Part VIIIIB Division 2, sections 110E to 110P of the *Defence Act 1903* so that:

- (a) a person appointed as the Inspector-General of the ADF must not have served in the ADF
- (b) the Inspector-General should be supported by two Deputy Inspectors-General with appropriate skills and experience, for example, having served in the ADF or having experience and understanding of the justice system, including military justice
- (c) the Deputy Inspector-General positions are to be statutory appointments.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Government agrees the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should be appropriately qualified, independent, supported and consistent with comparable Inspectors-General.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

### **Recommendation 43: Allow the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force to make recruitment decisions for the staffing of their office**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) should have the responsibility and authority for the selection of staff in their office, including as to whether staff are drawn from the ADF, the Australian Public Service, or from other sources.

The Inspector-General should have the power to select and recruit freely from the ADF without being constrained by whom the Chief of the Defence Force, the service chiefs or the Director of Military Legal Capability select or recommend.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should make recruitment decisions for the staffing of their office.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 44: Ensure that staff of the office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force have the necessary skills, expertise and qualifications**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) should develop a workforce plan that includes:

- (a) a review of the skills, expertise and professional qualifications required to discharge effectively the Inspector-General's complete functions
- (b) an assessment of the current workforce in the office of the Inspector-General in which any competency gaps are identified
- (c) a strategic plan to attract and deliver the required capability profile to the office of the Inspector-General.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** staff of the office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should have the necessary skills, expertise and qualifications to perform their duties, informed by an appropriate assessment.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 45: Improve transparency and accountability of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force by increasing their reporting requirements**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) should improve the transparency and accountability of their office by:

- (a) updating and publishing comprehensive guidance or other standard operating procedures on its website, including quality-assurance measures, related to the discharge of the Inspector-General's functions in each directorate of the office of the Inspector-General
- (b) establishing and including in this guidance specific performance measures related to timeliness in the completion of assessments and inquiries and the consideration of redress of grievance complaints, and reporting annually on performance against these measures.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to improve transparency and accountability of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force through the publication of the guidance or other Standard Operating Procedures, to include quality assurance and, where feasible, performance measures.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 46: Ensure staff of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force are trained in trauma-informed practice**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should ensure that all staff in the office of the Inspector-General (including consultants) who engage with members' next of kin and family members; are communicating with complainants, respondents or witnesses for the purpose of an inquiry; or who are charged with considering a redress-of-grievance complaint have completed the Compassionate Foundations course or equivalent training in trauma-informed practice before doing so, and complete refresher training every two years.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** staff of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will continue to be appropriately trained in trauma-informed practice.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 47: The Inspector-General to inquire into all deaths of serving members unless suicide can be excluded as the cause of death**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) should ensure that where suicide cannot be categorically excluded as the cause of death of an ADF member, a formal inquiry under written directions is conducted.

When undertaking such an inquiry, the Inspector-General should obtain input from a qualified mental health expert, such as a psychologist, when determining:

- (a) whether suicide may have been the cause of death
- (b) where suicide cannot be excluded, what the contributing factors may have been and whether there was a 'service nexus'
- (c) what recommendations should be made.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that inquiries into deaths of ADF members should be presumed where suicide cannot be excluded and there is a plausible service nexus.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 48: When a member dies by suicide, appoint a legal officer to represent the interests of the deceased and support the next of kin**

When a serving member dies by suicide, or is suspected to have died by suicide, the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should ensure that a legal officer from Defence Counsel Services has been appointed to represent the interests of the deceased upon written directions for a formal inquiry being issued.

The Inspector-General should ensure that interviews with the member's next of kin are conducted after the legal officer has been appointed and made contact with them.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should continue to ensure a legal officer represents the interests of the deceased, where the next of kin consents.

When a serving member dies by suicide, or is suspected to have died by suicide, the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should ensure that a legal officer from Defence Counsel Services has been appointed to represent the interests of the deceased upon written directions for a formal inquiry being issued.

The Inspector-General should ensure that interviews with the member's next of kin are conducted after the legal officer has been appointed and made contact with them.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*



## Recommendation 49: Minimise disclosure restrictions of Inspector-General inquiry reports and ensure they are fair and understood by the next of kin

In relation to non-disclosure directions made pursuant to section 21 of the *Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force Regulations 2016*:

- (a) staff from the office of the Inspector-General must explain the scope of the directions to next of kin and family members before they are made
- (b) the directions should not apply to information that next of kin themselves provide to an inquiry, and which next of kin may know independently of anything contained in a draft, unredacted or redacted report
- (c) next of kin should be consulted directly about the persons that are to be included in the carve-outs to the directions permitting disclosure, and persons nominated by the next of kin should be included unless there is a good reason not to include them
- (d) restrictions on disclosure in respect of unredacted and redacted final reports should only extend to those parts of the reports that need to have disclosure restricted in the interests of the defence of the Commonwealth, or for reasons of fairness to a person who the Inspector-General considers may be affected by the inquiry
- (e) the Inspector-General should establish a mechanism by which next of kin may have the directions that are made reviewed by a legal officer of the office of the Inspector-General who was not involved in the relevant inquiry or in the decision to make the directions. The Inspector-General must have regard to the issues or concerns raised by the legal officer
- (f) there should be comprehensive guidance in relation to the making and terms of Section 21 directions included in the updated comprehensive guidance on the Inspector-General's website.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will continue to minimise disclosure restrictions of the reports and ensure they are understood by next of kin.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 50: Amend the scope of the Inspector-General's role to inquire into suicide deaths of former Australian Defence Force members**

The Inspector-General should be required and empowered to inquire into the death of a former Australian Defence Force (ADF) member where the death may have been by suicide, and where:

- (a) the death occurs:
  - (i) after 30 September 2024; and
  - (ii) within two years of the former member ceasing to be an ADF member; and
- (b) the Inspector-General is notified or otherwise learns of the death within three months of the date of death.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should conduct inquiries into the deaths of former serving ADF members.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 51: The Inspector-General to regularly review inquiries into suicide deaths to determine common themes**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should conduct a review of all inquiries and reports into suicide or suspected suicide every three years to determine whether there are any common themes and contributing factors, and report the findings to the Chief of the Defence Force, the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Personnel.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should conduct triennial inquiries and reports into ADF member deaths by suicide or suspected suicide.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 52: Conduct a merits review when a member's service is involuntarily terminated and they submit a redress of grievance complaint**

When a member makes a redress of grievance complaint concerning a decision to terminate their service, the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force should:

- (a) (in addition to Recommendation 32) conduct a review in the nature of a merits review and determine, in their view, the correct or preferable decision
- (b) conclude their consideration of the complaint within 60 days of referral
- (c) give the member the opportunity to provide any further information or submissions prior to concluding their consideration of the complaint, in person, if practicable to do so, when the proposed outcome will not be favourable to the member.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will continue to conduct a merits review and seek member engagement in the resolution of their complaint.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

### **Recommendation 53: Give members 21 days to make a complaint after being notified of a decision to terminate their service**

Defence should amend Section 41(2) of the Defence Regulations 2016 to allow a member to make a complaint up to 21 days after they are notified of a decision to terminate their service.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to amend policy to enable members to make a complaint up to 21 days after being notified of a decision to terminate their service.

## **Recommendation 54: Improve the frequency of military justice-related audits conducted by the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force**

The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) should:

- (a) conduct a routine military justice performance audit of every major ADF unit every three years, and of every *ab initio* training establishment every two years
- (b) conduct a longitudinal study of all audit reports every two years to determine trends, themes and issues of concern, and provide the outcomes of this analysis to the Chief of the Defence Force, the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Personnel
- (c) audit at least three non-major units each year that are not part of the Directorate of Military Justice Performance Audit routine audit cycle.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will conduct the audits and studies as recommended by the Royal Commission.

*All recommendations related to the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force will be implemented with regard to the recommendations of the Twenty-Year Review of the Office of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.*

## **Recommendation 55: Conduct an audit into Defence workplace health and safety risk management**

The Defence Audit and Risk Committee should commission an audit into Defence workplace health and safety (WHS) risk management within the next 12 months. The audit should include, but not be limited to:

- (a) reviewing WHS hazard trends with a focus on psychosocial health and compliance with requirements of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth)
- (b) reviewing the accuracy of existing WHS enterprise risk reporting, including the WHS dashboard
- (c) assessing WHS risk-assessment methodology, and the accuracy of categorisations of 'likelihood' and 'impact' of hazards within the 'WHS' enterprise risk category
- (d) assessing the suitability and effectiveness of WHS hazard controls, including their ability to be measured for impact.

The findings of the audit must be reflected in the delivery of the Defence WHS Strategy and WHS risk reporting going forward.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to conduct an audit in 2025 into Defence workplace health and safety risk management.

## **Recommendation 56: Improve guidance and understanding of Defence's 'if in doubt, notify' policy**

Comcare and Defence should work together to improve guidance and understanding of the 'if in doubt, notify' policy in relation to determinations about when to report notifiable incidents to Comcare.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

Comcare will work with Defence to improve understanding and guidance concerning the 'if in doubt, notify' policy about when to report a notifiable incident to Comcare.



## **Recommendation 57: Comcare to regularly review Australian Defence Force determinations of 'service nexus' for suicide attempts and suspected deaths by suicide**

Comcare should improve its quality assurance of Australian Defence Force (ADF) 'service nexus' determinations made by the ADF by:

- (a) undertaking a periodic review of service nexus determinations made by the ADF for incidents of suicide, suspected suicide, attempted suicide, and non-fatal self-harm by ADF members, where the ADF has concluded that the incident did not arise out of the conduct of the ADF's business or undertaking, under section 38(1) of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth)
- (b) evaluating the results of these periodic reviews after three years to determine whether there is a continued need for them. The timeframe of three years will enable Comcare to test a sufficient sample size to inform a decision about whether to continue periodic reviews.

Defence should fund any additional resourcing required by Comcare to undertake these periodic reviews over the three-year period and conduct its evaluation at the end of that period.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

Comcare will conduct a periodic review of matters that Defence has determined as 'not notifiable', and evaluate the results.

## **Recommendation 58: Give Comcare access to the National Veterans' Data Asset**

Comcare should have access to the National Veterans' Data Asset (Recommendation 107), to inform Comcare's regulatory approach to preventing psychosocial harm including latent harm.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce.

The Government acknowledges the essential need for high quality data and research to support better health, wellbeing and safety outcomes for veterans and their families.

The Government will continue to improve the understanding of veterans' data in order to better support veterans and families.

Comcare will work with relevant agencies to facilitate access to a National Veterans' Data Asset (or equivalent) to inform Comcare's regulatory approach to preventing psychosocial harm including latent harm.

## **Recommendation 59: Defence to participate in Comcare's Psychosocial Proactive Inspection Program**

Defence should participate in Comcare's Psychosocial Proactive Inspection Program, once the evaluation has established that it is effective.

Either:

- (a) Defence should fund its participation in that program, or
- (b) a Commonwealth appropriation should be made to Comcare for the purpose of Defence's participation in the program.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce.

In 2023-24, Comcare piloted a psychosocial proactive inspection program. An independent evaluation of the pilot found it was perceived as a positive experience by workers, persons conducting a business or other stakeholders. The program methodology is currently being refined in order to effectively scale-up and support ongoing implementation.

Comcare will commence a Psychosocial Proactive Inspection Program in respect of Defence.

## **Recommendation 60: Improve strategies for harm prevention and early intervention by sharing quality data with Comcare**

To improve Comcare's ability to inform prevention and early intervention strategies for suicide and latent harm arising from Australian Defence Force service, Defence should:

- (a) share with Comcare on a quarterly basis through the Suicide and Self-Harm Working Group meeting:
  - (i) data on psychosocial harm (including data related to notifiable and non-notifiable incidents)
  - (ii) Defence's analysis of this data to identify systemic issues related to psychosocial harm
- (b) share with Comcare through the Defence-Liaison Forum meeting what actions it has taken to document and implement controls to address systemic hazards, risks and issues relating to psychosocial harm.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to this recommendation.

Defence will improve strategies in relation to data sharing with Comcare, including seeking to share data and subsequent analysis on psychosocial harm.

### Recommendation 61: Establish a brain injury program

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should establish a brain injury program that covers, at a minimum, relevant Army corps, special forces, Navy clearance divers, Air Force combat controllers, and serving and ex-serving members exposed to mefloquine and/or tafenoquine. The program should:

- (a) aim to better understand, and mitigate, the impact of repetitive low-level blast exposure on brain processes
- (b) assess and treat neurocognitive issues affecting serving and ex-serving members, whatever their cause.

To do this, it should:

- (c) monitor and assess environmental exposure to blast overpressure
- (d) record members' exposure to traumatic brain injury and minor traumatic brain injury, including in medical records
- (e) establish a neurocognitive program suitable for serving and ex-serving members experiencing a range of neurocognitive issues, whatever their cause. This could be adapted from the former Mending Military Minds program
- (f) provide referral pathways for further medical assessment, when required.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation, for further consideration by the Taskforce.

