

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

## MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 15 SEPTEMBER 2021

### Members

Hannah Blythyn MS	Deputy Minister for Social Partnership
Colonel Sion Walker	160 (Welsh) Brigade
Air Commodore Adrian Williams	RAF
Brigadier Fraser	Royal Navy
Emma Perrin	Army Families Federation
Vicky Brindley	Naval Families Federation
Ant Metcalfe	Royal British Legion
Colonel Dominic Morgan	Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (RFCA)
Rachel Morgan	WLGA
Lisa McKenna	Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service in Wales
Charlotte Fiander	COBSEO
Steve Boswell	SSAFA
Julian North	Help for Heroes
Helen Neve	Help for Heroes
Smita Mehta	Ministry of Defence
Bev Garside	Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee
Peter Davis	Ministry of Defence
Paul Morris	Welsh Government Police Liaison Unit
Sarah Mallaghan	DWP
Meri Mayhew	Meri Mayhew consulting
Phil Swann	Shared Intelligence
Anna Bird	Hywel Dda UHB
Jan Jones	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Cerys Gage	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Karin Phillips	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Huw Charles	Welsh Government – Housing

### Apologies

Cllr Maureen Webber	WLGA
Brigadier Andrew Dawes	160 (Welsh) Brigade
Wendy Quinn	Naval Families Federation
Lisa Thipthorp	RAF Families Federation
Neil Kitchiner	Veterans NHS Wales
Louise Forman	Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service in Wales
Roy Brown	COBSEO
Beverley Lovatt	DWP
Sian Jones	Welsh Government Education
Amelia John	Welsh Government Housing
Vanessa Plumley	RAF Families Federation
Dawn North	HIVE
Emma Williams	Welsh Government Housing
Jonathan Price	Veterans Welfare Service

## **ITEM 1 – WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS, MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING 24 MARCH 2021**

- 1.1 The Deputy Minister welcomed all members to the Armed Forces Expert Group, which was once again being held virtually. The Deputy Minister wished to place on record her thanks to all members who had provided much needed assistance following the situation in Afghanistan.
- 1.2 The Deputy Minister welcomed her reappointment as the Minister with portfolio responsibility for Armed Forces veterans.
- 1.3 The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true record.

## **ITEM 2 – PROGRESS REPORT ON ACTIONS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

- 2.1 The Deputy Minister noted that there was one action from the last meeting and that this had been completed. No other issues were raised.

## **ITEM 3 – UPDATE FROM THE TRI SERVICES**

- 3.1 The Deputy Minister thanked the Tri-services for submitting their written updates in advance of the meeting, noting that this would allow an opportunity for members to read the reports and raise any issues at the meeting.
- 3.2 Air Commodore Adrian Williams briefly mentioned the Battle of Britain event being held in Cardiff City Hall on the 16 September. The event would include a Red Arrows flypast over Cardiff and an historical exhibition. It was advised that the exhibition would go on tour around Wales; the RAF were working with the Local Authority Armed Forces Champions and Armed Forces Liaison Officers concerning Local Authority plans to host the exhibition.
- 3.3 Colonel Sion Walker welcomed the positive approach in Wales concerning the Afghan relocation programme and confirmed that a number of families had been offered sanctuary in the Urdd centre in Cardiff Bay. The issue of future funding of the Regional Schools Liaison Officers (RSLOs) was raised. Colonel Walker advised that funding for the roles would cease in 2022, and whilst a bid had been submitted for an additional 6-month funding, consideration should be given to funding beyond this time frame. A Working group would be established to consider how Local Authorities could continue with the work put in place by the RSLOs. Jan Jones agreed to be a member of the Working Group.

- 3.4 Brigadier Fraser confirmed that HMS Cambria was now operational. A formal launch to open the Royal Naval Reserve unit would take place on the 2 October 2021. Going forward the unit would host the ERS Gold Awards. Brigadier Fraser welcomed the suggestion for a future meeting of the Armed Forces Expert Group to be held at HMS Cambria. It was noted that the Royal Navy were delivering virtual ship visits as a means of visiting deployed fleets and to increase understanding of Service in the Armed Forces.

