

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

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 9 MARCH 2022

Members

Hannah Blythyn MS	Deputy Minister for Social Partnership
Lt Col Kevan Thornber	160 (Welsh) Brigade
Air Commodore Adrian Williams	RAF
Brigadier Fraser	Royal Navy
Vicky Brindley	Naval Families Federation
Fiona Jenkins	Cardiff and Vale University Health Board
Lisa Rawlings	Armed Forces Liaison Officer
David Evans	Armed Forces Champion (observer)
John Shivas	Ministry of Defence
Ant Metcalfe	Royal British Legion
Roy Brown	COBSEO
Colonel Dominic Morgan	Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (RFCA)
Rachel Morgan	WLGA
Lisa McKenna	Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service in Wales
Steve Boswell	SSAFA
Paul Morris	Welsh Government Police Liaison Unit
Sarah Mallaghan	DWP
Jan Jones	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Cerys Gage	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Peter Evans	Welsh Government – Community Safety
Karin Phillips	Welsh Government – Community Safety

ITEM 1 – WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

- 1.1 The Deputy Minister welcomed all members to the Armed Forces Expert Group, which was once again being held virtually. Despite fewer items on the agenda members' participation was encouraged.
- 1.2 The Deputy Minister wished to highlight the Welsh Government's position on support for the people of Ukraine and noted that £4m in financial and humanitarian aid would be provided to Ukraine.
- 1.3 New members were welcomed, including Armed Forces Liaison Officer Lisa Rawlings who would provide an update on the mental health first aid training during the meeting.

ITEM 2 – MINUTES FROM LAST MEETING AND PROGRESS REPORT ON ACTIONS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS

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

The Deputy Minister noted that the actions from the last meeting had been completed. No other issues were raised.

ITEM 3 – UPDATE FROM THE TRI SERVICES

- 3.1 Brigadier Fraser introduced the update on behalf of the Royal Navy and advised that Defence continued to be engaged operationally. The following week the Brigadier would be meeting with sailors and marines involved in supporting the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust (WAST) as ambulance drivers. It was noted this support was scheduled to finish at the end of March 2022.
- 3.2 The Brigadier advised that Defence was readying itself to provide support as part of the situation in Ukraine. This included NATO's flagship, HMS Prince of Wales, currently heading to Norway to undertake a NATO task force exercise.
- 3.3 St David's Day has long since signalled the start of the engagement calendar for the Armed Forces, with the Brigadier advising that future engagement activity would continue to include a mixture of hybrid and virtual events. The Royal Navy were keen to engage as much as possible, with activities planned through the engagement steering group.
- 3.4 Recognising that younger cohorts may have experienced challenges throughout the pandemic the Brigadier explained that going forward the Royal Navy were keen to focus on the youth agenda.
- 3.5 Air Commodore Williams provided an update on behalf of the RAF in Wales. The RAF were also supporting Ukraine, with RAF typhoon jets having arrived in Estonia in support of NATO operations. The Air Commodore advised that the jets flying from RAF Coningsby were piloted by Serving personnel who had all received training in Wales.
- 3.6 The RAF had also provided support during the pandemic with in excess of 450 RAF personnel deployed in a variety of tasks such as PPE delivery and WAST support.
- 3.7 The Air Commodore informed members of a number of engagement events had recently taken place. This had included a visit by the Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshall Mike Wigston, who along with the Air Force Board had attended the RAF primary school STEM in Wales award presentation. The Air Commodore expressed his thanks to the Deputy Minister, who had jointly presented the award to the competition winner alongside the Chief of the Air Staff.
- 3.8 A Wales space conference had also taken place; attended by 30 companies in support of the sector. Recognising the importance of the space industry the conference provided an opportunity to announce fellowships at MSc level, including artificial intelligence, with the aim of increasing knowledge of the space agenda.

- 3.9 It was noted that the Minister for Social Justice had attended the Air Force Board dinner hosted by the Chief of Air Staff and his Board colleagues; providing a further opportunity to highlight the support of the RAF in Wales. Additional forthcoming events included the platinum jubilee, Armed Forces Day in June, the Falklands 40th anniversary, airshows in Swansea and Rhyl plus an opportunity for Senedd members to visit RAF Valley as part of the Armed Forces Senedd scheme.
- 3.10 The Air Commodore ended his update by informing members of the new Ministry of Defence Welsh Language Scheme, put in place to ensure consistency in service provision in the Welsh language. As part of the scheme the Air Commodore had been appointed as the new Welsh Language Champion, a role he was privileged to undertake.
- 3.11 Lt Colonel Kevan Thornber introduced the update on behalf of the Army in Wales. Speaking about the Integrated Review members were informed that the barracks in Brecon would remain and that a new barracks in Caerwent would be developed. The barracks in Caerwent would be home to the Queens Dragoon Guards and the 1 Rifles. The Army footprint in Hightown Barracks, Wrexham, would be expanded to a new Army Reserve company. Whilst there would be a loss to the West Wales region with the scheduled 2028 re-location of the 14th Signal Regiment, Cawdor barracks, Lt Col Thornber reassured members that engagement with West Wales would continue.
- 3.12 Speaking about the pandemic, Lt Col Thornber highlighted that it was two years since the Joint Military Command (JMC) had been activated as part of Op Rescript – the longest ever duration of a JMC. Support from the JMC would be drawn down at the end of March 2022.

