

EXPERT GROUP ON THE NEEDS OF THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY IN WALES

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 24 MARCH 2021

Members

Hannah Blythyn AM	Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government
Brigadier Andrew Dawes	160 (Welsh) Brigade
Colonel Sion Walker	160 (Welsh) Brigade
Major Neil Kendrick	160 (Welsh) Brigade
Air Commodore Adrian Williams	RAF
Brigadier Fraser	Royal Navy
Darren Millar AM	Welsh Conservatives
Emma Perrin	Army Families Federation
Jane Williams	Naval Families Federation
Wendy Quinn	Naval Families Federation
Lisa Thipthorp	RAF Families Federation
Ant Metcalfe	Royal British Legion
Colonel Nick Beard	Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (RFCA)
Rachel Morgan	WLGA
Neil Kitchiner	Veterans NHS Wales
Louise Forman	Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service in Wales
Roy Brown	COBSEO
Steve Boswell	SSAFA
Julian North	Help for Heroes
Smita Mehta	Ministry of Defence
Millie Taylor	SSCE Cymru
Beverley Lovatt	DWP
George Tomlinson	Ministry of Defence
Dawn North	HIVE
Jan Jones	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Cerys Gage	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Peter Evans	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Huw Charles	Welsh Government – Housing
Omer Williams	Welsh Government – Housing
Jacqui Sharples	Welsh Government - Education

Apologies

Cllr Maureen Webber	WLGA
Reg Kilpatrick	Welsh Government – Local Government
Emma Williams	Welsh Government – Housing
Jonathan Price	Veterans Welfare Service
Fiona Jenkins	Cardiff and Vale UHB

ITEM 1 – WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

- 1.1 The Deputy Minister welcomed all members to the second virtual meeting of the Armed Forces Expert Group. Highlighting the continued challenges experienced as a result of Covid-19, the Deputy Minister thanked all members for their continued commitment and progress.

ITEM 2 – MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING 16 SEPTEMBER 2020

- 2.1 The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true record.

ITEM 3 – PROGRESS REPORT ON ACTIONS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS

- 3.1 The Deputy Minister noted that many of the previous actions had either been completed or were in progress, with further updates to be provided during the meeting.
- 3.2 Rachel Morgan updated members on the issue that had been raised regarding council tax policy. The WLGA continued to highlight the policy to all Local Authorities. Going forwards a meeting would be arranged between the WLGA and the Family Federations to discuss what additional measures could be put in place to ensure all Local Authorities were aware of this policy.
- 3.3 Dr Neil Kitchiner informed members that Veterans NHS Wales had been given an additional increase of £235,000 per annum from the Welsh Government. The funding will go towards the creation of Highly Specialist Veterans Clinical Lead posts within the service. In response to Darren Millar's question on whether the uplift would be part of core funding, Neil confirmed this was the case.

Action: A meeting to be arranged between the WLGA and Family Federations to discuss implementation of the Council Tax policy in all Local Authorities.

ITEM 4 – UPDATE FROM THE TRI SERVICES

- 4.1 Brigadier Andrew Dawes presented the update on behalf of the Army, confirming that Serving personnel continued to support in response to the pandemic. Examples of such support included 300 personnel deployed to support the vaccination programme, whole town testing in Merthyr Tydfil, planning support for Local Health Boards and the Welsh Government in addition to support for WAST in the form of patient-facing driving and non-clinical support. The Brigadier informed members that Serving personnel had responded to around 10,000 emergency calls in support of WAST. The last 12

months had seen up to 20 military assessment teams and 27 MACAs. This approach would be continued over the duration of the pandemic.

- 4.2 Raising the issue of the Integrated Review, following the publication of the Defence Command paper earlier that week, the Brigadier said he would expect to see a transformation going forward with £188 billion spend planned for Defence over the next 4 years. Whilst the Army would likely become increasingly more deployable the commitment to supporting Wales remained. The 14th Signals Regiment currently based in Cawdor Barracks would be relocated with its future location to be confirmed by the summer. Investment in technologies to support the Armed Forces, such as the Ajax build programme in Merthyr Tydfil, is continuing. The Brigadier noted that the Defence industry in Wales equates very well to that of the UK. The Army industrial strategy paper had recently been released and would be explored in more detail to fully understand the position from a Welsh perspective.
- 4.3 The Deputy Minister confirmed that she had met with Baroness Goldie to discuss the Defence Command paper. The Deputy Minister stated she had sought re-assurance on the issue of the military footprint in Wales. The Welsh Government would continue to engage with the Ministry of Defence to ensure the position in Wales is reflected in future decisions.
- 4.4 Air Commodore Williams supported Brigadier Dawes' comments, highlighting that the Integrated Review would provide investment in areas such as Space and new aircraft concepts, such as Tempest, all of which would offer new opportunities for the UK aerospace sector, including that within Wales. The Air Commodore confirmed that the Integrated Review had not resulted in any changes to the RAF footprint in Wales. Whilst the RAF will be relocating from St Athan, as planned pre-Integrated Review, RAF Valley would continue to be the home for fast jet training, with its long term future having been confirmed in recent years and much increased investment in infrastructure and new equipment having been seen.
- 4.5 The Air Commodore confirmed that RAF personnel also continued to support the pandemic. This has included 170 personnel involved in the whole town testing programme in Merthyr Tydfil and 150 personnel currently at various locations across Wales supporting the vaccine roll out – these numbers had included RAF musicians, who had also provided some impromptu musical recitals during their lunch break, which seemed to have been much appreciated by members of the Welsh public awaiting their vaccine.
- 4.6 During the period of the pandemic, essential RAF outputs, such as fast jet fighter pilot training at RAF Valley, had continued in Wales and work arrangements had been reconfigured accordingly to comply with Welsh Government regulations.
- 4.7 RAF recruitment continued to be positive with an increase in applications running at about 4,000 per month, an increase of 20% in comparison to the previous year. With the 2020/21 recruitment year coming to a close it was