#### **ITEM 4 – UPDATE FROM THE RESERVE FORCES AND CADETS ASSOCIATION (RFCA)**

- 4.1 The Deputy Minister welcomed Colonel Dominic Morgan to his first meeting of the Armed Forces Expert Group, congratulating him on his appointment. The excellent working relationship with the RFCA was noted.
- 4.2 Colonel Morgan advised that he had responsibility for the RFCA infrastructure, such as HMS Cambria and Raglan Barracks, Newport. His role also involved providing support for the 2,000 Reservists and 6,500 cadets and adult volunteers. Colonel Morgan confirmed that the cadets were now increasing their face to face activities. It was noted that this year's ERS awards would include 10 companies in Wales receiving the ERS Gold award with 24 receiving silver. The total number of companies in Wales in receipt of ERS awards now stands at 36 awarded Gold, 64 Silver and 165 Bronze. 323 organisations in Wales were now signatories of the Armed Forces Covenant.

#### **ITEM 5 – VETERANS GATEWAY**

- 5.1 Ant Metcalfe introduced the Veterans Gateway update, noting apologies on behalf of Callee Andrew.
- 5.2 Ant provided a brief outline of the purpose of the Veterans Gateway, a single point of contact for veterans seeking support and advice that had been established following the 2014 Veterans' Transition Review. Available worldwide and 24 hours a day, seven days a week the Gateway enables veteran transferrals to the most appropriate support organisation. 30 service referral partners were currently on board, including military charities and public sector organisations.
- 5.3 Ant explained that the Veterans Gateway, whose contact centre Connect Assist is based in Nantgarw, specifically ask that its staff to have a direct connection to the Armed Forces so that they understand issues facing those leaving the Services. Referrals can be made either through letter, text or various user friendly digital platforms. Work was underway to review the referral process as a means of broadening organisations offering support. Ant asked all members, whose organisations were signed up as referral partners, to quality assure the information presented on the site for reasons of accuracy.
- 5.4 Ant presented the Wales impact data, highlighting that Covid-19 had impacted on the figures included. Whilst housing and mental health were on a par with UK wide statistics, finance was once again the highest area of need with 43%

of incidents, as opposed to 30% UK wide. It was noted that the recent furlough scheme would have affected numbers reported. Ant confirmed that the finance figures corresponded with the level of views and downloads of the Veterans Gateway Finance Self Help Guides. It was confirmed that finance covered a wide remit, for example pensions and debt issues.

- 5.5 In terms of website engagement Cardiff presented with the highest levels of online sessions with hot spots identified in a number of areas including the North Wales coast, M4 corridor and a few occurrences in mid Wales.
- 5.6 Members agreed to help raise awareness of the Veterans Gateway and support potential campaigns. Ant also suggested that visits to the Veterans Gateway contact centre would be welcomed as a means of helping to publicise its service. Bev Garside extended an invitation to Ant to speak about the work of the Veterans Gateway at a future meeting of the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee (VAPC).

**Action: Bev Garside to invite Ant Metcalfe to a future meeting of the VAPC to present on the Veterans Gateway.**

## **AGENDA ITEM 6 – ARMED FORCES FAMILY STRATEGY**

- 6.1 Peter Davis introduced the Ministry of Defence's Family Strategy and action plan and advised members that the Strategy would be published towards the end of October. Prior to publication a final draft would be submitted for Ministerial agreement. As part of the Strategy an action plan had been developed and would include collaboration from varied delivery partners. Peter informed members that to date positive engagement to the action plan had been received.
- 6.2 The Deputy Minister welcomed the Strategy and supporting action plan, and noted that the Welsh Government would continue to provide input into the work as it progressed.

## **AGENDA ITEM 7 – VETERANS ADVISORY PENSIONS COMMITTEE**

- 7.1 Bev Garside spoke about the work of the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee (VAPC), of which her role was as Chair. Bev advised that the remit of the VAPC included raising awareness of veteran support services as opposed to service delivery. Working with limited resources the VAPC would act as an advocate to ensure effective delivery of public sector bodies. Bev said that the VAPC was in an unusual position in that it was a UK Government Ministerial appointment operating within the devolved administrations. The VAPC was also in place to raise awareness of war pensions.
- 7.2 There would be 20 members across Wales with each member appointed for a period of three years. Bev highlighted the importance of specialist members, for

example the AFLOs, many of whom were co-opted on the various VAPC Veterans Strategy sub-groups.