ITEM 4 – ARMED FORCES ACT

- 4.1 The Deputy Minister advised that development of Armed Forces Act statutory guidance was now underway, reinforcing that engagement in the guidance content was vital to help ensure it reflected the devolved services in Wales. Introducing the item John Shivas explained that whilst the new Covenant duty had not yet been stood up in law, Royal Assent of the Armed Forces Act had been given in December 2021. Following engagement with key partners in Wales the guidance included several Welsh examples. Work was now underway on the definition of relevant family members and this would be explored further through consultation. John confirmed the guidance would shortly be sent for approval to UK Government Ministers, after which Welsh Government Ministers approval would be sought. By the end of 2022 it was hoped to lay the final guidance before Parliament for final agreement.
- 4.2 Peter Evans said that he was pleased that the Senedd had been given the opportunity to scrutinise the Armed Forces Act. Welcoming the statutory guidance workshops that had taken place it was noted that members of the Expert Group had contributed their feedback on the draft guidance.
- 4.3 Roy Brown highlighted that the charity sector was supportive of extending the scope of the Act and would continue to monitor its progress.

- 4.4 Ant Metcalfe emphasised that awareness raising was key to fully understand the meaning of the legislation and asked about plans for a Government awareness raising scheme. John confirmed that work was underway between the Ministry of Defence and wider Government on such a campaign.

ITEM 5 – VETERANS’ COMMISSIONER FOR WALES

- 5.1 Cerys Gage introduced the item on the Veteran’s Commissioner for Wales. The UK Government had announced that Colonel James Phillips had been appointed to the role. It was noted that once in post the appointment would add value to the established wealth of support and services delivered for veterans in Wales. It was reinforced that the post was UK Government led and welcomed by the Welsh Government. Arrangements were underway for an introductory meeting between the Deputy Minister for Social Partnership and Colonel Phillips.
- 5.2 Fiona Jenkins also welcomed the appointment and confirmed that Cardiff and Vale University Health Board were keen to engage with the Veterans’ Commissioner. John Shivas also expressed an interest in early engagement to highlight work on the Armed Forces Act to date. Ant questioned the office support in place for the Veterans’ Commissioner, Jan Jones confirmed that interim support would be provided by the Office for Veterans’ Affairs with discussions for substantive support ongoing.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – WELSH GOVERNMENT UPDATE

- 6.1 Peter Evans provided an update on the Welsh Government Veterans’ Scoping Exercise. Now two years since publication of the action plan, work was underway in formulating next steps, including future engagement with the veteran community. Delivery to date included an employment event for veterans in November 2021 with discussions underway between Public Health Wales and NHS Wales on a GP friendly scheme for Wales. Consideration was also being given to enhancing the provision of resettlement services in Wales.
- 6.2 It was noted that consultation on the Scoping Exercise with the sector had already started with an initial session held with members of the Wales Charities Forum. Further events would be arranged to explore delivery of the remaining recommendations. Members of the Armed Forces Group would be included in these discussions.
- 6.3 Lisa Rawlings gave an overview of the Armed Forces mental health first aid courses, delivered in North and South Wales following receipt of funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. The courses had been offered to veterans, families and organisations and groups that work with the Armed Forces community. Presenting the statistics gathered Lisa advised that a number of Local Authorities and third sector organisations had taken the opportunity to attend the courses along with 110 veterans to date. Feedback received from a mix of participants had been positive.

- 6.4 In welcoming the presentation the Deputy Minister recognised the good work that had taken place during challenging circumstances.
- 6.5 To close Lisa briefly mentioned the new Covenant Wales website and advised that it would be launched later in the year. Designed to include information on the support available for the Armed Forces community the website would be managed by the Armed Forces Liaison Officers.

AGENDA ITEM 7 – FALKLANDS 40TH ANNIVERSARY

- 7.1 Ant provided an update on plans in place to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Falklands War, informing members that the Royal British Legion would be commemorating the service and sacrifice of all those involved. 30,000 sailors, marines, soldiers, airmen and merchant mariners had taken part in the conflict along with many civilians; 255 British personnel had sadly lost their lives.
- 7.2 A national commemorative event was scheduled to take place at 2pm on the 14th June at the National Memorial Arboretum with a live link to the Falkland Islands. Registration for the event was through local Regimental Associations for all veterans involved in the conflict. Members of the public who wished to attend could register through the Arboretum website, and whilst they would be unable to attend the Commemorative Ceremony they would be able to be on site on the day and visit the exhibitions. Key activities would also be taking place at respective memorials on the morning of the 14th June.
- 7.3 Ant also advised that a number of community activities had been arranged throughout April and June 2022 to mark the support given by the Merchant Navy and factory workers whose role had been to prepare and load ships for mobilisation.
- 7.4 Despite it being 40 years since the Falklands conflict members were informed that the RBL continued to be approached by people seeking support. Such support issues included mobility and mental health. Ant reinforced that support could be accessed through the RBL directly or the Veterans Gateway.
- 7.5 Peter highlighted the Welsh Government national commemorative service to be held on the 16th June and led by the First Minister. Whilst not yet in the public domain the event would be supported by a number of key partners, including the South Atlantic Medal Association (SAMA). The Deputy Minister would be supporting a cycle ride with veterans on the 5th June, starting in Cardiff at the National Falklands memorial. A small wreath laying event, led by the First Minister was also planned for the 16th June at the Falklands War Memorial Stone, Alexandra Gardens. To be delivered in collaboration with Cardiff Council the event would be by invitation only.
- 7.6 Brigadier Fraser welcomed the number of events planned, noting their importance to the veteran community. Veteran interest in commemorating the Falklands conflict was notable, reflected in the high number of veterans aboard HMS Cardiff during the conflict that were planning to meet in Cardiff on the 27-29 May.

AGENDA ITEM 8 – ANY OTHER BUSINESS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 8.1 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 14 September 2022. In the meantime all members were encouraged to provide examples of good practice for inclusion in the Welsh Government Armed Forces Annual Report to the Armed Forces team.