forecast that some 98% of the 2,400 posts requirement would be achieved. Good progress also continued to be made in increasing the number of applications and entries from both females and BAME backgrounds, which continued to be a priority area across Defence to see further improvement.

- 4.8 In terms of engagement it was hoped that, once restrictions eased, there would be opportunities to engage face to face again, however planning would be flexible taking into account the current situation. Future engagement would include a GWR train naming event in honour of former Wing Commander Ken Rees from Wrexham, together with a Battle of Britain 80th commemoration; both postponed from 2020. The Air Commodore informed members that the intention was for the Battle of Britain historical exhibition on the Welsh Pilots who had fought in the Battle to then be taken on tour around Wales and hopefully Welsh communities would enjoy finding out about the Welsh RAF Pilots of 1940. It was hoped that Local Authorities would host the exhibition for a week in any period up to July 2022. The Air Commodore would work with the Local Authorities and Armed Forces Liaison Officers in taking this forward.
- 4.9 Work to promote the RAF STEM programme would continue in earnest once pandemic requirements allow and schools have the capacity to get involved. In terms of the Air Cadets it was noted that they had continued to operate successfully on a virtual basis over recent months. This had included online guest speakers, for example the current Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Mike Wigston, formerly a Cadet of Number 1557 (Friars School), Bangor Squadron, had recently given a talk on Zoom to all Welsh Air Cadets.
- 4.10 Brigadier Fraser introduced the Naval update, confirming that the First Sea Lord Admiral Tony Radakin had conducted a virtual visit on the 15 March which had involved discussions with Serving personnel in support of Op RESCRIPT, discussions with BAME leaders and a speech to the Cardiff Business Club.
- 4.11 Speaking about HMS Cambria the Brigadier said that work continued to promote the facility in Cardiff Bay. HMS Cambria was now fully operational with an official opening scheduled for September 2021. The Royal Navy investment in ship building was ongoing with HMS Cardiff T26 Frigate currently being built. 7% of Royal Navy/Royal Marines joiners were from Wales whilst in support of Op RESCRIPT it was confirmed that 14 Royal Navy personnel remained deployed in this area. The Royal Navy footprint would not be changing with fighter pilots continuing to train at RAF Valley. Use of the Castle Martin training range continued, a facility that had been used regularly during Ex JOINT WARRIOR.
- 4.12 On the issue of the Integrated Review the Brigadier confirmed that Naval Reservists were embedded in the Defence command paper and following completion of the build of HMS Cardiff it would be used for anti-submarine warfare, air defence and general purpose operations.

- 4.13 Ant Metcalfe asked whether the Swansea Air Show would be held in July 2021. The Air Commodore confirmed that discussions were ongoing with no firm decision made to date.

