

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

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 23 MARCH 2023, CONFERENCE ROOM, D TŶ HYWEL

Attendees

Hannah Blythyn MS	Deputy Minister for Social Partnership
Brigadier Jock Fraser (JF)	Senior Naval Officer Wales
Brigadier Nick Thomas (NT)	Commander 160 th (Welsh) Brigade
Air Commodore Adrian Williams (AW)	Air Officer Wales
James Phillips (JW)	Veterans Commissioner for Wales
Ant Metcalfe (AM)	Royal British Legion (RBL)
Adrian Leslie (AL)	Royal British Legion (RBL)
Councillor Lis Burnett (LB)	Welsh Local Govt Association (WLGA)
Rachel Morgan (RM)	Welsh Local Govt Association (WLGA)
Fiona Jenkins (FJ)	NHS Wales
Shabina Aqil (SA)	Ministry of Justice (MoJ)
Vanessa Plumley (VP)	RAF Families Federation (RAF-FF)
Dominic Morgan (DM)	Reserve Forces & Cadets Association (RFCA)
John Shivas (JS)	Ministry of Defence (MoD)
Julian North (JN)	Help for Heroes (HfH)
Welsh Government	
Liz Lalley (LL)	Director, Risk Resilience & Community Safety
Karin Phillips (KP)	Deputy Director, Community Safety Division
Peter Kellam (PK)	Head of Armed Forces Branch
Peter Evans (PE)	Armed Forces Branch
Robert Wilson (RW)	Armed Forces Branch
Karen Faulkner (KF)	Education, Social Justice and Welsh Language
Richard Hockey (RH)	Mental Health & Vulnerable Groups

Apologies

Darren Millar MS	Chair, Senedd Cross Party Group Armed Forces and Cadets
Jonathan Price	Veterans Welfare Service, Ministry of Defence

Item 1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 The Deputy Minister welcomed those attending to the second hybrid meeting of the AFEG.

1.2. The Deputy Minister welcomed NT to his first meeting of the Group and put on record her thanks to his predecessor, Brigadier Andrew Dawes, for his contribution to the Group and the Armed Forces community in Wales as Commander 160th (Welsh) Brigade.

Item 2. Group Terms of Reference

2.1. PK outlined proposals for changes to the Terms of Reference of the Group having invited Members to submit suggestions ahead of the meeting.

2.2. The key changes agreed by the Group were:

- That the Veterans Commissioner and the Chair of the Cross Party Group should attend as Observers, but contributing fully to discussions. The purpose of this would be to afford a degree of distance from Group decisions in recognition of their role in scrutinising Government.
- That a readout of the meeting be provided to regional Armed Forces fora / groups of the meeting to aid the flow of information ahead of the formal agreement and publication of meeting minutes.
- That BLESMA should be added to the Group membership.

2.3. The Group discussed the content of the meetings. The importance of maintaining a focus on the Armed Forces Covenant and on the needs of the breadth of the Armed Forces Community, Service People, Veterans and their families was agreed. It was also agreed that, whilst not the key focus of the meeting, updates from the Armed Forces on key events and engagement activities was helpful information and should be maintained.

2.4. The Group also agreed to the recommendation that a forward work plan of ‘deep dives’ on Covenant related themes should be developed for future meetings.

Actions	Responsible	Due
1. Share readout from AFEG with regional fora, AFLOs and LHB Champions network	Armed Forces Team	Within a week of the meeting
2. Develop forward work plan of ‘Deep Dives’	Armed Forces Team	By next meeting

Item 3. Actions from the Last Meeting

3.1. The Actions from the last meeting were agreed as complete / closed.

Item 4. Covenant delivery

4.1. PE delivered an update on Covenant delivery, including progress on the Veterans Scoping Exercise and the UK Strategy for Our Veterans. Progress against the priorities outlined by the Group in the Welsh Government Annual Report was identified.

4.2. The Group noted the progress made and raised a number of issues in discussion:

- The importance of considering not just Service People but Service Families in policy development.
- An increasing number of Service Personnel were accessing cost of living support (see later agenda item).
- In response to a query on whether training modules on the Duty of Due Regard would be mandatory for staff across public bodies it was confirmed this would be a decision for individual organisations but that the Armed Forces Liaison Officers had a key role in promoting and encouraging participation.
- The importance of sharing progress and developments in Wales, to capture and recognise good work, across the various sector groups including regional Armed Forces fora, as well as the need for ongoing collaboration at all levels including AFEG, Armed Forces forums, WLGA Champions' Forum, Wales Charity Group and the Senedd Cross Party Group.
- The Commissioner identified that he was seeking to ensure that the new contract being developed for Career Transition Services set clear expectations about delivery of services in Wales for Service People hoping to settle in Wales. Welsh Government officials meet regularly with MOD regarding transition support and this would continue.
- The recommendation for 'deep dives' from the Terms of Reference discussion was re-visited with suggestions for initial topics being proposed. These included Criminal Justice, Cost of Living, Health (orthopaedics, mental health, Veterans Trauma Network) and Housing / Homelessness.

Item 5. Tri Services Updates

5.1. The Deputy Minister welcomed NT to his first Expert Group meeting as Commander of 160th (Welsh) Brigade.

Army.

5.2. NT thanked the Minister and identified the value of the group in representing the Armed Forces community as a whole. He had been in post since February 2023 and in that time had overseen planning and delivery of Military Aid to the Civil Authorities in relation to Industrial Action. The Army had also recently been working alongside Welsh Government and other organisations on the civil contingencies exercise EX MIGHTY OAK. The Brigade Commander identified how the impacts of the rising cost of living is being seen across Army personnel and their families. He provided examples of the support being delivered within units. This included providing grocery vouchers to those in need, use of Regimental Association funds to provide hardship grants, and the co-ordination of family activities and shared car schemes to try and reduce costs.

