



# Ex-Service Organisations Round Table December 2024

## Ex-Service Organisations Round Table Meeting

The Ex-Service Organisations Round Table (ESORT) met on Tuesday, 3 December 2024. A range of issues were discussed during the meeting, including the Government's response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

## DVA update – Acting Secretary Andrew Kefford PSM

### Topical issues

Acting Secretary Andrew Kefford provided an update to members on topical issues. He noted that in the first 3 months of this financial year, DVA received 25,524 claims, which was a 37.1 per cent increase on the same period last year. Over the same period, DVA also made 24,780 determinations – a 6.7 per cent increase on the previous year. He advised that, as at 30 September 2024, more than half of all claims DVA had on hand had been received within the last 200 days, and around one third were received in the last 100 days.

For MRCA Initial Liability claims received from 1 December 2023 and determined by 30 September, the average time taken to process was 84 days. He said that DVA was also taking action on a number of fronts to target unscrupulous medical providers and commission-based fee-for-service advocates.

Acting Secretary Kefford advised that more than \$3.7 million has been allocated to community organisations through the 2023–24 Veteran Wellbeing Grants program. He noted 69 grants have been awarded to deliver community-based projects and activities that benefit veteran health and wellbeing. He said

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the 2024–25 round of the Veteran Wellbeing Grants program is now open, with over \$3.8 million of funding available to benefit veterans and families. Eligible organisations can apply for small grants of up to \$50,000 and large grants of up to \$200,000, an increase from the \$150,000 available in the last round. The current round closes on 17 December 2024.

Acting Secretary Kefford advised that Australia’s top veteran employers and employees were recognised at the Prime Minister’s National Veteran Employment Awards in Canberra on 26 November.

He noted that Australians planning to honour the fallen at the 2025 Anzac Day Dawn Services in Türkiye or France can now register for their free attendance passes.

He noted that the late Private Richard Norden was recently awarded a Victoria Cross for Australia for his gallantry during the Battle of Fire Support Base Coral in the Vietnam War.

Acting Secretary Kefford also thanked ESORT members for their assistance during the year and said DVA was looking forward to working with them again in 2025 to implement the Government’s response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission. He also noted that the Veterans’ Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024 remains before the Parliament and is expected to be considered on Parliament’s return in February 2025.

### **Government’s response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide**

Acting Secretary Andrew Kefford updated members on the Government’s response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, which was released yesterday. He said the Government has accepted the overwhelming majority of the Royal Commission’s 122 recommendations: agreeing or agreeing-in-principle to 104 recommendations, noting 17 recommendations for further consideration and one recommendation is not supported in part.

Acting Secretary Kefford said the Government announced it will establish a new statutory entity the Defence and Veterans Services Commission to oversee enduring and systemic reform. This entity will provide independent oversight and evidence-based advice to improve suicide prevention, and drive better outcomes for serving and ex-serving ADF personnel.

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The Government will also 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 matters of detailed implementation.

The Government has also directed DVA to co-design, with the veteran community, a new agency focused on wellbeing to be established within DVA. This body will be focused on consultation and co-design with Defence and veteran communities, and their families, to ensure the agency meets their needs.

The Government will also fund DVA to continue consultation on the development of a national ex-service organisation peak body.

Acting Secretary Kefford noted that the Government's response outlines significant reform across Defence and the veteran support system. He stressed that DVA is committed to enacting the Government's response and delivering on the recommendations accepted by the Government. He said working through the recommendations, many of which intersect one another, will take time, especially as DVA will need to work closely with other agencies and the veteran community.

Members discussed the various aspects of the Government's response, the implementation process, consultation and the importance of engagement and partnerships.

Acting Secretary Kefford said the Government's response is a blueprint for reform to not only address suicide and suicidality in the veteran community, but also to improve veteran wellbeing in many other areas. He stressed the Government's response provides clear direction to the Department on priority work for the years ahead and marks the start of a new chapter in how DVA supports the veteran community. He noted that the Department has undertaken significant preparatory work so that it is well placed to quickly enact the Government's response and acknowledged the work that DVA has already achieved over the last 3 years. He said DVA now looks forward to getting on with the job so veterans and veteran families are better supported now and in the future. He stressed there would be significant and comprehensive consultation with ESORT members in the New Year.

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**The following member submissions were considered by the ESORT:**

**Standardisation and consistency in the delegate's decision-making process (Legacy Australia)**

ESORT members noted the submission from Legacy Australia concerning inconsistency in the decision-making process when considering claims. The Department advised that ongoing training and additional resources are available to delegates to ensure they are provided with the necessary tools to enable them to make consistent and legally correct decisions.