ITEM 5 – UPDATE FROM THE FAMILIES FEDERATIONS

- 5.1 Jane Williams introduced the update on behalf of the Family Federations informing members that the Navy Family Federations Childcare report 2021 had recently been published. Childcare provisions had been identified as a key consideration for families in Wales, an important aspect of retention as raised in previous Family Federation surveys. One of the issues raised in terms of childcare support was the impact it has on employment opportunities and the quality of family life. Another consideration was its cost and availability as families needed to access appropriate support. Jane confirmed that work was underway to explore barriers for support.
- 5.2 The Integrated Review also recognised the importance of childcare, highlighting the need for continued investment for support in this area. The current Ministry of Defence pilot childcare scheme was welcomed and it was noted that the pilot will inform future spend on childcare. Jane welcomed the opportunity to work with the Welsh Government and partners in Wales on the future provision for childcare in Wales.
- 5.3 Emma Perrin provided an update on behalf of the Army Family Federations, informing the group of their new Chief Executive, Collette Musgrave. Speaking about Forces Families Jobs Emma said that over 4,000 job seekers had now registered, 53 training providers and 760 employers. To date 96 live jobs were based in Wales. It was noted that the North Wales Fire and Rescue had recently registered on the site.
- 5.4 Lisa Thipthorp spoke on behalf of the RAF Family Federation, welcoming the close collaboration that had been developed as part of the ongoing work concerning the Armed Forces Bill. Lisa confirmed that the FIMT research conference had also explored childcare needs and that the overseas content of the RAF Family Federations website had recently been launched.
- 5.5 The Deputy Minister confirmed the issue of childcare had been raised at the Armed Forces Bill Select Committee, noting that Ministry of Defence officials would be meeting with Welsh Government childcare policy officials in April 2021 to discuss further.
- 5.6 Brigadier Fraser wished to place on record his thanks to all the Family Federations for their ongoing support on issues facing the families of Serving personnel. He also welcomed the work of the AFLOs and their support towards dispersed families.
- 5.7 Noting the issue raised concerning Council tax and social housing tenancy Rachel offered to explore further and meet with the Family Federations to discuss.

ITEM 6 – STOMP PHASE 2

- 6.1 Louise Forman confirmed that the STOMP project phase 2 would conclude on the 31 March. In addition to Covenant awareness raising sessions to all criminal justice agencies Louise confirmed that a suite of promotional materials aimed at police custody through to courts, prison and probation had been developed. To date 270 direct and 105 indirect beneficiaries had been in receipt of support from STOMP phase 2. It was explained that a joint paper had been produced addressing the project evaluation recommendations. The recommendations would be taken forward by the Integrated Offender Manager Cymru partnership as part of their 'business as usual' work. Future engagement would include the ongoing role of the Single Point of Contacts in all prisons and a criminal justice resettlement information pack in collaboration with the AFLOs, Veterans NHS Wales and drug and alcohol services.

AGENDA ITEM 7 – COBSEO MEMBERS SURVEY RESULTS

- 7.1 Roy Brown provided an update on the COBSEO Members' surveys to gauge the impact of Covid. The first survey had been carried out at the start of the pandemic, and was repeated in October 2020, receiving responses from 121 respondents – 77% from Full Members, and 21% from Associate Members. Roy summarised the key headlines, which included a rise in demand for mental health support, up by 74%; loneliness and social isolation support (up 70%); poverty and financial support (up 55%); and an increase of 22% in those seeking drug and alcohol support. 72% of Cobseo members reported a decrease in monthly income (e.g. from fundraising events, public donations, and trading income); whilst 9% reported an increase in income, and 19% saw no change. The UK Government's 'Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme' had been welcomed, as had specific measures to support the Charity Sector; however, the estimated loss of income across the Service Charity Sector in the past year was assessed to be £250M. It was also anticipated that the impact on services to beneficiaries would be felt in late-2020, and into 2021; and there was growing evidence of this.
- 7.2 Whilst an inevitable reduction in the delivery of services was highlighted by 25% of Cobseo members, Roy explained that innovative measures, and new ways of working, had been adopted to mitigate the effect, including utilisation of IT and digital applications, and increased emphasis on collaboration. Notwithstanding these measures, members were exhausting their reserves, and 19% expect to merge, or close their doors, within the next year.
- 7.3 Roy explained that the data presented would provide a firm base for future targeted support requests. The next survey was scheduled for April 2021.

- 7.4 Ant highlighted that the current situation had meant that charities had to adapt current ways of working and this would likely see a long term change in the delivery of future support.

AGENDA ITEM 8 – WELSH GOVERNMENT ARMED FORCES SCOPING EXERCISE AND FUTURE PRIORITIES

- 8.1 Introducing the update on behalf of the Welsh Government the Deputy Minister advised members that the recent UK Government announcement on appointing a Veterans' Commissioner for Wales was something that the Welsh Government was unsighted on. A meeting with Johnny Mercer MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence, People and Veterans had enabled the Deputy Minister to convey disappointment on the lack of consultation. Going forwards Welsh Government will work with the UK Government to ensure the new Commissioner works effectively with existing arrangements in Wales.
- 8.2 Jan Jones highlighted Welsh Government's support for all those transitioning out from the Services. Working in collaboration with 160 (Welsh) Brigade, Career Transition Partnerships and Defence Transition Services Jan advised that Welsh Government was developing a Wales Resettlement Guide. This would be published prior to summer recess. It was also noted that Welsh Government had joined the early adopter phase of the UK Government's 'Great Place to Work for Veterans' initiative whereby veterans who meet the minimum criteria for a job role will progress to the next stage of selection. Jan also updated members on the future plans for Armed Forces Day. Virtual events would take place this year with Wrexham hosting the 2022 event.
- 8.3 Cerys Gage advised members that work was underway to develop the 2020 Welsh Government Armed Forces Annual Report. Scheduled to be published prior to summer recess members were invited to submit case studies and new initiatives for inclusion in the report. Cerys also said that it was uncertain as to whether delivery of the conference in the Autumn would be virtual or face to face. Members would be kept updated.
- 8.4 Speaking about the Veterans Scoping Exercise progress update Peter Evans thanked all those who had taken the time to help progress a number of initiatives identified in the update. Examples of progress included Welsh Government participation in the veterans' railcard scheme and ongoing discussions to deliver an employment event aimed at Service leavers and veterans in Wales.
- 8.5 Ant asked for an update on PLASC. Jacqui Sharples confirmed that data collation would be subject to changes in regulations and at present Covid and Brexit meant that there was no slot in the legislation programme for taking this forward. Once legislation pressures ease this would hopefully progress.