- 7.3 Monthly meetings would be held between the Chair and the regional chairs with a view to promoting the work underway in Wales to highlight how it contributes to the UK wide Veterans Strategy.
- 7.4 Bev explained that the VAPC hadn't been established to duplicate work that was already ongoing in Wales, but to contribute to data collation ensuring it is up to date and improve delivery of services for veterans in Wales.
- 7.5 VAPC engagement to date had been comprehensive with meetings held with the tri-services, RFCA, Veterans NHS Wales, the Welsh Government and other key partners.

## **AGENDA ITEM 8 – WELSH GOVERNMENT UPDATE**

- 8.1 Introducing the Welsh Government update the Deputy Minister mentioned the recent publication of the third Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, which highlighted progress to date, much of it in collaboration with key partners. The launch of the Welsh Government Wales Resettlement Guide for Serving Personnel and their families settling in Wales was also noted. Members were asked to continue to share the documents wider amongst key networks.
- 8.2 Jan Jones provided members with an update on the latest position concerning the UK Government appointment of a Veterans Commissioner for Wales. Jan explained that discussions were ongoing with the Office for Veterans Affairs and that Welsh Government involvement would be essential to ensure the role worked effectively with existing structures in Wales. To date there was no clear timeframe for appointment.
- 8.3 Colonel Walker advised that Welsh members on the Commissioner panel would be essential, recommending Brigadier Dawes from the Army perspective.
- 8.4 Cerys Gage provided members with an overview of the AFLO update. KPIs had been agreed as a means of monitoring delivery and these helped form the basis of the updated reports. Cerys highlighted the key activities included in the reports demonstrated the varied roles of the AFLOs and also their engagement with many key partners.
- 8.5 The AFLOs had raised a number of issues. Examples included the lack of veteran-aware GP scheme in Wales and the need for more engagement on the Covenant legislation. On the former issue Cerys explained that work to introduce a veteran-aware GP scheme in Wales was underway; lead by Welsh Government health policy colleagues. On the Covenant legislation it was confirmed that a meeting had been held with the Ministry of Defence earlier that week and that consultation events would shortly be arranged to seek feedback on the second version of the Covenant legislation guidance. It was noted that the issues raised would be progressed in collaboration with partners and an update provided at the next meeting.

- 8.6 Speaking about the Veterans Scoping Exercise update Cerys advised members that notable progress had been made to date; further detail on the progress had been included in the third Armed Forces Annual Report. Now in the second year since the work was commenced it was time to develop an updated action plan to drive forward the remaining recommendations. This would be done in collaboration with the Armed Forces Expert Group, members of the Scoping Exercise Action Groups and other key partners. The Armed Forces team would keep members informed of progress.

## **AGENDA ITEM 9 – ARMED FORCES COVENANT LEGISLATION**

- 9.1 Smita Mehta attended on behalf of the Ministry of Defence Covenant team to provide the latest position on the Armed Forces Covenant legislation. The Bill had received clearance from the House of Commons prior to summer recess and had its second reading in the House of Lords on the 7 September. Further scrutiny would take place at committee level. The second version of the guidance would be ready in October, the consultation of which would include both face to face and virtual workshops.

## **AGENDA ITEM 10 – POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER ENGAGEMENT**

- 10.1 Paul Morris presented an update on Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) engagement. Paul advised that the PCCs were supportive of the Armed Forces Covenant and that all areas had signed the Covenant. Paul suggested a meeting to be arranged with the four strategic custody leads and the Armed Forces team to ensure a consistent approach in the identification of ex-Serving personnel in the criminal justice system.
- 10.2 Lisa McKenna said that a number of the police forces operate different IT systems and that having one single IT system would incur a substantial cost. Lisa and Paul agreed to further discuss the identification of ex-Serving personnel at point of custody.