DVA encouraged advocates who disagree with a decision in the first instance to discuss their concerns with the delegate. To assist with transparency, the Department advised it could share its claims-in-review statistics with ESORT members and noted that the application of AI in the claims assessment, but not decision making, process and engagement with the proposed Institute for Veterans' Advocates offers opportunities to increase consistency in the decision-making process.

**Combined Wellbeing, Compensation Level 1 Competency Qualification (Vietnam Veterans' Federation of Australia)**

Members noted the submission from the Vietnam Veterans' Federation of Australia and the concerns raised. The Department advised that support for advocates, which includes learning and development will be considered as part of advocacy reform and the proposed Institute for Veterans' Advocates. The Institute would, in keeping with other similar professional organisations, provide leadership and support to veterans' advocates, set competency and training standards for the sector, and provide guidance and determination of Recognition of Prior Learning, as well as accredit and register advocates.

**Review the relationship between the War Widows Pension and the Age/Service Pension (Legacy Australia)**

The Department provided information to ESORT members about the rate of War Widow(er)'s pension payable under the *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986* (VEA) over time and the relationship with the Age Pension in response to the submission from Legacy Australia. DVA advised that the War Widow(er)'s pension will continue to grow at a greater rate than the Age Pension. The Department undertook to report to the Minister that the issue had been raised

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at the ESORT meeting. The Department also undertook to provide advice on the pension supplement indexation.

### **Blast Wave Injuries in Military Training (Legacy Australia)**

Members noted the submission from Legacy Australia regarding blast wave injuries in military training and action. The Department advised that it is engaging with research providers to conduct a literature review to stay informed of emerging research on mild traumatic brain injuries and repetitive low-level blast over pressure exposure (rLLBH). The Department noted that any research identified in the literature review as high priority, or which provides significant evidence of a causal relationship between rLLB and neurocognitive conditions, will be referred to the Repatriation Medical Authority.

The Department also advised that it is engaging with our Five Eyes partners on the issue and that it is an element of the RSL's MEAO Scoping Study. The Repatriation Commissioner emphasised the importance of further research and the value of promoting the Veterans' Brain Bank.

### **Cessation of DVA funding for APOD (Australian War Widows)**

Members noted the submission from Australian War Widows regarding the funding for APOD. DVA noted the funding to APOD was ceased in accordance with the terms of the relevant contract on its expiry. DVA noted that ongoing funding or delivery of a business benefits program is not core Government or Departmental business.

Veteran Cards and the Covenant Lapel Pin continue to provide a way for veterans to demonstrate their veteran status in the community when they aren't wearing their service uniforms or medals.

Where possible and appropriate, the Department undertook to keep ESORT members informed of program changes in the future.

### **SRDP/TPI Veterans Medical Certificate Requirements under MRCA (TPI Federation of Australia)**

ESORT Members noted the submission from the TPI Federation of Australia. The Department confirmed the current medical certificate requirements for *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA) Special Rate Disability Pension (SRDP) eligible people in relation to incapacity and SRDP

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payments. DVA advised that the policy has not recently changed, however, it will provide further clarification and education to delegates to ensure clarity and consistency.

## **DVA Critical Initiatives**

### **Legislative Reform**

The Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024 remains before the Parliament. DVA noted the Government has flagged two proposed amendments to the Bill in relation to a statutory review requirement, and apportionment of certain payments in relation to children.

The Bill is listed for early consideration on Parliament's return in February 2025. ESORT members also discussed the terminology around 'wholly dependent partner'.

### **Advocacy**

The Department advised that from 23 August to 4 October 2024, DVA conducted public consultation on the ESORT Advocacy Governance Working Group proposal to establish the Institute of Veterans' Advocates. DVA reported that there was significant interest in the proposal with 95 submissions received online and via email, from a range of ESOs, commercial advocacy providers, the legal sector and individual advocates and veterans. DVA noted that most of the submissions supported the concept of the Institute, with qualifications regarding how it should be established.

ESORT members discussed issues surrounding the establishment and registration of the Institute of Veterans' Advocates. The Department advised it would convene a meeting of the ESORT Advocacy Governance Working Group in the near future and an out-of-session ESORT meeting regarding the appointment of the foundation directors.

### **NCF Review**

The Department updated members on the 2024 National Consultation Framework review, which is currently underway, and thanked veterans and families for taking time to complete the online survey. DVA advised that the Government's response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into

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Defence and Veteran Suicide will influence the outcome of the review and it will engage with ESORT members regarding next steps.

### **Update on Treatment Principles and Specialist Referral Requirements for Specific Procedures**

Following discussion at the last ESORT meeting, the Department provided ESORT members with an update on the treatment principles, specifically focusing on the requirements for specialist referrals for certain procedures.

DVA advised that it has recently started a trial which allows radiologists to claim MRI scans for eligible clients referred by a GP without needing to seek prior approval from DVA.