- 8.6 The Deputy Minister wished to place on record her thanks for the work of the Armed Forces team whose dedication had ensured progress in a number of key areas.

AGENDA ITEM 9 – ARMED FORCES COVENANT LEGISLATION

- 9.1 Smita Mehta provided an update on the Armed Forces Covenant legislation highlighting the continued engagement between the Ministry of Defence and Devolved Administrations. The legislation focused on three key areas – health, education and housing and it was hoped the new legislation would raise awareness of the Covenant in these areas. Smita advised that whilst Government departments weren't included in the legislation local Government would be. Smita advised that the legislation was currently being considered by the Select Committee and following this would be the report stage and Royal Assent expected in the Autumn following completion of the legislation process in both the Houses.
- 9.2 George Tomlinson confirmed that guidance on the new legislation would be developed in collaboration with the Devolved Administrations. This would involve engagement with the WLGA, Local Authorities and the Armed Forces Liaison Officers. Thanking Smita and George for the update the Deputy Minister affirmed the interest in the guidance by the Select Committee.
- 9.3 Roy Brown noted that COBSEO and sector stakeholders were working with the Ministry of Defence to improve the Bill and support the development of the accompanying Statutory Guidance. He further advised that COBSEO would monitor implementation of the Bill and would utilise fora such as the Covenant Reference Group and Annual Report to hold the UK Government to account.

AGENDA ITEM 10 – ARMED FORCES LIAISON OFFICERS (AFLOs) – KEY ISSUES RAISED

- 10.1 Rachel Morgan presented an update on the work of the AFLOs, noting their varied progress which included the delivery of training on the Armed Forces Covenant and signposting support. Rachel welcomed the announcement by the Welsh Government on the funding for the AFLOs, enabling the continuation of their roles.

AGENDA ITEM 11 – REGIONAL SCHOOLS LIAISON OFFICERS

- 11.1 Millie Taylor attended as a guest member to update the group on the work of SSCE Cymru. Millie confirmed that a MODLAP meeting had recently been held which has provided an opportunity to discuss the Andrew Selous report 'Living in Our Shoes' and reinforce the commitment in Wales to progress the recommendations concerning Service children.

- 11.2 Millie also spoke about the appointment of the Regional Schools Liaison Officers (RSLOs) - a joint initiative between 160 (Welsh) Brigade and the WLGA. The role of the RSLOs was to support schools to understand the needs of Service children and embed activities to suit. Whilst the post covering the South Wales region will shortly be made vacant Millie confirmed that work was underway to recruit a replacement.
- 11.3 Data collation activity was underway between the RSLOs and each Local Authority, providing a snapshot of activity of Service children across Wales. RSLOs would also take on a case management function to put in place interventions for service children working with partners.
- 11.4 April celebrates the month of the military child and a range of resources had been developed to highlight Service children. This included a CPD package which once launched would be delivered by each RSLO through 60 sessions.
- 11.5 Millie also confirmed the availability of a small pot of funding that could be used to put interventions in place to help overcome barriers facing Service children. The funding will be monitored by the RSLOs, in addition to progress and impact.
- 11.6 Funding has once again been provided by the Welsh Government towards supporting Service children across Wales. Adopting a different approach on this occasion each Local Authority was awarded a sum of money, the amount of which was dependant on the outcome of the data collation activity.
- 11.7 Colonel Sion Walker asked whether we are able to capture information on the Armed Forces community. Work was ongoing to collect data.

AGENDA ITEM 12 – ANY OTHER BUSINESS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 12.1 Members of the Expert Group thanked Jane Williams and Colonel Nick Beard for their contribution to the group. Both members were attending their final meeting. Colonel Nick Beard advised members that his successor would be Colonel Dominic Morgan.
- 12.2 Bringing the meeting to a close the Deputy Minister thanked members for their support, confirming that it had been a privilege to lead on the Armed Forces portfolio. A date for the next meeting would be confirmed in due course, following the May Senedd elections.