**Action: A meeting to be held between Paul Morris and the Armed Forces Team Welsh Government to discuss the identification of Serving personnel at point of custody.**

## **AGENDA ITEM 11 – OUR COMMUNITY, OUR COVENANT UPDATE**

- 11.1 Meri Mayhew spoke about the Our Community, Our Covenant document and advised members that she was part of the Shared Intelligence and RAND consortium that had been commissioned to undertake research ahead of the development of the third edition of the report. This edition would focus on the delivery and impact of the Covenant. Meri was interested to hear the members' views about the delivery of the Covenant in Wales and its impact.
- 11.2 Bev reinforced the importance of promoting the Covenant and said that she was keen to see greater involvement from non-military charities.

- 11.3 Colonel Walker highlighted that the Covenant was very much a two-way process involving sign up and also an understanding of the benefits that could be gained.
- 11.4 Ant said that the AFLOs and RSLOs were key in supporting the Armed Forces community; since their appointments they had become valuable single points of contact for partner organisations and had raised awareness of issues facing the Armed Forces community. Another example was the Wales Charities Group that enabled the sector to engage widely and successfully given its diverse membership. The Royal British Legion report following the 10-year introduction of the Armed Forces Covenant would feature these as good practice examples.
- 11.5 Brigadier Fraser reinforced the importance of the AFLOs to the Naval communities and urged continued funding of the posts. With the Naval families often dispersed across Wales the AFLOs had the ability to understand the needs and circumstances of these families.
- 11.6 Emma Perrin highlighted that the close connections in Wales meant that there was always someone to reach out to for support. As an example Emma spoke about an occurrence whereby two families had struggled with dentistry provision. Support from Powys and Cardiff LHB's helped ensure dental provision was secured.
- 11.5 Meri questioned whether any evaluation had been undertaken of the AFLOs and Jan confirmed that early discussions with the Forces in Mind Trust were underway with a view to carrying out such an evaluation.

## **AGENDA ITEM 12 – FAMILY FEDERATIONS**

- 12.1 Providing an update on behalf of the Army Families Federation Emma Perrin highlighted the housing issue facing families. A lack of families' accommodation meant that families would be offered substitute service family accommodation provided through the rental market. However, at present there was a shortfall in properties due to private tenant demand and use of properties for holiday lets. It was advised that the Ministry of Defence was aware of the issue and looking into it.
- 12.2 Vanessa Plumley had sent her apologies and Emma provided the RAF update. Emma spoke briefly about the issue with higher education funding. The location of where the Serving personnel joined the military was linked to which of the four nations their dependants could access funding from for higher education. Jan confirmed that the Ministry of Defence had signalled its wish to re-convene discussions on the current policy for higher education funding across all four nations.
- 12.3 Vicky Brindley introduced the Royal Navy update. The closing date for families to apply for the Headspace App project had passed, however following an extension to the deadline additional families were being asked to apply by the end of November 2021. Vicky spoke about the continued

success of Forces Families Jobs. To date there were 12,088 live vacancies on the site, 388 of which were in Wales.

### **AGENDA ITEM 13 – ANY OTHER BUSINESS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 13.1 An information sheet from Help for Heroes had been circulated to all members. Helen Neve provided a brief summary of the work of Help for Heroes and their support to improve the quality of life for wounded, injured and sick veterans. The service was provided through weekly drop ins and community outreach. It was noted that the charity had recently expanded its provision for mental health through its Hidden Wounds service, offering free and confidential psychological wellbeing advice and support. The charity had experienced an increase in demand for support following the situation in Afghanistan; a dedicated team was now in place to support Afghan families.
- 13.2 Ant provided members with a reminder of the upcoming Remembrance dates which included the opening of the Field of Remembrance, Cardiff Castle, 3 November, the Festival of Remembrance, St David's Hall, 6 November, Cardiff City Poppy Day, 9 November and Remembrance Sunday, 14 November.
- 13.3 Jan advised members that the Welsh Government annual Armed Forces Conference would be held virtually on the 20 October.
- 13.4 In bringing the meeting to a close the Deputy Minister thanked the members for their attendance and positive contributions. The next meeting would be held on the 9 March 2022.