The Department said that it is currently working on updating the Treatment Principles and will brief ESORT members as the project unfolds.

### **Claims Processing Update**

The Department provided ESORT members an update on compensation claims processing and advised that it remains focused on processing outstanding claims as quickly as possible, to reduce the time it takes for determinations to be made. DVA noted that the backlog of unallocated claims was cleared at the end of February 2024 and that it is now managing ‘business as usual’ levels of claims across all three major claim types – as at 31 October 2024 there were 7,082 claims waiting to be allocated (1,985 IL; 98 Incapacity; 4,999 PI).

DVA noted that determinations remain high – it made 9,013 determinations in October 2024 and has finalised 33,794 claims in the financial year to date. DVA advised it is starting to see improvements across many claim types, with the TTTP MRCA IL falling from an average of 441 days in FY2022–23, to 304 days in the 2024–25 FYTD. For MRCA IL claims received since 1 December 2024, the average days to process a MRCA IL claim is 91 days.

The Department continues to see claim numbers increase. DVA noted that it now has more than 1,000 staff supporting claims processing activities, primarily ongoing APS staff. The ESORT members also discussed the success of the Claims Lodgement Support (CLS) Model pilot in WA, which is now operational in a “business-as-usual” sense in WA.

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## **Sustainability of Veterans' and Families' Hubs operations**

The Department provided members with advice regarding the sustainability of Veterans' and Families' Hubs operations. It advised that hub sustainability is a consideration that must be addressed by the lead organisation in the business case developed in the process of applying for grant funding under this program. DVA stressed that each lead organisation is required to demonstrate how their hub will be financially viable beyond the \$5 million Commonwealth grant, for an agreed designated use period of up to 10 years.

ESORT members also discussed recommendation 86 of the Final Report of the Royal Commission around Hubs' sustainability and viability into the future and noted that this particular recommendation was agreed-in-principle by the Government.

## **Aged Care Update**

ESORT members were updated about the activities being progressed by the Aged and Community Care Taskforce, including the upcoming publication of two new information booklets for DVA clients, families, carers and residential aged care providers. DVA also discussed public consultation and communication around the Aged Care Bill 2024, which passed the Parliament on 25 November and will commence from 1 July 2025.

In addition, DVA provided some clarifications around palliative care and informed ESORT members about a recent Town Hall meeting held by the Taskforce.

## **Update on the Handling of Personal Information Project**

ESORT members were briefed on the Handling of Personal Information (HOPI) Project, which aims to improve DVA's handling of personal information, including collection, use, storage, retention and disclosure. The Department's aim is to be best practice and compliant with all relevant requirements. The project also seeks to build the confidence of DVA stakeholders, including veterans and families, researchers and other government agencies in DVA's handling of personal information.



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## **International Anzac Day Services and domestic commemorations in 2025**

DVA provided ESORT members with an update on international Anzac Day services and domestic commemorations in 2025. Next year will be the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Anzac landings at Gallipoli. DVA advised that in addition to staff from across DVA, the Türkiye and France Anzac Day delivery teams will each include an additional 10 personnel being:

- four Australian Defence Force Members;
- three veterans;
- one veteran family member; and
- either two Gallipoli Scholars or two Sir John Monash Foundation Scholars (relevant to the location).

The Department advised that veterans and veteran family members are currently being selected from the Expression of Interest process that closed in October. It was also noted that the Minister announced the opening of the Anzac Day ticketing registration system for Anzac Day services in Türkiye and France on 30 November.

In regard to domestic commemorations for 2025, ESORT members were advised that the Department has commenced early engagement with relevant ex-service organisations for commemoration in 2025 of the:

- 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Australian service in the Malayan Emergency; and
- 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Australian service in the Korean War.

The Department noted that the proposed commemorative program for these anniversaries may include a National Service in Canberra and the development and dissemination of resources to raise awareness in the Australian community of these important events.

## **Women's Veterans' Strategy**

ESORT members were advised that the Department has started work on a Women Veterans Strategy. It noted that women veterans can face issues accessing support services in a system traditionally designed for men. Building on the important insights of the Women Veterans Policy Forum and the national gender equality strategy, *Working for Women*, DVA is looking at ways to tailor and improve its support and the way it works for women veterans.

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## **Other Business**

The following items were discussed under Other Business:

- a brief update was received from the Younger Veterans Contemporary Needs Forum – ESORT agreed to receive a comprehensive report on work on hand at its next meeting
- ESORT members were briefed on the Department’s Christmas Reduced Activity Period and early payment dates for certain DVA benefits that would otherwise fall due on public holidays
- ESORT members were provided with a recent article by DVA’s Chief Health Officer Dr Jenny Firman that appeared in *newsGP*, a publication of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.