Noting the complex nature of brain injury and their evolving understanding, particularly in military settings, the Taskforce will provide advice on the establishment of a brain injury program.

Current and former full time serving ADF members can already receive treatment of all mental health conditions, including those which may be linked to brain injuries. Under DVA's Non-Liability Health Care mental health arrangements, members can be seen without the need to prove the condition is related to their service. This includes reservists who have at least one day of continuous full-time service.

Defence and DVA are leveraging research of the Five Eyes community, including through regular engagement with the United States' Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Repatriation Commission will continue to engage with the Repatriation Medical Authority on emerging research evidence.

## Recommendation 62: Establish a research translation centre for defence and veteran health care

The Australian Government should support the development of a research translation centre for Defence and veteran health care, or a similar body with an explicit research translation focus.

- (a) Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should work with relevant stakeholders, including researchers and health providers with expertise and experience in defence and veteran health care, to develop a model for the establishment of the research translation centre and priority initiatives for funding.
- (b) The model should be informed by the National Health and Medical Research Council criteria for accreditation of a research translation centre, and include the following aims:
  - (i) promoting and increasing research on Defence and veteran health care in Australia
  - (ii) translating research into improvements to the health system and better outcomes for patients
  - (iii) facilitating collaboration among and between researchers and clinicians
  - (iv) supporting research-infused education and training.
- (c) Defence and DVA should jointly develop a business case for the research translation centre for consideration by the Australian Government.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Government recognises the unique healthcare needs of the Defence and veteran community. It is also important that research that relates to Defence members and veterans is translated into actionable health care support for the community.

The Government notes the work underway in DVA to establish a new research and evaluation partnership model known as the Veteran and Family – Learning and Innovation Network of Knowledge. This will enhance the impact of research and evaluation, promote evidence based practices and contribute to better outcomes for veteran health and wellbeing. This is expected to commence early 2025.

## Recommendation 63: Reduce stigma and remove structural and cultural barriers to help seeking

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) should identify and remove cultural and structural barriers to help seeking and make a greater concerted effort to reduce stigma. This should include:

- (a) the Australian Government should remove reference to the word 'malingering' at Section 38 of the *Defence Force Discipline Act 1982* (Cth)
- (b) Defence should review all its policies and procedures and amend or remove those that are stigmatising
- (c) the ADF should develop a dedicated training program and a communications campaign to reduce stigma and promote help seeking.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to remove structural and cultural barriers in order to remove stigma to help-seeking.

ADF culture places significant value on sacrifice and self-sufficiency, in some cases inhibiting members from asking for help and seeking appropriate treatment.

## **Recommendation 64: Establish an enterprise-wide program to monitor and prevent physical and psychological injury**

The Australian Defence Force should establish a comprehensive, enterprise-wide injury surveillance and prevention program. The program should encompass physical and psychosocial risks and hazards, and:

- (a) be adequately resourced, including by engaging staff with appropriate expertise in injury prevention, including physical and psychosocial injury and illness
- (b) identify the most common injury risks and hazards and implement strategies for preventing or minimising them
- (c) include functionality within the reporting system to identify root causes or contributing factors including location, time, and activity being undertaken at the time of injury
- (d) actively monitor where injuries and psychological risks and hazards occur and generate quarterly reports on injury rates and clusters with actionable recommendations for commanding officers.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that there would be benefit in establishing an enterprise-wide program to monitor and prevent physical and psychological injury, consistent with the new *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* obligations.

Defence will build on initial work already underway, including improving its Work Health Safety Management Information System and the establishment of a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing Branch.



## Recommendation 65: Improve access to, timeliness and quality of mental health screening and use the data effectively

The Australian Defence Force should ensure that its mental health screening continuum effectively identifies members who require additional support and/or who are at heightened risk of suicide, and that these individuals receive support, by:

- (a) ensuring that members have access to screening and are offered referrals for further support at all known points of vulnerability, including: during *ab initio* training, when their military employment classification is downgraded, and accessing rehabilitation
- (b) ensuring that a sufficient and appropriately trained workforce is available to administer the mental health screening continuum and conduct the required follow-ups, including:
  - (i) ensuring screening is done in such a way that encourages disclosure, including face-to-face screening wherever possible
  - (ii) ensuring members receive timely and appropriate referrals following screenings where required
  - (iii) monitoring the uptake of referrals and following up with members who do not action these referrals
  - (iv) monitoring members who are overdue for screenings and following up with them
- (c) introducing tools that screen for known risk factors for suicide and suicidality that are not currently screened for, including problematic anger, sleeping difficulties and military sexual trauma
- (d) using the data collected during screenings for longitudinal surveillance.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** that Defence will use data effectively to improve access to, timeliness and quality of mental health screening.

The Government will commit to improving mental health screening. Defence will build on the work underway including mental health research underway and efforts to improve health assessments.

## **Recommendation 66: Where possible, support injured members to be rehabilitated at work, within their home unit**

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) should support and resource rehabilitation services within the ADF to adopt a tailored approach, from members rehabilitating within their home unit, either with or without the support of a specialist rehabilitation service working in conjunction with the chain of command when required, to coordination of rehabilitation and recovery through a specialist rehabilitation unit only in exceptional circumstances and when necessary to optimise functioning and return to work.

Consistent with this approach:

- (a) Defence policies and procedures related to rehabilitation should adopt the principle of recovering at work, where safe to do so. This principle should be embedded in the Defence Health Manual, Military Personnel Manual, ADF Rehabilitation Program Procedures Manual, and other relevant policies and guidelines.
- (b) rehabilitation at home or in a designated rehabilitation unit should be reserved for exceptional circumstances, and even in these instances, home units must maintain connection with the member undergoing rehabilitation, whether that be at home or assigned to a designated rehabilitation unit
- (c) rehabilitation outcomes should be publicly reported on a regular basis.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence will enhance its support for injured members to be rehabilitated at work, within their home unit, where possible.

## **Recommendation 67: Align Defence's clinical governance framework with the national model framework**

Defence should work with relevant bodies, including the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, and in consultation with Bupa, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and relevant civilian health services to review its clinical governance framework, with a view to aligning it with the National Model Clinical Governance Framework.

Defence should give particular attention to:

- (a) strengthening its quality improvement systems to actively manage and improve the safety and quality of its health care
- (b) ensuring that performance monitoring systems are in place to monitor clinical effectiveness
- (c) establishing partnerships across DVA, civilian healthcare services and specialist facilities for serving and ex-serving members, and leveraging these partnerships to respond optimally to the unique needs of each patient
- (d) ensuring that serving members are a partner in the design, delivery and evaluation of Australian Defence Force healthcare services.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence should align its clinical governance framework with the national model framework.

Defence will implement this recommendation, building on the work it has initiated including an expert review into clinical governance, led by the Force Health Protection Principal Consultant to the Surgeon General of the ADF.

## Recommendation 68: Strike the right balance between upholding confidentiality and disclosing information when a member is in distress

Defence should ensure that members and commanding officers understand how the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) operates and the importance of members' consenting to their health information being shared with those able to facilitate appropriate care and support, in the event members are distressed or experiencing mental health challenges.

To this end, Defence should:

- (a) continue its proactive approach to consent and provide regular training on the Privacy Act
- (b) regularly evaluate members' understanding of the importance of consent and how Defence will use their personal information
- (c) by the end of 2025 and regularly thereafter (no less frequently than every three years), review its privacy policy and amend it as appropriate to ensure that it is clear, particularly with respect to:
  - (i) what it means to provide consent, and why consent is important, particularly for ensuring that family members are equipped with relevant information to support a members' mental health and wellbeing
  - (ii) how members' health information is reasonably necessary for, or directly related to, the functions and activities of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), including what 'suitability for service from a health perspective' means
  - (iii) when a 'general permitted situation' (as defined in section 16A of the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth)) exists in the context of the ADF, particularly when a member is experiencing distress or mental health challenges that puts them at risk of suicidality
  - (iv) when members' mental health information will be disclosed to their commander or manager to facilitate their wellbeing; when, in the context of the ADF, disclosure is necessary to lessen or prevent a serious threat to the life, health or safety of any individual or to public health or safety, and to whom the information can be disclosed.

If barriers remain following review and amendment of the Defence privacy policy, then consideration could be given to subsequent legislative change, as part of the process set out in Recommendation 74.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to ensure Defence appropriately adheres to confidentiality requirements, while disclosing necessary information where necessary.

The Government will work through any legislative reform changes required to give effect to this recommendation.

## **Recommendation 69: Improve suicide-prevention training so it is practical, tailored, informed by lived experience and delivered in person**

The Australian Defence Force should revise and improve its suicide-prevention training so it:

- (a) focuses on practical rather than theory-based learning, and ensures members are familiar with what support is available
- (b) is scaled, to emphasise different levels of responsibility, from junior ranks to commanders. Specific training should be offered to senior leaders, which sets out how they can support those under their command
- (c) is informed by, and involves, members with lived experience of suicide, suicidality or mental health
- (d) delivers all suicide prevention training in-person by no later than 31 December 2025.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence will improve its suicide prevention training.

In addition to updating annual training and awareness initiatives, Defence and DVA have commenced suicide prevention programs. Defence is also exploring a Lived Experience Framework to understand how it can safely and formally incorporate lived experience in programs and activities.

## **Recommendation 70: Revise protocols for responding to suicidal crisis to be in line with clinical best practice**

By no later than 31 December 2025, Defence should revise its protocols for responding to suicidal crisis so they are applied consistently, in line with clinical best practice.

- (a) The protocols should, among other things, specify:
  - (i) the availability of, and arrangements for accessing, culturally appropriate crisis care facilities
  - (ii) a minimum standard for aftercare
  - (iii) how monitoring and follow-up support should occur following a suicide-related incident
  - (iv) approaches to reintegration following a suicidal crisis.
- (b) The revised protocols should be developed in partnership with an external body with expertise in managing suicidal crisis and aftercare.
- (c) The revised protocols and their application across the three services should be subject to independent evaluation after five years.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence will review and revise its protocols for responding to suicidal crises in line with clinical best practice.

## **Recommendation 71: Increase the Department of Veterans' Affairs fee schedule so it is aligned with that of the National Disability Insurance Scheme**

The Australian Government should amend the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) fee schedule to mitigate the challenges faced by veterans in accessing health care, ensuring that:

- (a) at a minimum, the revised fee schedule aligns with that of the National Disability Insurance Scheme
- (b) efforts to mitigate supply constraints are prioritised, such as non-fee-for-service components, additional loading, and/or incentive payments, including in areas with few health services for the populations being served.

DVA should reduce the time taken to pay healthcare providers, and track and publicly report on the time taken to provide these payments.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce.

The Government acknowledges the relativity of DVA fees to comparable fees in the health, aged care and disability sectors can have a negative impact on access for veterans.

The Government is progressing elements of this recommendation relating to DVA's Veterans' Home Care, Household Services and Community Nursing Programs. This has been in conjunction with the Independent Health and Aged Care Pricing Authority, and the broader work on the care and support economy, including the intended alignment of pricing over time.

The Government agrees there is a need to consider veteran health care pricing arrangements and system design. This will help better incentivise providers, simplify administrative arrangements, ensure greater fiscal sustainability of veteran healthcare arrangements, and promote better veteran health outcomes.

Aligning the DVA fee schedule with that of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, which does not fund medical care, is unlikely to incentivise the proliferation of military-informed veteran friendly general practices that deliver multidisciplinary care and coordinate access within a specialised veteran local care network, including to secondary and tertiary services.

Progressing the competitiveness of fees in the context of the wider care and support economy including independent price setting mechanisms consistent with other Commonwealth funded health, aged care and disability services will address parity.

## Recommendation 72: Expand and strengthen healthcare services for veterans

The Australian Government and state and territory governments should prioritise networks of care in the National Funding Agreement on Veterans' Wellbeing (Recommendation 88).

To enable this, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should develop a plan to expand and strengthen specialised health care for veterans. It should set out how to bring together the different components of the health system to meet the health needs of veterans. DVA should complete the plan by September 2026 and submit it to the Veterans' Ministerial Council for endorsement as part of the funding agreement.

The plan must set out measures to improve the coverage of specialised veterans' care, including by:

- (a) providing support for primary and allied care providers whose services focus on veterans' health needs
- (b) expanding veteran-specific secondary and tertiary health services
- (c) developing additional partnership agreements between DVA and primary health networks.

It must also support the integration of veterans' health services at a local and national level, including by:

- (d) better informing veterans about available services
- (e) using existing health infrastructure, such as primary health networks
- (f) developing local exchanges to tighten relationships between medical and allied health care practitioners.

The plan should be guided by current and future needs and informed by data on Australia's veteran population showing the size of veteran communities in different areas, where specialised services currently exist or are lacking, and how and where veterans access health services.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce.

DVA will continue to work with states and territories to improve health services for veterans. Over the last three financial years, the Australian Government has invested \$6.84 million in the National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare at Concord Hospital in NSW. In addition to this, in 2023-24, the Government has spent more than \$1 billion on public and private hospital services for veterans and more than \$1.4 billion on primary, specialist and allied healthcare.