5.3. NT raised two particular concerns that Welsh Government might look into and report back on:

- access to childcare
- access to NHS dentistry services

5.4. NT also identified the new Curriculum for Wales as an area that families needed to understand in relation to potential postings to and from Wales.

Royal Air Force

5.5. AW outlined ongoing engagement taking place around the aerospace sector. Cost of living support is being promoted and the Air Commodore echoed issues raised by NT regarding impact on service families. Dentistry issues on Anglesey previously raised regarding RAF Valley were resolved via work with the Local health board. It was important that waiting list time accrued when serving in one location be carried across to the next location on posting (the issue is included Welsh Health Circular advice).

5.6. The scaling down of RAF St Athan will see a significant reduction in RAF personnel in Wales.

5.7. As Welsh Language champion for the RAF, AW is working in MOD on consideration of a Welsh language veterans' badge.

Royal Navy / Royal Marines

5.8. JF provided a Royal Navy/Royal Marines update. He was supportive of previous comments regarding cost of living and highlighted the dispersed nature of Royal Navy families in Wales who number approximately 1400. He identified AFLOs as remaining vital to that network as a first point of contact / link to local services for that community. He also identified travel and housing costs present a key challenge as many Naval personnel make significant commutes between work and home.

5.9. Covenant signings continue with employers, promoting awareness of the Covenant and Service Personnel across Wales. HMS CAMBRIA will be granted the Freedom of the City of Cardiff on Saturday 25 March.

5.10. The Group noted the update and the following actions were identified.

Actions	Responsible	Due
3. Officials to raise access to childcare policy team in Welsh Government and share final response / conclusions with Group when available.	Armed Forces Team, Education Officials	By end April
4. Concerns over access to dentists with the Dentistry policy team in Welsh Government and share final response / conclusions with Group when available.	Armed Forces Team	By end April
5. Arrange between 160 Brigade and Welsh Government Curriculum Policy officials so that Service People needs can be better understood / catered for.	Armed Forces Team	By end April
6. Armed Forces team to share Welsh Government Cost of Living communications via AFLOs and other points of contact into the Armed Forces Community.	Armed Forces Team	As and when new information is published

Item 6. Update on Armed Forces Liaison Officers (AFLOs)

6.1. The Deputy Minister introduced the paper and was pleased to note continued Welsh Government funding for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 Financial Years. The Deputy Minister outlined the importance of ensuring the roles are evaluated within this period.

6.2. The AFLO Key Performance Indicator (KPI) report had been circulated.. PE outlined the AFLO reporting process. It was also noted that one of the AFLO roles was to identify gaps/barriers in local delivery to be considered at the Expert Group and by the Armed Forces team. Examples from the previous meeting included gaps in geographical location of hubs/drop ins and AFLOs have actively sought to work with partners to fill such gaps for example with new hubs in Caerphilly and Ceredigion (Aberystwyth).

6.3. The Group noted the update.

6.4. The Commissioner, MOD, the Armed Forces and RBL identified the AFLOs as a vital resource.

Item 7. Cost of Living Discussion

7.1. PK, supported by AM, briefed the Group on a cost of living discussion which they had held with members of the All Wales Charity Group on 15 March. The discussion had been informed by a questionnaire to members of the All Wales Charity group. The briefing focused on how 3rd Sector organisations in particular were being affected by increased costs and also increased demand for services.

7.2. AM briefed the Group on how the RBL has delivered cost of living grants to 264 families in Wales, with support totalling £225,000 to date. JN stated that H4H have seen a 440% increase in grants distribution this year.

7.3. The demographic accessing support was identified as changing from the traditional, more elderly, RBL client group to more working age families with increasing numbers of Serving Personnel requesting help. It was noted that the crisis is having an impact on not only beneficiaries but staff and volunteers within service charities/providers.

7.4. The availability of Veterans’ support hubs across Wales was cited as a strength, as was the inter-connected nature of the 3rd sector in Wales.

7.5. AL highlighted the need to ensure communications around help and support available included how to reach marginalised members of the Armed Forces Community, in particular recognising that for some there needed to be alternatives to digital communications.

7.6. The Deputy Minister noted that this would be AM’s last meeting and thanked him for his contributions to the Group.

Item 8. AOB

8.1. FJ noted she was happy to remain the NHS rep on the group but suggested rotating representation or additional representation from other areas / parts of the NHS may be worthwhile. She also recommended that the link between LHB Champions forum and AFEG be strengthened and that Champions receiving the readout of the meeting would help.

Action Item	Responsible	Due
7. WG health colleagues to distribute AFEG note to LHB Champions network.	Health Rep	By end April

List of Actions

Action Item	Responsible	Due
1. Share readout from AFEG with regional fora, AFLOs and LHB Champions network	Armed Forces Team	31 March
2. Develop forward work plan of 'Deep Dives'	Armed Forces Team	By next meeting
3. Officials to raise with childcare policy team within Welsh Government and share final response / conclusions with Group when available.	Armed Forces Team, Education Officials	By end April
4. Raise dental access with the Dentistry policy team within Welsh Government and share final response / conclusions with Group when available.	Armed Forces Team	By end April
5. Set up meeting between 160 Brigade and Curriculum Policy officials so that Service People needs can be better understood / catered for.	Armed Forces Team	By end April
6. Armed Forces team to promote Welsh Government Cost of Living support via AFLOs and other points of contact into the Armed Forces Community.	Armed Forces Team	As and when new information is published
7. WG health colleagues to distribute AFEG note to LHB Champions network.	Health Rep	By end April