The Government acknowledges that coordinated, multidisciplinary and military informed care is needed for veterans with more complex conditions. Some veterans experience difficulties accessing a health care provider due to a range of factors, including broader workforce issues within the health care sector in certain locations and business decisions by some health providers.



## Recommendation 73: Improve military cultural competency in health professions working with veterans

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should complement the work outlined in Recommendation 72 by expanding its efforts to build cultural competency relating to veterans among health workers who operate in mainstream health settings. DVA should expand its training modules and enable health professionals working with veterans to complete them. It should promote this work, including through partnerships with professional bodies.

### Australian Government Response

The Australian **agrees** to this recommendation.

The Government acknowledges the value of building the cultural competency and military awareness of health care providers working with veterans. The Government has extended the Military Veterans' Psychiatry Training program for a further one year, which aims to improve access to psychiatrists with training in military and veteran mental health by funding military and veteran psychiatry registrar training placements.

DVA has collaborated with Medcast Pty Ltd, a health professional education provider, to implement the dedicated Veterans Healthcare eLearning Platform (VETs HeLP), launched on 1 July 2024. The platform provides health professionals access to a range of evidence-based educational resources central to delivering health care to veterans and their families. While the training is primarily aimed at GPs, some of the training resources will also be applicable to a broader range of healthcare providers.

DVA recognises the general practice landscape continues to evolve and it needs to be better positioned to understand the needs of providers. To support this, a General Practitioner Advisory Group was established in June 2023, with representation from all key primary healthcare colleges and associations. In the 2023-24 budget the Government tripled the Veteran Access Payment for GPs to provide higher fees for face to face and telehealth GP consultations including home visits. These payments are equivalent to the Medicare Bulk Billing incentive.

## **Recommendation 74: Clarify the application of the Privacy Act to veterans to determine whether amendments are necessary**

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should seek legal advice clarifying the application of the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) (and any other relevant legislation) to veterans and their families in the context of sharing data and information related to health, wellbeing and safety.

DVA should use this advice to inform consideration of whether legislative amendments are required to optimise the management of the health and wellbeing of veterans. Consideration may be given to extending the scope of any changes to encompass serving members, if this is needed following the review of the Defence privacy policy proposed at Recommendation 68.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** there is a need for enhanced information and data sharing to improve health, wellbeing and safety outcomes for veterans and their families, and will consider the need for legislative changes to better support these outcomes.

DVA should seek legal advice clarifying the application of the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) (and any other relevant legislation) to veterans and their families in the context of sharing data and information related to health, wellbeing and safety.

## **Recommendation 75: Conduct an independent review of Open Arms and publish the report**

The Australian Government should commission an independent review of Open Arms, to commence in 2027, following the implementation of the new Model of Care and led by a qualified entity outside of the Defence portfolio.

The scope of the review should be wide-ranging and it should examine:

- (a) how Open Arms is discharging its functions, including its compliance with clinical standards and its management of at-risk clients
- (b) issues that could affect Open Arms' ability to discharge its functions, including workforce, culture and funding
- (c) what functions Open Arms should perform within the wider network of services accessible to serving and ex-serving members
- (d) the appropriateness of Open Arms' delivery model, and whether another model is preferable.

The Australian Government should make the review's report public.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to commission an independent review of Open Arms. The Government acknowledges Open Arms' commitment to ongoing service improvement, and compliance with clinical standards and governance in their current work.

## **Recommendation 76: Develop a postvention framework with experts and those with lived experience of suicide bereavement**

The Australian Defence Force should develop a postvention framework that must be implemented following a serving member's death by suicide (or suspected suicide) for the purposes of supporting the member's family members and colleagues, as well as first responders. It should involve:

- (a) collaborating with and seeking input from peak postvention organisations and those with lived experience of suicide bereavement
- (b) developing communication materials and training modules for commanders and key decision-makers about trauma-informed postvention support for Defence personnel
- (c) the use of a systematic process for identifying and referring those at highest risk following a suicide death
- (d) consideration of the unique circumstances of each posting or cultural circumstances of the bereaved
- (e) greater surveillance and evaluation of the broader impact of suicide on personnel and their functioning for the purposes of improving interventions.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to continue the work currently underway to develop a postvention framework with experts and those with lived experience of suicide bereavement.

Initial work to implement postvention support across DVA and Defence includes improving DVA's Adverse Events Analysis and Defence training modules that seek to focus on suicide postvention practices and increased access to postvention bereavement services support.

## **Recommendation 77: Develop a suite of postvention resources in collaboration with stakeholders**

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should fund and facilitate the development of a postvention network of suicide-bereavement resources in collaboration with ex-service organisations, states and territories, lived experience peers, and civilian support organisations to augment current postvention offerings, which can be inclusively accessed by and are tailored for the military community and all those affected by veteran suicide.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to develop a suite of postvention resources, in collaboration with stakeholders, to support those affected by defence and veteran suicide.

DVA's Suicide Postvention Framework will continue to be developed and will describe the range of postvention activities to be undertaken by DVA and other bodies.

## Recommendation 78: Prevent, minimise and treat moral injury

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should work collaboratively to develop an agreed approach to minimising the negative impacts of moral injury, including the risk of suicide and suicidality for serving and ex-serving members. The approach should evolve in line with emerging research and best practice, and at a minimum include:

- (a) implementing education, training and support programs with the explicit objectives of preventing, minimising and treating moral injury
- (b) considering using the Moral Injury Outcome Scale or other tools, as the evidence base evolves, to support the early identification and treatment of moral injury
- (c) conducting or commissioning further research to better understand moral injury in the Australian military population.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Government acknowledges the negative impacts that moral injury can have on members of the ADF. Defence and DVA will build on existing work, for example, including moral injury considerations in the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

The Government will continue to explore moral injury in the Australian military population, including conducting and commissioning further research where necessary.

## Volume 5: Transition, DVA and support for ex-serving members

### **Recommendation 79: Ensure that respect for and recognition of service are embedded throughout Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs**

Respect and recognition should be a key element of separation and transition processes; they must also be the foundation for all interactions with members and former members of the Australian Defence Force during service and civilian life.

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should:

- (a) examine their processes to identify ways in which respect in interactions with serving and ex-serving members can be increased
- (b) create a survey to benchmark the levels of respect shown to current and ex-serving members prior to 30 June 2025
- (c) conduct this survey every two years to identify areas for improvement, and introduce improvements no later than the following year
- (d) support the Joint Transition Authority to review its policy on recognition and farewells on a regular basis (at least every three years) to identify areas for improvement, and introduce these improvements by the following year.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that respect for and recognition of service should be embedded throughout Defence and DVA. Defence and DVA will continue to identify and entrench practices that demonstrate respect and recognition for veterans and their families.

Defence is examining options to identify ways to better recognise the service of ADF personnel who are transitioning from service.

## **Recommendation 80: The Department of Veterans' Affairs to take responsibility for supporting members to transition out of the Australian Defence Force**

Defence should continue to be responsible for supporting members to prepare for and complete separation from the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The new executive agency to be established in the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) (Recommendation 87) should take responsibility for supporting members to transition into civilian life.

Through the new agency, DVA should:

- (a) establish a meaningful relationship with serving members as soon as they begin a pathway towards transition
- (b) conduct a transition readiness review prior to separation, which includes the member, their commanding officer and DVA support person
- (c) lead transition screening and expand it to assess members' psychosocial readiness for transition, including purpose and connection, help-seeking, beliefs about civilians, and regimentation and adaptability
- (d) with the consent of the member, share transition screening results (wholly or partially) with the member's commanding officer and key transition support people within Defence and DVA (with Defence and DVA implementing a proactive process to obtain members' consent to share this information)
- (e) proactively reach out to ex-serving members in the 12 months after they leave the ADF to understand their experience of transition, how they are adjusting to civilian life, and connect them with supports delivered by Australian Government agencies, states and territories, and ex-service organisations.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Government is committed to supporting serving members to have a proactive and meaningful transition journey.

The Government has provided additional funding to DVA to commence consultation on transition and wellbeing supports, including the co-design of a new agency focused on wellbeing (Recommendation 87). Consultation will include ways to encourage participation, including in line with the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry into Adaptive Sport Programs for Australian Defence Force Veterans.



## **Recommendation 81: The Department of Veterans' Affairs to fund a program to support members' wellbeing during transition to civilian life**

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should fund and commission a cultural transition program to support members to build and maintain wellbeing during the transition from military to civilian life. The purpose of the program should be to empower members to develop the skills to adjust and integrate into civilian culture successfully and sustain social connections.

The program should:

- (a) be designed by an expert panel independent from DVA, including people with lived experience of service and transition (both serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members) and expertise in cultural adjustment and trauma-informed approaches
- (b) be delivered in two parts, the first prior to separation and the second within six months of separation
- (c) be evaluated three years after the commencement of the program to assess its outcomes and effectiveness, with adjustments made accordingly.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Government is committed to supporting serving members to ensure their transition beyond military life is proactive and meaningful, noting the range of views across the Defence and veteran community relating to transition.

The Government has provided additional funding to DVA to commence consultation on transition and wellbeing supports, including the co-design of a new wellbeing agency (Recommendation 87). Consultation will include ways to encourage wellbeing and participation, including recommendations of the Senate Inquiry into Adaptive Sport Programs for Australian Defence Force Veterans.

## **Recommendation 82: Establish a consistent, locally responsive policy on ex-serving members' access to bases**

Defence should establish a consistent policy on access to military bases that includes the objective of supporting ex-serving members and their families to maintain social connections following separation from the Australian Defence Force. The policy should allow for local decision-making that balances the benefits of maintaining social connection with former colleagues in the 12 months following separation, with the need to maintain base security.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that a consistent, locally responsive policy on former serving ADF members' access to bases will be established.

Defence is examining its existing base access policies to determine how to best implement this recommendation.

### **Recommendation 83: Increase opportunities for members to gain civilian qualifications from Defence training and education**

Defence should expand the objective of its education and training policies and programs from a sole focus on Defence capability requirements to include member lifetime wellbeing. Specifically, Defence should:

- (a) commencing 1 July 2025, issue all civilian accreditations for Defence training at the point of completion of the requisite training, rather than at the point of transition from service
- (b) remove arbitrary limits on the number of civilian qualifications that may be awarded to a member in recognition of Defence training they have completed
- (c) 'fill the gap' between Defence and civilian training (where an equivalent civilian qualification exists), either by expanding the content of the Defence training course or by funding bridging training for members prior to separation.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to part (a) and (b) of this recommendation.

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to part (c) of this recommendation.

The Government recognises the benefits of increasing opportunities for members to gain civilian qualifications from Defence training and education.

## **Recommendation 84: Issue separating members with a reference that states their skills, experience and capabilities**

To support ex-serving members to promote their skills and experience in the civilian job market, the Australian Defence Force should issue a reference to each member at separation. The reference should reflect the individual skills and experience of the member and include a personalised statement on the capabilities they demonstrated in their most recent role/s. Contact details of the member's commanding officer approximate to, or at, the point of transition should be provided wherever possible.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence will issue separating members with a reference that states their skills, experience and capabilities.

Testimonials that detail an individual's period of service and are intended for use as a reference for prospective employers are a valuable tool for members' transition. Defence will strengthen its approach to achieve consistency across all Groups and Services when providing testimonials to ADF personnel who are transitioning from permanent service.

## **Recommendation 85: Develop employment pathways for ex-serving members in public sector agencies**

The Australian Public Service Commission and its state and territory equivalents should work with public sector agencies to develop and prioritise employment pathways for ex-serving members. They should prioritise agencies in portfolios where military capabilities and lived experience of service are especially relevant, including health, justice, corrections, police, veterans' affairs and defence.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that DVA will continue to work with the Australian Public Service Commission and other public sector agencies on improving employment pathways for former serving ADF members, including the VetPaths program.

VetPaths provides an employment pathway for veterans into the Australian Public Service to support transitioning, and recently transitioned, veterans to establish an ongoing and meaningful career in the public service. It will be expanded in 2025 with the focus being on increasing agency participation and subsequently participant numbers.

## **Recommendation 86: Ongoing funding for Veterans' and Families' Hubs**

The Australian Government should develop a recurrent funding model for Veterans' and Families' Hubs to support their financial sustainability and ongoing operations. In particular, the funding model should ensure that the operating costs of hubs can be met (that is, separate from the costs associated with the services delivered by various providers). The funding model should be developed in consultation with lead organisations of Veterans' and Families' Hubs, as bespoke arrangements are likely to be needed.

Funding agreements should include standardised, de-identified data collection and reporting requirements to inform ongoing service delivery improvements and help to identify service gaps. Data should be shared with state and territory governments.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Government agrees that ongoing funding options for Veterans' and Families' Hubs should be developed including DVA tenancy opportunities in Hubs, with the planning for the establishment of a new agency in DVA focused on wellbeing (Recommendation 87) and the supports and programs intended in Recommendations 79, 80 and 81.

## Recommendation 87: Establish a new agency to focus on veteran wellbeing

The Australian Government should establish a new executive agency focused on veteran wellbeing. The new agency should have distinctive branding, but be administratively nested within the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to ensure seamless information sharing and referrals.

The new veteran wellbeing agency should have the following functions:

- (a) Transition – to play a key role in supporting veterans to transition from military to civilian life (Recommendation 80), build relationships and encourage veterans to access early interventions and supports
- (b) System navigation and connection to wellbeing supports at the individual level – to help veterans to navigate the wellbeing ecosystem by providing clear information online about available services, and by working in partnership with Veterans' and Families' Hubs and expanding engagement with veterans through state and territory shopfronts
- (c) Improve referral pathways and service integration at the systems level by:
  - (i) managing relationships between Veterans' and Families' Hubs, ex-service organisations (ESOs), DVA, Australian and state and territory government agencies and non-government service providers
  - (ii) ensuring referral pathways are in place and services are integrated to the greatest extent possible
  - (iii) advising DVA and state and territory governments on service gaps
- (d) Co-designing wellbeing supports – to work with veterans and ESOs to co-design new prevention and early intervention wellbeing programs and services at the local level, supported by a dedicated funding stream under the redesigned grants program for ESOs.

The new veteran wellbeing agency should have an ongoing operating budget, and the following capabilities and features:

- (e) staff who have lived experience of military service
- (f) offices established in area/s where large numbers of veterans live
- (g) customer service expertise, including in digital-led solutions
- (h) a trauma-informed communications and service-delivery approach
- (i) led by a CEO who reports to the Secretary of DVA
- (j) adhering to a service charter and associated key performance indicators, supported by regular and transparent reporting requirements.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation, as part of its commitment to ensuring service members are supported through their transition out of the ADF.

The Government has provided additional funding to DVA to commence consultation on transition and wellbeing supports, including the co-design of a new agency focused on wellbeing.

## Recommendation 88: Develop a national funding agreement on veterans' wellbeing

A national funding agreement on veterans' wellbeing should be developed, with immediate focus on the following priorities:

- (a) improving outcomes for veterans who are experiencing homelessness, including a long-term investment framework that supports capital and operational expenditure for veteran-specific housing and the provision of wraparound services
- (b) supporting veterans who are incarcerated, both during and after their incarceration
- (c) facilitating school enrolments for children of serving members, without requiring a confirmed address
- (d) developing networks of health care for veterans (see Recommendation 72)
- (e) obtaining individual consent from veterans who separate involuntarily for medical or other reasons (and other cohorts at higher risk of suicide and suicidality) to provide their personal data to state and territory governments to ensure they can receive tailored support and referrals to veteran-specific services, including Veterans' and Families' Hubs.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Government acknowledges the important contribution states and territories make to veteran wellbeing, including through the Federal Financial Relations system.

DVA and Defence will continue to work collaboratively with jurisdictions to improve supports for current and former serving ADF members, including supports relating to homelessness, incarceration, schooling and health.



## **Recommendation 89: Establish a national peak body for ex-service organisations**

The Australian Government, in consultation with ex-service organisations (ESOs), should establish a national peak body for ESOs following a co-design process.

The role, functions, membership, governance and funding model of the peak body should be informed by the outcomes of the business case, and agreed between the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the ESO sector. The funding model should not exclude participation of any eligible ESOs, particularly those who operate on a not-for-profit basis.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Government has provided additional funding to DVA to continue consultation with ex-service organisations on the development of a national peak body.

## **Recommendation 90: Remove the service differential for permanent impairment compensation and expand mental health support to all reserve personnel**

The Australian Government should:

- (a) remove the service differential as it relates to permanent impairment compensation
- (b) extend non-liability health care for mental health conditions to all reserve personnel.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **does not support** the removal of the service differential as it relates to permanent impairment compensation.

The Government acknowledges there are differing views in the veteran community about the service differential. It notes that while all veterans, including reservists, are able to access support and assistance for all conditions linked to their service through DVA, the service differential is a long-standing feature of Australia's support for veterans which sees higher levels of compensation provided for injuries or illness incurred in operational type service.

The Government agrees-in-principle to further expanding non-liability health care for mental health conditions to all reserve personnel.

## **Recommendation 91: Implement combined benefits processing for all initial liability and permanent impairment claims**

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should implement combined benefits processing for all initial liability and permanent impairment claims under the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (Cth) (the new single Act) for veterans' entitlements, noting that some limited exceptions will apply.

The Australian Government should ensure that DVA has sufficient additional funding to implement this new approach to claims processing.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to DVA implementing combined benefits processing for liability and permanent impairment claims where possible.

## **Recommendation 92: Review claims to the Department of Veterans' Affairs associated with physical and sexual abuse**

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should commission an independent review of claims made between 2015 and 2024 that are associated with physical and sexual abuse during service. The review should:

- (a) determine if there is any material difference in the acceptance or correctness rates for these claims compared to other claim types and, if so, identify why and any required changes to veterans' entitlements legislation, DVA policy, and/or training and support provided to delegates
- (b) recommend any necessary improvements that will ensure delegates deliver services in a trauma-informed way and understand the dynamics of military sexual violence and other forms of abuse during service
- (c) examine the supports in place for victims who have submitted a claim of this kind and recommend any necessary improvements to align with best practice.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to commission an independent review of claims associated with physical and sexual abuse and will continue to ensure processes support best practice in the management of cases related to physical and sexual abuse.

## **Recommendation 93: Fund the Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Program on an ongoing and national basis**

The Australian Government should provide funding to the Department of Veterans' Affairs and Defence to support:

- (a) expanding the Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Program to North Queensland in 2025–26
- (b) rolling out the program nationally to serve all Australian Defence Force members who are medically separating with complex needs from 2026–27 onwards.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to fund the Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Program, subject to an evaluation of the pilot to ensure its effectiveness. DVA has commenced work on the pilot program, which is supported by Defence who provide referrals for medical imaging and specialist reviews, ongoing provision of office space and Defence IT systems, and assistance with data requests.

The model seeks to have Defence and DVA case management staff working together within Defence health facilities to manage the medical transition requirements of members with complex medical conditions in the lead up to their transition date.

## **Recommendation 94: Improve timeliness and reporting on information-sharing between Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs for claims processing**

To ensure timely information-sharing between the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and Defence for the purpose of claims processing:

- (a) DVA and Defence should establish a key performance indicator for the timeliness of information provided by Defence through the Single Access Mechanism, and report on performance in annual reports
- (b) Defence should report annually on the progress of records digitisation until all records are fully digitised.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to improve the timeliness and reporting of information-sharing between Defence and DVA for claims processing.

This work is underway and will be delivered through the Health Knowledge Management System.

## Recommendation 95: Support the expanded application of 'presumptive liability'

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should

- (a) establish a dedicated ongoing workstream to support the expanded use of presumptive liability as part of its research and evaluation model, informed by the views of the expert committee on veteran health research (Recommendation 117)
- (b) follow developments in civilian workers' compensation schemes, and consider where they are relevant to Australian Defence Force (ADF) contexts. As an immediate priority, DVA should consider whether a presumption related to liability for post-traumatic stress disorder should apply to certain roles within the ADF.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to expand the application of 'presumptive liability', noting the *Veterans' Entitlements Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024* has been introduced into Parliament.

## Recommendation 96: Ongoing funding for Provisional Access to Medical Treatment

The Australian Government should fund Provisional Access to Medical Treatment beyond June 2026 on an ongoing basis.

### Australian Government Response

The Australian Government **agrees-in-principle** to continuing the Provisional Access to Medical Treatment program beyond June 2026.

Through this program, eligible veterans who are waiting for their claims to be considered by DVA can continue to receive medical and allied health treatment on a provisional basis for one or more of the 20 most commonly accepted conditions, such as hearing loss.

In 2024, the Government extended the program until 30 June 2026, with funding for treatment under the program continuing until 31 December 2026.



## **Recommendation 97: Consider giving the Veteran Payment to more veterans with physical health conditions**

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), in conjunction with the Repatriation Commission, should examine whether there are specific cohorts of veterans with physical health conditions who are at higher risk of suicide and may therefore benefit from receiving the Veteran Payment.

If such cohorts are identified, DVA should seek the appropriate authority from the Australian Government to extend the Veteran Payment to those cohorts.

## **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to consider expansion of the eligibility for the Veteran Payment to further support the financial security of veterans and their families.

Veterans claiming physical health conditions already benefit from potential eligibility for the Veteran Payment where they are also claiming a mental health condition at the same time.

## Recommendation 98: Strengthen Department of Veterans' Affairs performance targets for claims processing timeframes, and improve transparency

Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) performance targets for the timeliness of liability and permanent impairment claims under the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (Cth) (the new single Act) should be reset so that:

- (a) by 1 July 2026, at least 65% of claims are determined within 90 days
- (b) by 1 July 2028, at least 80% of claims are determined within 90 days.

Starting in 2024–25, DVA should include in its annual reports:

- (c) data-driven measures of DVA's compliance with its customer service standards
- (d) the percentage of claims for which DVA requested an independent medical examination
- (e) the number of additional conditions and sequelae covered by presumptive liability compared with the previous year, as well as the number and percentage of initial liability determinations that were made pursuant to presumptive liability provisions.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to the recommendation.

The Government has made significant investments to ensure DVA is better funded and resourced than it has been in three decades. As a result of those investments, DVA has cleared the backlog of unallocated claims identified in the Royal Commission's Interim Report.

The Government has undertaken significant legislative reforms to simplify the legislative basis of support for veterans through the *Veterans' Entitlements Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024*.

The Government will continue to progress improvements to DVA's performance reporting, noting DVA now publishes its claims processing times information on its website.

A range of business improvement activities are underway aimed at streamlining claims processing activities and improving DVA's engagement with veterans and the broader veteran community.

## Recommendation 99: Improve compensation advocacy by funding professional, paid advocates

The Australian Government should replace the Building Excellence in Support and Training (BEST) grant program with an ongoing, demand-driven funding program for professional, paid veteran compensation advocates. At a minimum, the amount of funding should be increased to provide compensation advocacy for:

- (a) all veterans who need support to submit a liability and/or compensation claim with the Department of Veterans' Affairs
- (b) all veterans seeking an internal or external review of a claims decision.

Funding allocations should be for a minimum of three years to provide employment stability. They should be designed to ensure equitable geographic service coverage and meet the diverse demographic needs of the veteran population, including female veterans and LGBTIQ+ veterans.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to improving compensation and wellbeing advocacy, including funding compensation advocacy services that are provided at no cost to veterans.

DVA has been working with ex-service organisations to consider how advocacy services could be strengthened to benefit veterans and families, including consultation on a national professional association for veterans' advocates.

DVA is currently piloting the Claims Lodgement Assistance program in Western Australia. This pilot embeds experienced compensation staff within Ex-Service Organisation offices (ESOs) to work alongside ESO advocates to provide advice to veterans on DVA entitlements and supports, information to support a claim, and what to expect during the claim process. This program will also assist veterans to lodge compensation claims and facilitate referrals to rehabilitation support through DVA where needed.

## **Recommendation 100: Improve the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of the Department of Veterans' Affairs rehabilitation program**

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should improve the transparency of the DVA Rehabilitation Program and how its effectiveness is measured. At a minimum, this should include:

- (a) reinstating the program performance indicator that measures the percentage of clients for whom rehabilitation goals were met or exceeded, with a target of 75%, and including this measure in annual public reporting
- (b) expanding key performance indicators for rehabilitation program providers to measure the percentage of clients who meet or exceed their rehabilitation goals, disaggregated by goal type (for example, medical management, vocational and psychosocial). This information should be shared with DVA rehabilitation clients so they can make an informed choice of provider (as related to Recommendation 101 on choice and autonomy).

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to improve the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of DVA's rehabilitation program by expanding and publishing its performance indicators.

This will be supported by the improved data reporting arrangements recently implemented with national rehabilitation providers.

## Recommendation 101: Give Department of Veterans' Affairs clients more choice and autonomy

Veterans supported by the Department of Veterans' Affairs should be afforded similar levels of choice and autonomy to National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants, to the greatest extent possible. At a minimum, this should include:

- (a) enabling veterans to:
  - (i) choose their rehabilitation provider, supported by clear information about provider quality and service characteristics (including information specified in Recommendation 100)
  - (ii) self-manage their budget for approved household assistance on an opt-in basis, to align with the autonomy and payment conditions afforded to NDIS clients and providers
- (b) reimbursing veterans for travel costs to see their preferred healthcare providers (noting that some constraints will apply), supported by legislative reform developed in consultation with veterans.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **notes** the recommendation to enable veterans to choose their rehabilitation provider and to self-manage their budget for approved household assistance on an opt-in basis. This recommendation will be further considered by the Taskforce.

The Government notes that changes were introduced in June 2024 that enabled veterans to have more choice and agency to tailor their rehabilitation plans. Under existing programs, veterans are able to choose their household service providers, general practitioner, specialist and allied health provider, as well as access public hospitals, and choose from over 500 DVA-contracted private hospitals and day procedure centres.

The Government agrees to legislative reform to reimburse veterans for travel costs to see their preferred healthcare providers. Changes proposed in the *Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024* will harmonise access to, and funding for, expenses incurred in undertaking travel for treatment.

### Recommendation 102: Implement and improve upon the Defence Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Family and Domestic Violence

In addition to, and as part of the implementation of the Defence Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Family and Domestic Violence 2023–2028, Defence should:

- (a) recognise the nexus between family violence and suicide, including the inclusion of family violence indicators within approaches to suicide prevention, and consideration of suicide risk within responses to family violence
- (b) implement all recommendations made by Defence Families of Australia (DFA) in its issues paper on Australian Defence Force families and domestic violence and work collaboratively in an enduring fashion with the DFA to deliver ongoing reforms to prevent family and domestic violence and support victims of family and domestic violence
- (c) establish and communicate a set of minimum standards to guide its approach to family and domestic violence that are publicly available and:
  - (i) clearly articulate victim safety (including that of children) as the primary consideration in decision-making
  - (ii) define how Defence will ensure that any protection orders that may be in place can be upheld in the workplace, including how it will ensure that postings and workplace arrangements prioritise the safety of the victim
  - (iii) include clear expectations regarding disclosure by Defence members who are the respondent on a protection order relating to family violence
- (d) take steps to ensure that Defence property, equipment and resources are not used to perpetrate family and domestic violence, including that Defence housing stability is not used as a means to exercise coercive control or to create barriers to safe separation
- (e) ensure that there are no impediments to Defence personnel accessing emergency services responses while on base, in relation to family and domestic violence. All materials regarding family and domestic violence should include emergency services response information and be regularly reviewed for currency.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** with this recommendation. Defence will continue to improve the extant Defence Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Family and Domestic Violence.

Elements of this recommendation have commenced.

Defence will release its Action Plan supporting the Defence Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Family and Domestic Violence by the end of 2024, incorporating elements of this recommendation.

## Recommendation 103: Improve the support, communication and services provided to Defence families

In recognition of the critical role that Defence families play in Defence capability, and the stressors that service life places on the member and their family unit, Defence should:

- (a) increase and enhance the suite of family support programs and initiatives available to Defence families, informed by co-design with members, families and Advocates. This should include:
  - (i) systematically analysing data from the Defence Member and Family Helpline to better understand issues and trends, and create opportunities to better assist members and their families
  - (ii) removing barriers to families directly accessing information and services provided by Defence Member and Family Support (DMFS)
  - (iii) providing an evidence-based suite of information and resources to support families, especially at times of peak stress including postings, return from deployment and member transition
  - (iv) facilitating greater access to or provision of family therapy, and services that support partners and children of Defence members
  - (v) an enhanced DMFS communications strategy
- (b) ensure that systems are in place to communicate directly with families on an 'opt out' basis to provide information on available services and supports, assisted by a refreshed DMFS communications strategy and greater efforts to publicise the supports available
- (c) develop and implement a framework to evaluate outcomes, including the efficiency and effectiveness of all current and future DMFS initiatives, with this material to be made public to demonstrate transparency and accountability for the performance of DMFS
- (d) work with the Australian, state and territory governments to investigate and improve arrangements for facilitating employment opportunities for partners of Defence members as well as opportunities for remote working, or preferential employment of this cohort in appropriate roles
- (e) work with the Australian Government, following the completion of the Defence Childcare Review and the Productivity Commission Review into Early Childhood Education and Care, to identify and realise opportunities to improve the provision of child care services to Defence members.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** that Defence will continue to improve the support, communication and services provided to Defence families.

Defence will continue to review its suite of family support programs and initiatives available to Defence families, including services that support partners and children of ADF personnel. Defence is reviewing the Defence Member and Family Helpline data to better understand issues and trends.

Defence has designed a framework to evaluate outcomes, including the efficiency and effectiveness of all current and future Defence Member and Family Support initiatives. Defence is evaluating and re-designing program data collection methods to align with outcomes.

Significant work is underway to ensure Defence communicates with members and their families in a trauma-informed way, and that families have access to the right information at the right time in their family's service journey.

Defence Member and Family Support is developing a new public facing portal to increase communication and access to information for families. Defence will seek consent from registered family members to communicate with them directly on supports and services tailored to their military lifecycle needs and interests, further reducing barriers to information access in a timely and efficient manner.



## Recommendation 104: Improve the profile, resourcing and impact of the Defence Family Advocate

To achieve the best possible representation of serving and ex-serving members and their families, the Australian Government should:

- (a) improve the profile, resourcing and impact of the Defence Family Advocate, by:
  - (i) providing the Defence Family Advocate with appropriate staffing, budget and remuneration, with a salary and employment conditions at an equivalent rate to comparable executive positions, supported by full-time staff with the same employment conditions as their counterparts in Defence and the public service
  - (ii) formalising the relationship between the Defence Family Advocate and the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner
  - (iii) working with the new Defence Family Advocate to implement the recommendations made in the 'Our Community' and the PricewaterhouseCoopers reviews to refine and improve the governance and outcomes of the Defence Family Advocate
- (b) appropriately staff and resource the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner and their office to improve outcomes and ensure that veteran families are represented in policy design, decision-making and advocacy
- (c) investigate whether shared administrative support for both office holders may further assist collaboration and support the efficiency of their operations.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to consider the profile, resourcing and impact of the Defence Family Advocate. This will be informed by further detailed analysis of administrative processes and support required for the Defence Family Advocate to fulfil its responsibilities effectively and efficiently.

## **Recommendation 105: Improve coordination with coroners and the National Coronial Information System**

The Australian Government Attorney-General's Department should work with its state and territory counterparts to establish mechanisms that improve coordination between coroners, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the National Coronial Information System and work towards:

- (a) aligning coronial practices related to making determinations of intentional self-harm to improve the consistency and timeliness of national suicide reporting
- (b) implementing communication strategies between Defence, the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force, DVA and coroners to support the streamlined provision of information and reduce the risk of stress on families
- (c) sharing good-practice support regarding trauma-informed care.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation, which the Taskforce will consider further in consultation with other relevant stakeholders.

The Government supports greater cooperation between coroners and improved coronial data sharing, but notes the complexity to implementing this recommendation, including that states and territories are responsible for coronial matters. The Government will engage with states and territories on practical solutions to improve coordination with coroners and the National Coronial Information System.

## **Recommendation 106: Establish a suicide database of serving and ex-serving members**

Defence should design and develop a new suicide database that is appropriate for the purpose of suicide monitoring and reporting of all relevant data of permanent, reserve and ex-serving members. The design and development of the database should:

- (a) leverage data collected throughout the service journey from recruitment to discharge and beyond
- (b) capture a broader range of risk and protective factors, including but not limited to recording incidents of unacceptable behaviour and injuries, which is necessary to improve understanding of suicide, suicidality and self-harm
- (c) be informed by best-practice approaches from other countries, including the United States.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to establish an appropriate database for the purpose of suicide monitoring and reporting, with the Taskforce to consider options for implementation. This will include considerations with respect to the collection, management and sharing of data.

Defence and DVA are working closely with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to develop an approach to collect data relating to suicide monitoring and reporting.

The Government notes the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare will continue to collect Defence and veteran suicide data, and publish annually.

## Recommendation 107: Establish the National Veterans' Data Asset

To improve understanding of deaths by suicide and provide better support to veterans and their families, the Australian Government should:

- (a) provide appropriation funding to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the National Suicide Prevention Office (or any subsequent body assuming its functions) to establish and maintain a National Veterans' Data Asset that brings together data from Defence, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and states and territories, to enable timely monitoring and surveillance of suicide and suicidality of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members
- (b) provide appropriation funding to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the National Suicide Prevention Office to:
  - (i) use the National Veterans' Data Asset to produce discrete annual public reports and other research to monitor and improve understanding of suicidality and deaths by suicide, and the associated risk factors for serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families
  - (ii) commission an independent program of evaluation of the implementation and functioning of the National Veterans' Data Asset, including an interim evaluation and a post-implementation evaluation.

The Australian Government and state and territory governments, through their relevant agencies, should use the National Veterans' Data Asset for the purposes of:

- (c) furthering their understanding of suicide, suicidality, and health and wellbeing among serving and ex-serving members and their families; and
- (d) preventing deaths by suicide and improving postvention for serving and ex-serving members and their families.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce.

The Taskforce will consider and develop options for Government consideration on ways to efficiently and effectively improve veterans' data collection and management to improve understanding of deaths by suicide and provide better support to veterans and their families.

## **Recommendation 108: Ensure that all relevant jurisdictions and entities regularly provide data to the National Veterans' Data Asset**

So that all jurisdictions provide data regularly to the National Veterans' Data Asset:

- (a) the Australian Government, and state and territory governments, through their relevant agencies, should provide relevant data at quarterly intervals to the National Veterans' Data Asset (Recommendation 107)
- (b) Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should prioritise data governance arrangements in order to provide data for the National Veterans' Data Asset to support its development and ongoing use.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce.

The Government acknowledges the important role of states and territories in supporting veterans' health and wellbeing, and will continue to work collaboratively across jurisdictions including on data use and sharing and associated governance arrangements.

## **Recommendation 109: Defence to report annually on its progress towards data maturity**

Defence should report on its progress to improve data maturity, each year, to the Minister for Defence, using the 2021 Defence Enterprise Data Maturity Assessment as a baseline. Reports should be supported by surveys of Defence staff every three years in addition to the data capability maturity assessment tool.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence will report annually to the Minister for Defence on its progress toward data maturity.

Defence will leverage the whole-of-government Data Maturity Assessment Tool to monitor and manage its maturity uplift.

## **Recommendation 110: Review Defence's data assets and address issues with their quality, management, integration and use**

The Defence Chief Data Integration Officer (CDIO) and Defence Data and Analytics Board should establish a program of review of Defence's data assets. As part of this program:

- (a) the reviews should be conducted by Defence's Data Division and focus on the quality, awareness, management, access, integration and use of the dataset
- (b) the CDIO should designate actions required of data custodians to address any issues identified by each review and be provided with follow-up reports from Enterprise Data Custodians on the progress of actions following completion of Data Division reviews.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

Defence will review its data assets and address issues with their quality, management, integration and use. Defence will consider how to best implement this recommendation taking into account reform already underway with Defence's Enterprise Resource Planning Program.

## **Recommendation 111: Achieve a 'gold standard' rating for Defence datasets related to suicidality and suicide**

The Defence Chief Data Integration Officer should direct data custodians to improve the data quality of datasets related to suicide, self-harm and suicidality so they achieve a 'gold standard' rating. This will ensure the data is reliable and supports accurate decision-making. The remediation should focus on addressing issues of duplicated, missing, incomplete and non-standardised data, and ensuring datasets can be integrated.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Government agrees Defence should manage its datasets in accordance with best practice and seek to set the highest standard for data management. Given the complexity of Defence's data sets, further work will be required to improve the quality, management and integration of data consistent and effectively across the Defence enterprise.



## **Recommendation 112: Include data on suicide and suicidality in the enterprise-wide Defence data catalogue**

Defence should prioritise the inclusion of datasets related to suicide and suicidality in its enterprise-wide data catalogue. Defence should also make its data catalogue publicly available and include the quality rating of each dataset.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence should include data on suicide and suicidality in the enterprise-wide Defence data catalogue.

This work will be prioritised under the Defence Data Strategy 2.0.

## **Recommendation 113: Ensure commanding officers access and use quality data for continuous improvement of wellbeing metrics**

To better support Defence commanders and personnel, Defence should:

- (a) use data from the following sources to provide Australian Defence Force commanders with data for their units and teams, as well as relevant comparison points:
  - (i) the new Defence suicide database (Recommendation 106)
  - (ii) the National Veterans' Data Asset (Recommendation 107)
  - (iii) internal surveys
  - (iv) unacceptable behaviour reporting and injury reporting.
- (b) ensure the data is provided in a timely manner, in an accessible format and with necessary context, and provide training that supports commanders to use the data to inform decision-making.

Commanders should use this data for continuous improvement and to better understand the wellbeing of the members under their command.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation for consideration by the Taskforce.

The Government agrees Defence should ensure commanding officers have access to, and use of, available quality data for continuous improvement of wellbeing metrics. This recommendation will be considered by the Taskforce, including existing Privacy Act obligations and in the context of further work required to respond to recommendations 19, 26, 68, 106 and 107 of this report.

## **Recommendation 114: Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs to prioritise research into veteran health and wellbeing, and publish their workplans**

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should publish research workplans showing research priorities on issues affecting the health and wellbeing of current and ex-serving members. These workplans should be updated annually and include information on planned research and the progress of research that is underway.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to prioritise research into veteran health and wellbeing, and publish relevant Defence and DVA research workplans.

Defence is developing a framework and proposal in collaboration with Monash University to deliver a list of published evidence on the health of serving ADF personnel over the last twenty years. This will improve access to, and use of, current and previous research relating to ADF and veteran health and wellbeing.

DVA is developing a new research and evaluation partnership model (Veteran and Family – Learning and Innovation Network of Knowledge (VF-LINK)) to enhance the impact of research and evaluation, promote evidence-based practices and contribute to better outcomes for veteran health and wellbeing.

## **Recommendation 115: Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs to publish their research into veteran health and wellbeing**

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should conduct and, as a matter of course, publish research that includes information on the health and wellbeing of serving and ex-serving members.

Prior to publication, research outputs should be subject to review from independent researchers, including from the new expert committee on veteran health research (see Recommendation 117).

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** that Defence and DVA should, subject to appropriate review, publish their research conducted into veteran health and wellbeing.

Based on the work related to Recommendation 114, Defence will publish the synthesis and catalogue of this research to also enable the identification of research gaps.

## Recommendation 116: Improve the quality, evaluation, translation and sharing of research findings

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should create evaluation and research teams in a central area of their respective departments to improve the quality and coordination of research and evaluation practices. These central research and evaluation teams should be given the following responsibilities:

- (a) take the lead on improving the research and evaluation culture
- (b) manage the evaluation of programs and policies within their respective departments, and ensure evaluations are appropriate and effective
- (c) develop and maintain the evaluation schedule of all mental health and suicide prevention programs
- (d) develop and maintain a central library of program evaluations and relevant research, ensuring that evaluation findings are used and incorporated into future programs and policies
- (e) monitor the integration of research outputs into policy, programs and practices, thus ensuring that research outputs are translated effectively
- (f) use data and research to provide timely, targeted and effective advice to improve suicide prevention, intervention and postvention support
- (g) implement the continuing joint Defence and DVA research agenda
- (h) in the case of the Defence evaluation and research team, develop a revised survey research program with surveys that:
  - (i) collect information that can be used to evaluate Defence programs and policies effectively
  - (ii) capture data on the health and wellbeing of Australian Defence Force members
  - (iii) capture data not otherwise included in Defence administrative datasets and the National Veterans' Data Asset.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Taskforce will consider and present options to implement the recommendations related to research and data, including to improve the quality, management and sharing of research findings to enhance the impact of research and evaluation, promote evidence-based practices and contribute to better outcomes for defence and veteran health and wellbeing.

DVA centralised its research and evaluation functions into a Research Evaluation and Data Division in April 2024.

## Recommendation 117: Establish an expert committee on veteran research

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) should establish an expert committee on veteran research, comprising experts from government, academia and the private sector who have skills and experience in military and veterans' affairs, health care, rehabilitation and family support.

The committee should:

- (a) be informed by international examples of success from Five Eyes partners and other nations
- (b) include representatives with lived experience of service life, suicidality and mental health
- (c) fulfil the functions described in Chapter 29, Use of data and research by Defence and DVA, and provide advice to Defence and DVA on research and evaluation matters relevant to improving the wellbeing of serving and ex-serving members.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to establish an expert committee on veteran research, comprising experts with specialised knowledge in military and veterans' affairs, health care, rehabilitation, and family support and lived experience. The Committee will support the efficient and effective implementation of the Government response to the Royal Commission's recommendations related to research and data.

## Recommendation 118: Use the Census to collect information on ex-serving members as a population

To ensure there is ongoing collection of reliable statistics and information on ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members in the Australian community, the Australian Government should:

- (a) direct the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to continue the existing Census question on ADF service in 2026 and in future censuses
- (b) direct the ABS to include an additional question on year of separation for ex-serving members in the 2026 Census and in future censuses, with the ABS undertaking any testing required to include this question on the 2026 Census.

### Australian Government Response

The Government **agrees** to ask the ABS to continue the existing Census question on ADF service in 2026 and in future censuses.

The Government notes part (b) of the recommendation. While the ABS has finalised the topic recommendations for the 2026 census – and the Government has accepted those recommendations – Government will work with the ABS to explore the use of existing data sources that could meet the intent of this recommendation. The Government will make representations to the ABS to emphasise the value of rich data on the veteran population for its consideration in future Census rounds.

## **Recommendation 119: Improve understanding of veteran health by adding questions to Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys**

The Australian Government should fund the Australian Bureau of Statistics to:

- (a) include additional questions on Australian Defence Force (ADF) service in any future iterations of the National Health Study, the National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, the General Social Survey and the Personal Safety Survey, prompting respondents to state whether they are a current or ex-serving ADF member and if so, whether they served in the permanent forces or solely in the reserve forces
- (b) increase the sample of serving and ex-serving members in any future iterations of these surveys to allow for robust reporting on serving and ex-serving members.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees-in-principle** to this recommendation.

The Government agrees to direct the Treasury and the ABS to improve the understanding of veteran health by adding questions and changing the samples of ABS surveys.



## **Recommendation 120: Increase funding for research into veteran health and wellbeing**

The Australian Government should provide increased funding for research into the health and wellbeing of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members by:

- (a) providing \$10 million through the National Health and Medical Research Council to support a Special Initiative research grant program focused on veteran health and wellbeing
- (b) considering opportunities to fund veteran health and wellbeing research through the Medical Research Future Fund and Million Minds Mental Health Research Mission.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce.

The Department of Health and Aged Care and the National Health and Medical Research Council will consider priority-driven research grant opportunities focused on veteran health and wellbeing. The Taskforce will consider and present options to enhance research into the health and wellbeing of serving and ex-serving ADF personnel, including in the context of other recommendations on data and research.

## Recommendation 121: Enable research into the health and wellbeing of Defence families

The Australian Government should enable research on the health and wellbeing of families of current and ex-serving members through:

- (a) expanded National Health and Medical Research Council funding for veteran health and wellbeing research
- (b) Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs leading research in conjunction with lived experience individuals (see Recommendation 117)
- (c) the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Family Studies being funded to collaborate and leverage existing datasets and the National Veterans' Data Asset (see Recommendation 107), to develop a better understanding of veteran families through research on wellbeing and risk and protective factors.

## Australian Government Response

The Government **notes** this recommendation for further consideration by the Taskforce. The Taskforce will consider options to enhance research, including in the context of other recommendations on data and research.

## **Recommendation 122: Establish a new statutory entity to oversee system reform across the whole Defence ecosystem**

The Australian Government should establish a new statutory entity with the purpose of providing independent oversight and evidence-based advice in order to drive system reform to improve suicide prevention and wellbeing outcomes for serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members.

### **Australian Government Response**

The Government **agrees** to establish a new statutory entity to oversee system reform across the whole Defence ecosystem as a priority.

The Government will appoint an interim head of the oversight body to work across government and provide advice on the establishment of the permanent oversight entity, including legislation required, to enable its establishment by September 2025.

**Annex A** - Actions taken by  
Defence and DVA to improve  
the experience of service for  
ADF members and veterans

## How Defence and DVA have sought to improve the experience of service for ADF personnel and veterans.

The Royal Commission shone a light on the tragedy that is veteran suicide and the actions needed to improve the experience of ADF members and veterans. The recommendations have now been considered and recommendations will be implemented.

### Focus on Defence Personnel

In June 2023, the Government appointed the first Chief of Personnel, a three star appointment equivalent to the Chiefs of Service who reports directly to the Chief of the Defence Force. This reform brings personnel management from across the five warfighting domains of the Defence Force into a single integrated system, which is essential to drive change across the ADF. Key reforms include:

- Recent updates to the Military Employment Classification System to provide more options for members who are unable to deploy for medical reasons to continue to serve within the ADF.
- Performance appraisal and promotion systems across the ADF are putting a greater focus on the culture of Defence's leaders when assessing their suitability for command. Since September 2022, any person considered for command is now subject to a fit and proper person test. Defence has also implemented a number of immediate measures to improve the preparation provided to ADF personnel for, and selection to, leadership positions. This includes social dimensions, including those in leadership positions being included in the new Performance Appraisal Report (AF195) for ranks up to LTCOL (E).

For example, recent reforms have been made to the Military Employment Classification System to provide more options for members who are unable to deploy for medical reasons to continue to serve within the ADF.

Risk assessment in the ADF now places greater focus on the psychosocial risks on our personnel of the activities our Defence force undertakes.

### Supporting Families

Significant work is underway to ensure Defence communicates with members and their families in a trauma-informed way, and that families have access to the right information at the right time in their family's service journey.

The Veteran Transition Strategy, launched in 2023, is a joint initiative between Defence, DVA, and the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation with a focus on empowering veterans and their families to plan and prepare for transition early, access a range of needs-based support programs across the ecosystem, and engage family and other significant support people in the transition process.

### Defence Cultural change

The National Defence Strategy recognises that culture is fundamental to achieving the Defence mission and implementing the strategy. Defence's culture must be values-based, address current cultural challenges and promote a positive, inclusive and psychologically safe workplace.

Significant reforms have been made to achieve cultural change, such as:

- In November 2023, the Secretary of Defence and the Chief of the Defence Force jointly launched the Defence Culture Strategy: Defence Culture Blueprint Program 2023<sup>1</sup>. Informed by research and consultation, the Defence Culture Blueprint Program provides clear direction on how culture will evolve within Defence, with strategic objectives and a Defence Culture Framework;
- Enterprise and Service specific Defence Culture Blueprint Action Plans are focusing and prioritising culture change actions;
- Each Defence Service Chief and Group Head has issued their own Culture Commitment Statement making it clear to the workforce that culture change is a priority;
- Defence has introduced a Respect@Work Framework, including the delivery of Respect@Work seminars, to ensure managers and commanders are equipped to prevent and manage instances of sexual misconduct;
- Stop Sexual Harassment Directions have also been introduced, providing a complaints process independent of the member's chain of command;
- The Commonwealth Ombudsman published its Action Speak Report (Defence's implementation of recommendations from our inquiry into behaviour training for Defence recruits) on 21 November 2024. In this report, the Commonwealth Ombudsman found that Defence had completed the required evaluation of its mandatory sexual misconduct training packages;
- Defence will continue to review and evaluate all courses on a regular basis to ensure training is effectively achieving the intended learning outcomes and addressing the risks associated with unacceptable behaviour;
- Specific interventions have been implemented, including at the Australian Defence Force Academy where additional training and education is now provided and new support officer roles have been introduced;
- Wellbeing and family support have been strengthened through the extension of the SafeSide Project, the establishment of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Branch, and the introduction of a suicide review pilot program; and
- Support to ADF families has been enhanced through the expansion of the ADF Family Health Program and remote locality leave travel with the purpose of providing ADF personnel and their families access to facilities not available at their remote location and relief from isolated conditions.

### **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Defence has created a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing Branch to focus and strengthen Defence's approach to preventive mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

Defence and DVA are prioritising suicide prevention programs, including through the development of the first joint Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.<sup>2</sup> The Strategy will be supported by two Action Plans: Suicide Prevention, and Mental Health and Wellbeing.

There is also work currently underway in Defence to deliver the 'SafeSide' Project which will provide a system-wide approach to suicide prevention. Ensuring positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes for all Defence people, including current and former serving ADF personnel, their families and communities, will enhance performance and support Defence in achieving its workforce growth and optimisation priorities.

<sup>1</sup> Defence Culture Strategy: Defence Culture Blueprint Program 2023 | Defence

<sup>2</sup> Development of the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy | Department of Veterans' Affairs (dva.gov.au)

The Project has a shared vision, goals and a roadmap to bind Defence and DVA together, to ensure every member of our Defence and veteran community has access to the support they need to lead healthy, fulfilling lives, right from the moment they sign up to life after Defence.

Additionally, Defence conducts a number of mental health and wellbeing promotion, prevention and early intervention activities, including:

- Annual awareness presentations such as Suicide Prevention and Alcohol, Tobacco and other Drugs (these Work Health and Safety presentations contribute to wellbeing);
- On request education training courses such as Fundamental of Mental Health: Stress and Self-care, Sleep and Stress and Trauma in the ADF for High Risk Groups;
- Skills-based training such as Keep Your Mates Safe – KYMS five modules - Mental Health Awareness, Suicide Prevention, Low Risk Drinking, Mental Health First Aid, BattleSMART and operational BattleSMART;
- Early intervention programs designed for members who require additional support and do not meet the threshold for clinical intervention, such as the RESET program and the On Target Harm Minimisation Program; and
- Resources such as fact sheets, toolkits and online information for clinicians, leaders, members and supervisors.

### **Improvements to Health Support**

Defence has implemented the Individual Health Assessment to replace the Periodic Health Examination. The Individual Health Assessment provides members the opportunity to undertake routine and preventative health screening in accordance with their individual health needs. It also provides routine assurance of medical individual readiness to commanders and managers.

Defence updated its policy in relation to the support offered to members during pregnancy and in the post-partum period in June 2023. Defence has expanded the models of care and eligibility for support services during pregnancy and the post-partum period, with the intent of providing equity and alignment to what is best practice and available to the civilian community.

Defence has updated its Suicide Prevention Program to incorporate the SafeSide Project. Defence has implemented a targeted approach to training on SafeSide with specific training packages provided for medical officers, mental health professionals and nurse practitioners, for other health professionals, chaplains and wellbeing support personnel, and for commanders and managers. New health policy on assessing and supporting members at risk of suicide, self-harm or harm to others has also been rolled out in addition to a new Military Personnel Policy Manual (MILPERSMAN) chapter on *Support and management of members at risk of suicide, self-harm or harm to others*.

In 2024, Defence updated health policy on the management of mental health disorders and shifted from a prescriptive, conservative approach to a principles-based approach. In doing so, Defence has moved from a mandatory period of non-deployable military employment classification for members diagnosed with mental health disorders to a progressive return to full capacity through a series of less restrictive deployable military employment classifications.

Defence has an ongoing body of work to optimise the delivery of health care to ADF members under the Smarter Service Delivery Program. The Program aims to optimise health care delivery across the country, ensuring sustainability to current and future service demand, while remaining responsive to current and evolving expectations of ADF members and their families. Since inception in 2021, the Program has delivered a number of improvements to health care delivery. These include improvements to wait times through the expansion of the on-base medical officer workforce and the use of other health professionals, growth of the on-base mental health workforce to improve both treatment options and wait times, and optimisation of the physiotherapy workforce as primary contact practitioners to enable direct presentation by members without having to first see a medical officer. As part of Defence's continuous improvement approach to health support, Defence introduced video-enabled telepsychiatry and telepsychology options. These service options are available nationally for members referred for off-base psychiatry and psychology services.

Defence has initiated an expert review into clinical governance, led by the Force Health Protection Principal Consultant to the Surgeon General of the ADF and one of Australia's experts in the field. The ultimate aim of the review is to ensure the delivery of safe, effective and resilient health services to enable high quality integrated care and patient safety. The review is occurring during the 2024-25 Financial Year. Defence is also undertaking work to develop more sophisticated health assurance systems across the business, capability and clinical domains of the health enterprise.

### **Health and the Defence Force Discipline Act 1982**

In December 2023, Defence published the updated Defence Health Manual chapter *Health support for members navigating the military justice process*. This updated policy provides guidance for Defence health staff in advising commanders and managers, and supporting members who are involved in the military justice process.

In June 2024, updated guidance was published to Defence health staff who are advising the commanders and managers of personnel who are involved in the military justice process.

### **Preparing ADF members for transition**

Defence has a Transition Program that provides support programs to ADF members to assist with their transition. Certain programs can be accessed at any time in an ADF member's career, with further programs available once transition commences, and for up to 24 months after transition. Transition Coaches are trained to assist ADF members to develop an individual Transition Plan, including post-transition goals, to support them completing administrative requirements of transition from military service. Members are encouraged to complete a Transition Preparedness Questionnaire when they decide to transition. Responses provide insights into circumstances, needs and post-transition goals. Subsequent questionnaires are completed approximately two weeks prior to, and six months following transition. Engagement with a Transition Coach is now mandatory when transitioning from Defence.

### **Defence Transition Support Improvements**

Defence is partnered with DVA in the Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Program. Defence supports this pilot by providing medical referral support for medical imaging and specialist reviews, ongoing provision of office space and Defence IT systems, and assistance with data requests.

The model seeks to have Joint Health Command and DVA case management staff working together within Joint Health Command facilities to manage the medical transition requirements of members with complex medical conditions in the lead up to their transition date.

To facilitate continuity of health care for transitioning members, Defence will book and fund a once-off civilian general practitioner appointment, preferably within three to four weeks either side of the member's transition date, for each transitioning member to facilitate clinical handover of care.



## **Work Health and Safety**

The Defence Work Health and Safety Strategy 2023-2028 (the Strategy 2023-2028) supports the ever-changing demands of Defence and aligns with Defence priorities.

Defence has placed a greater focus on psychosocial risks on personnel and particularly to support effective psychosocial risk management in the workplace.

Defence has also made systematic improvements to its Work Health and Safety Management Information System (Sentinel) to improve data capture, reflect changes to the organisational structure and enhance security and the user experience.

## **Complaints Management**

In April 2023, Defence implemented Stop Sexual Harassment (SSH) directions, a complaints process independent from Defence's chain of command.

Recognising the importance of keeping all parties informed of what is happening, and what actions have been taken, both throughout the complaints process and when it is complete, in February 2024 Defence released a new chapter in the Complaints and Alternative Resolutions Manual - Chapter 4 Notification of Outcomes. This Chapter outlines who is to be notified of information during the complaint process and following the complaint process has been concluded; what information is to be provided, and how that information is to be provided.

Defence has also accepted all nine of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's recommendations in its late 2023 report *'Defending Fairness: Does Defence handle unacceptable behaviour complaints effectively?'* The key recommendation was 'the establishment of a specialised, centralised trained complaints unit with quality assurance at its core, operating across all components of the ADF and Defence'. Defence has commenced work to implement these recommendations.

## **Enhancing Defence Data Capability**

The inaugural Defence Data Strategy 2021-2023 was launched on 4 August 2021. The Strategy highlighted the need to prioritise building a strong data literate workforce. It identified a requirement to adopt a more disciplined and deliberate approach to how data is collected, stored, analysed and applied in decision-making processes across Defence. Defence continues to work on improved data sharing and analytics between Defence and DVA through the Data Sharing and Analytics Solution to deliver actionable insights, which are designed to improve health, safety and wellness outcomes.

The second Defence Data Strategy 2023-2026 (DDS 2.0) was released in August 2024, and implementation work is already underway to strengthen data integrity and maturity, and helping Defence to realise enhanced decision advantage.

The One Defence Data Platform is the tangible vehicle driving the realisation of data strategies in Defence. It is increasing the quality and speed of Defence decision making by transforming the way Defence integrates and uses its data. It will provide better access to insights and identify trends and lead indicators that, will improve mental Health and Wellbeing outcomes for Defence members.

## **DVA is continuing to change for the better**

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide has documented the challenges faced by veterans and their families, and the impact and tragedy of veteran suicide. Critically, the Royal Commission has found that there is a lack of trust between DVA and veterans and families.

DVA acknowledges the findings of the Final Report and recognises the fundamental need to:

- simplify and improve access to services and benefits for veterans and families;
- embed a client-focused culture throughout DVA's service delivery and engagement;
- invest in and deliver more targeted and effective programs and support; and
- build a more connected and coordinated veteran support ecosystem.

Implementation of the recommendations will ensure that DVA is able to deliver a better client experience, build trust across the veteran community and, in partnership with Defence, support veterans and families to transition to purposeful and productive civilian lives.

Change on this scale requires significant time, planning and resourcing. DVA has made, and continues to make, significant inroads. This includes the substantial response to the Royal Commission's Interim Report (see Annex B), which identified legislative complexity, improving claims processing and the claims system, and information access as urgent issues that needed to be addressed in relation to veteran suicide.

### **Claims Processing**

DVA recognises that many veterans have been waiting too long for their claims to be processed. DVA is focused on reducing the time taken to process claims by employing more claims processing staff and making the application process easier for veterans and their families.

DVA initiatives are improving the claims processing system, both in terms of processing efficiency and client experience. The Government's previous commitment to an additional 500 ongoing staff, has enabled DVA to clear the backlog and operate in a new business-as-usual environment. This investment will help meet the continuing increase in demand for DVA's services and assist veterans and their families to access the support they need faster.

This commitment has been extended in the 2024-25 Budget, with the Government investing \$186 million over four years from 2024-25 and \$20.6 million ongoing from 2028-29. This will fund an additional 141 ongoing claims processing staff to increase determinations and reduce time taken to process claims.

Since the Interim Report the increase rate of DVA decision-making enabled by additional departmental resourcing has seen a significant increase in entitlements paid to veterans and their families. The 2024-25 budget included an additional \$6.5 billion for income support and compensation over five years from 2023-24 through to 2027-28, of which \$2.2 billion was paid in 2023-24.

Despite record numbers of claims continuing to be lodged by the veteran community, and an increase in the complexity of the claims lodged, the number and proportion of claims being actively processed continues to rise. In the 2022-23 Financial Year DVA received over 72,000 claims and completed almost 68,000 determinations. In the 2023-24 Financial Year DVA received over 89,000 claims and completed over 100,000 determinations.

A range of business improvements are advancing service delivery, such as the review of medical forms, which make it simpler and easier for veterans and their families to lodge claims and quicker for decision makers to assess claims. The Client Support Officer (CSO) model has delivered reduced claims processing times for veterans, and DVA's new Claims Lodgement Assistance Program is improving veterans' experience of the claims process.

### **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

DVA has placed the health and wellbeing of veterans and families at the core of its work through the DVA Wellbeing Framework. In 2024, DVA established a new Chief Psychiatrist role, to provide DVA and clients with dedicated psychiatric expertise and to support clinical governance across programs and policies, in particular mental and social health programs. Dr Don Lane, a veteran, commenced acting in the role from June 2024. DVA continues to innovate and explore ways to improve services and outcomes across different wellbeing domains, through programs such as the GP Veteran Health Training, Veteran's Chaplaincy Pilot and the Tasmanian Mental Health Program—which is being expanded across Australia. DVA is exploring a redesign of its grants programs, including co-design and co-funding opportunities with ESOs, to deliver grants that better support veteran needs and support a wider cohort.

Following extensive consultation, DVA and Defence have developed two crucial joint strategies: the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-29 and the Defence and Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy. These strategies will help align actions with whole-of-government priorities to improve mental health outcomes and reduce suicide and guide engagement with veteran families and further improvements. Defence and DVA are developing two interdepartmental Action Plans to support implementation of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy: the first focused on actions to empower and support Mental Health and Wellbeing and the second focused on Suicide Prevention.

DVA continues to develop initiatives where there are gaps in available supports, such as veteran homelessness, and to expand and consolidate the Veterans' and Families' Hubs network. DVA is exploring the integration of some DVA services in Hubs and is undertaking research to address knowledge gaps and identify other opportunities.

DVA also continues to invest in Open Arms, Australia's leading provider of mental health support and clinical counselling services for Australian veterans and their families. Open Arms has seen a year on year increase in demand for its services, including a 10 per cent increase in services from 2020-21 to 2021-22, a three per cent increase in services from 2021-22 to 2022-23, and a four per cent increase in services from 2022-23 to 2023-24. Open Arms offers face-to-face, telephone and online counselling, as well as self-help tools on the website to enable clients to have timely access to high quality mental health care and family and relationship counselling.

### **DVA Transition Support Improvements**

Transition is a strategic priority and focus for DVA and requires significant collaboration and coordination, as highlighted by the Veteran Transition Strategy. The Strategy released by the Australian Government on 22 August 2023 is a joint initiative between Defence, DVA and the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation (CSC). The strategy seeks to align transition stakeholders with a shared vision for what it means for a veteran and their family to transition well. On 2 December 2024 a cross-agency Action Plan to support the Strategy was released.

This work is supported by the establishment of the Transition Branch in DVA and the Joint Transition Oversight Panel, comprising senior executive representatives from key Commonwealth agencies, including Defence, CSC, the Department of Health and Aged Care and Services Australia. DVA continues to work in partnership with Defence to identify transition service duplication, service gaps and areas for improvement, to assist ADF members and families to be better prepared and supported through their transition journey.

DVA has introduced a number of initiatives to support transitioning members. The Enhanced Veteran Support Officer Pilot targets support to vulnerable medically separating veterans; the Transition Medical Assessment Pilot Project (known as TMAPP) has been developed in partnership with Defence. DVA has evolved its rehabilitation programs which are now delivered by a smaller panel of national providers, supporting a better experience and services for clients. DVA continues to progress transition-related reforms to improve our systems and data, offer more proactive and tailored interventions, and refine DVA's role alongside key Commonwealth partners.

This is in addition to DVA's existing service offering to support transitioning members and families, including the Veteran Support Officers, through which DVA provides a national service at 14 Defence bases across Australia; case management support for medically or administratively transitioning veterans aged under 30 with vulnerable or complex presentations; an annual health check from a general practitioner for the first five years after military separation/transfer; and the Veteran Employment Program, which seeks to ensure veterans' ADF skills and experience are recognised as being transferrable to civilian employment, and provides support to organisations seeking to attract, recruit and retain veteran employees. In early April 2024, an updated Veteran Employment Commitment was implemented and a national veteran employment campaign launched.

## **Veteran Ecosystem**

DVA has enhanced its collaboration with Defence on joint areas of responsibility, and DVA continues to build its relationship with veteran organisations. This includes work to support options for the establishment of an ex-service organisation peak body to improve services for veterans and families. Other future priorities include better integration of veteran and stakeholder input through co-design and lived experience, ensuring appropriate governance for any emerging technologies undertaken by DVA, and establishing wellbeing objectives for the veteran support ecosystem across levels of government.

DVA is improving its engagement with the veteran support ecosystem and working on initiatives to strengthen the ex-service organisation community. As well as supporting efforts to establish an ex-service organisation peak body, DVA is reviewing its National Consultation Framework to ensure effective and representative engagement with the veteran, family and serving community. DVA has been consulting on a proposed professional body for veteran advocacy and is partnering with ex-service organisations to implement new ways to assist veterans with their claims.

DVA continues to develop and expand the Veterans' and Families' Hubs network to support veterans, current serving ADF members, reservists and families across the country. As part of the October 2022–23 Budget, the Australian Government committed \$46.7 million to expand the network, bringing the total number of Hubs to 17.

## **Organisation and Culture**

Over the past two years, DVA has realigned its organisational structure and internal governance to improve accountability and performance. DVA has undergone substantial changes to improve its capability, the way DVA interacts with veterans and families, and our service design and delivery. As an organisation, DVA continues to focus on how to best support its people and foster a positive, veteran-centric culture.

DVA understands the critical importance of building the trust and confidence of the community, as recognised through the appointment of a Deputy Secretary responsible for Veteran, Family and Stakeholder Experience and DVA's expansion and increased use of feedback mechanisms such as surveys and recently introduced 'Town Hall' events. DVA has implemented centralised oversight of all internal and external surveys to improve coordination and consistency across DVA and to minimise survey fatigue. DVA monitors the factors contributing to overall satisfaction with DVA's service delivery and works with key stakeholders across the veteran support system to improve access to services and supports and inform policy and program development. In April 2024, DVA introduced online Community Consultation Town Hall events led by Deputy Secretaries, which provide interested veterans and other stakeholders nationally with updates on various DVA programs.

DVA's employees are strongly committed to supporting and serving veterans and families. DVA continues to invest in its staff, particularly through its training programs, as this is critical to supporting staff to support veterans and families across all of DVA's services and supports. DVA is expanding offerings related to military culture and trauma-informed practices. DVA continues to draw on the capability and ideas of its staff as part of an innovation culture, including through uptake of staff-proposed initiatives to streamline DVA processes and improve the veteran and family experience.

Since 2016 DVA has used collaborative design to engage with veterans, families, veteran organisations and staff to discover opportunities for improvement, develop innovative solutions and change organisational culture. Collaborative design provides rich qualitative insights, and with this understanding comes a better ability to deliver meaningful solutions that meet people's needs. Two key examples of collaborative design in DVA are the Women Veterans Policy Forum and the Veterans' Families Policy Forum as well as the Understanding the Veteran Experience workshops.

DVA uses the Women Veterans Policy Forum and the Veterans' Families Policy Forum to provide platforms for these communities to work in direct collaboration with DVA. The focus of these Forums is leveraging lived experience to co-design future DVA policies, programs, services and products.

The Understanding the Veteran Experience workshops, some of which are delivered on ADF bases, provide staff with a deeper understanding of the 'lived experience' of serving members and the unique nature of military service. The full day workshops are facilitated, collaborative design style engagements with staff hearing directly from currently serving personnel about their lived experience of ADF service.

### **Research, Data and Innovation**

DVA has undertaken significant work on its research and data investments and capability to better inform and improve the development, delivery, and evaluation of DVA policies, programs and initiatives. This includes efforts to establish a modern enterprise data warehouse and analytical capabilities, collaborating on improved information-sharing with Defence, and a new model for governing, funding and procuring research and evaluation work. DVA continues to develop its research partnerships in Australia and overseas, including through Five Eyes partners. DVA is working on key data-related initiatives to improve the understanding of its clients and tailor its services and programs, including the Priority Investment Approach, Data-driven Client Segmentation and the Commonwealth's Person Level Integrated Data Asset. DVA is exploring ways to overcome legislative barriers to improved data-sharing which is critical to facilitating improvements to the provision of services.

The Early Engagement Model and the Defence and DVA Electronic Information Exchange has created connections between Defence and DVA through which important information and data can now flow more efficiently. This has replaced a number of slow, largely manual processes that existed before Veteran Centric Reform to share veterans' information to enable service provision to them. DVA has also been working with Defence to progress the Defence/DVA data sharing and analytics solution, which seeks to create an enduring linked data asset to understand the drivers of wellbeing, including prevention or minimisation of the impact of in-service injuries while improving whole of life health and wellbeing outcomes for current and former serving veterans. DVA continues to collaborate with Defence on their respective efforts to support whole of life wellbeing measurement and insights from an in-service perspective.

DVA is implementing a new approach to the funding and procurement of its research and evaluation work under a new model known as VF-LINK (the Veteran and Family – Learning and Innovation Network of Knowledge). This involves a partnership approach over an extended period to deliver more coordinated and innovative research and evaluation projects. The model will help to improve DVA's policy and program design, incorporate evaluation planning as policies are developed, translate research and evaluation evidence into improved policy and practice, and leverage the sector to maximise the capacity of DVA completed research to address identified evidence gaps.

DVA is also continuing to explore innovative approaches to support veterans and families, including two recent innovations concerning health approvals and invoice processing, identified and led by our staff. In October 2024, DVA began a six-month trial which allows radiologists to claim MRI scans for eligible clients referred by GPs without needing to see prior approval from DVA. This reduces administrative burdens and wait times. DVA has also significantly improved its timeliness in processing invoices from service providers, following increased levels of demand and delays in processing invoice payments. From 30 September 2024, DVA implemented an online provider upload portal and, as at 29 October 2024, over 90 per cent of invoices were being lodged by the portal and 100 per cent of all invoices were processed in under 20 days.

## **The Attorney-General's Department is working closely with Defence**

The Attorney-General's Department and the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission have been working closely with Defence to ensure Defence service convictions are disclosed to civilian authorities, and available for the purposes of Nationally Coordinated Criminal History Checks (or police checks).

The Australian Human Rights Commission has worked with Defence to deliver insights, recommendations and frameworks, to create a safer, more equitable, diverse and inclusive culture, with a particular focus on preventing and responding to unacceptable behaviour

## **Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is working with stakeholders to progress research**

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Annual Veterans Suicide Monitoring (ASM) report provides a national record that is widely referenced, including by the RCDVS in both the interim and final reports.

The AIHW was able to leverage the data collated to produce the ASM to further support the Royal Commission through the provision of additional data and analysis on request.

The DVA/AIHW partnership that produces the ASM represents a significant Government investment, extending prior to, and continuing beyond the Royal Commission. For example, the AIHW was commissioned by the interim National Commissioner into Defence and Veteran Suicide, to produce the 'Final report to the Independent Review of Past Defence and Veteran Suicides' (published 29 Sep 2021), which analysed and identified risk and protective factors related to suicide among ADF members.

## **Comcare is helping stakeholders understand and mitigate psychosocial risks**

Comcare has provided a suite of educational materials, forums and events targeted to support and engage stakeholders across a range of topics including psychosocial hazards, injury prevention, rehabilitation and return to work. This includes Comcare's Psychosocial Health and Safety Forum, first held in October 2023 and hosted biannually, which provides an update on the regulatory landscape and approaches to address psychosocial hazards. These events and educational materials regularly receive positive feedback and satisfaction ratings between 85% and 100%.

In 2023 and 2024, Comcare piloted a psychosocial proactive inspection program. An independent evaluation found the pilot was perceived as a positive experience by workers, persons conducting a business or undertaking and other stakeholders. The program methodology is currently being refined in anticipation of scaled-up and ongoing implementation. In addition to the proactive inspection program, Comcare provides information and advice about psychosocial risks and related work health and safety duties through presentations and forums.



## **Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force continues to evolve how it supports Defence**

Continuous improvement has always been at the heart of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force's business practices. The Royal Commission's recognition that the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force has always acted independently and impartially demonstrate that the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force's extensive contributions to the Royal Commission benefited from this focus. It is gratifying that the Royal Commission's recommendations are consistent with that continuous improvement journey

## **The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations is promoting psychosocial literacy within Defence**

Management of psychosocial hazards in the workplace and the promotion of psychosocial literacy among ADF personnel.

Recommendations (recommendations 2, 3, 8 and 9) and themes in the Final Report of the Royal Commission refer to promoting psychosocial literacy among defence personnel, and positive psychosocial workplace culture. The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations notes ongoing initiatives across the portfolio which support this objective.

Amendments to the Work Health and Safety Regulations to clarify the obligation to manage psychosocial hazards in the workplace commenced in the Commonwealth jurisdiction on 1 April 2023.

Under Work Health and Safety laws, a person conducting a business or undertaking must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, workers and other persons are not exposed to risks to their psychological or physical health and safety. A person conducting a business or undertaking must eliminate psychosocial risks in the workplace, or if that is not reasonably practicable, minimise these risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

On 2 November 2024, the Work Health and Safety (Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work) Code of Practice 2024 (Psychosocial Code) commenced in the Commonwealth jurisdiction.

The Psychosocial Code provides practical guidance to persons conducting a business or undertaking on how to identify and manage psychosocial risks in the workplace. This includes guidance on identifying psychosocial hazards, assessing risks of hazards occurring, and applying control measures to eliminate or minimise risks. Common psychosocial hazards include high job demands, fatigue, low job control, traumatic events or material, poor physical environment, violence and aggression, bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment.

## **Annex B** - Progress of the Government's Response to the Interim recommendations

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On 11 August 2022 the Royal Commission released its Interim Report, which made 13 recommendations, which fell within three key themes: improving the claims process, Royal Commission procedural matters and access to information in Defence and DVA.

The Government responded on 26 September 2022 and agreed to nine recommendations, agreed in principle to one, noted two and indicated one (Recommendation 5) had already been implemented by removing the Average Staffing Level Cap for all Australian Government agencies.

All of the Interim recommendations which were agreed have either been implemented, or legislation has been introduced that will implement the recommendation.

### **Recommendation 1**

The Government **agreed** to simplify and harmonise the veterans' legislation framework. To deliver on the Government's commitment, on 3 July 2024 the Government introduced the *Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024* into Parliament, following extensive public consultation throughout 2023.

The purpose of the Bill is to implement a single Act model for all new claims for veteran rehabilitation and compensation, by way of an improved *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA). This will create a simpler system making it easier for veterans and families to understand their entitlements, and for claims advocates to assist veterans and families with their claims. It will also allow for faster claims processing of claims, so veterans and families receive the support they need and deserve, when they need it.

### **Recommendation 2**

The Government **agreed** this recommendation, and funded 500 additional ongoing staff enabling DVA to clear the backlog of unallocated Initial Liability (IL), Incapacity, and Permanent Impairment claims identified by the Royal Commission. The backlog was cleared ahead of schedule and as at 30 September 2024, DVA had made determinations for almost 97 per cent of the claims in the backlog identified by the Royal Commission.

This has allowed for DVA to allocate new claims within two weeks of receipt to a delegate for processing.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Government **agreed** this recommendation. The administration of DVA's claims systems continues to improve with the introduction of significant improvements to DVA's processes and ICT systems. This includes streamlined medical forms, the introduction of claims screening teams, and improvements to the MyService portal. These reforms make it simpler and easier for veterans and families to lodge claims and faster for decision-makers to assess claims. As the recommendation also stated, DVA reported on the status of this recommendation by public reporting via their website from June 2023 until June 2024.

### **Recommendation 4**

The Government **agreed** this recommendation, and allocated DVA additional funding and staff to process veteran compensation claims faster, and funded improvements to the department's internal systems. This will improve the DVA Demand Driven Funding Model (DDFM) to better forecast future demand for DVA services and operations into the future. This will result in a better understanding of the future support needs of veterans and their families.

### **Recommendation 5**

The removal of DVA's Average Staffing Level Cap was achieved through the Government's commitment to remove the cap for all agencies. This enabled the employment and retention of additional ongoing staff with the right skills and capabilities to deliver enduring and meaningful service to veterans.

## Recommendations 6 – 8

The Government **agreed in-principle** to Recommendation 6 and noted Recommendation 7 and 8.

## Recommendation 9 – 13

The Government **agreed** recommendations 9-13. These recommendations were implemented, delivering improvements to information access from Defence and DVA for members of the ADF, veterans and their families.

Both Defence and DVA now provide greater clarity on the eligibility criteria to receive access to records, whilst also providing more information to applicants about any redactions which may be necessary. The web presence has also been simplified to ensure applications for records can be easily submitted and allow for online submission wherever possible. Defence and DVA have established Information Access Units that centrally manage requests and provide a single point of contact for applicants. A 'no wrong door' approach across both departments has been embedded making it easier and faster for applicants to access information. Significant training has been undertaken to ensure that complex and sensitive records are released in a trauma informed manner.

## Outcomes

The implementation of the Interim Report recommendations has made a meaningful difference to the experiences of veterans and their families in engaging with Government to access support, entitlements and information.

Providing easier and faster access to services makes a significant difference to individual health and wellbeing outcomes, particularly through healthcare and financial support for eligible veterans and families. These improvements act to reduce the potential adverse mental health impacts. Improved processes, resourcing and administration enables DVA to be better positioned to focus its efforts on better supporting vulnerable veterans, and working to address the issues of veteran suicide and suicidality highlighted by the Royal Commission.



